Parliamentary Control of the Executive

DIRECTORS: Dr. Manuel SANCHEZ DE DIOS and Dr. Thomas D. LANCASTER

DETAILED OUTLINE OF WORKSHOP:

Questions about parliamentary control of the executive derive from democratic principles holding that governments in liberal democracies should be representative, responsible, and accountable. Parliamentary control therefore incorporates the monitoring of executive power. In parliamentary systems, such monitoring is a logical consequence of the fact that the executive emanates from the parliament, in a manner that creates a direct accountability linkage.

In general terms, parliamentary control is a political control given to those holding legislative office. This linkage includes the financing and supervision of the executive’s activities. Parliamentary control consists of an institutionalized activity that generally follows formal procedures. The agents of parliamentary control are normally the political parties and groups in the legislature or, in some cases, individual deputies who implement it. Normally, opposition parties and groups exercises activities of parliamentary control.

Parliamentary control therefore has an instrumental character. In implementing such control through monitoring activities, legislators hold the opinion to expose to public opinion the policy shortcomings and errors of executive implementation of the governing party or coalition of parties and, consequently, advocate the alternation of power. Finally, parliamentary control is a permanent activity that operates from the first moment of each new legislative period and doesn’t stop until the executive submits and ceases its activity and relinquishes power.

Parliamentary control is to be found in most parts of legislative activities including the approval of the budget. But, in all countries there exists similar procedures that are typical of the exercises of this control and monitoring: questions, debate, other types of interventions, investigative commissions, requests for members of the government to appear before the chamber or legislative committees, requests for information, etc.

The theme of parliamentary control is somewhat surprisingly understudied, especially in more recent work. Little research exists from the point of view of our workshop on parliamentary control since we are not just focusing on the broader topic of legislative-executive relations. In fact, most recent research in this area tends to be drawn from subjects that are related but contain investigations into other primary questions. For example, some previous research focuses on specific instruments of legislative control such as parliamentary questions (Wiberg, 1994; Franklin & Norton, 1993; and Ameller, 1964). Other concentrate on opposition behavior (Beyme, 1987) or the role of committees (Lees and Shaw, 1979). Still other excellent works include such questioning within broader studies of legislatures and legislative functions (Damgaard, 1992; Norton, 1990; Olson & Norton, 1996; Liebert & Cotta, 1990; and Doring, 1995). All of these works contain some analysis, in one form or another, of parliamentary control and the workings of its instruments such as commissions, questions, and debate. They do not, however, make this their sole analytical focus. The few studies that our workshop wishes to parallel tend to be somewhat dated (Gerlich, 1973; King, 1976; and Montero & Morillo, 1984).

The workshop’s goal will therefore be to undertake a broadly comparative study of parliamentary control in liberal democratic systems. The directors would like to include research reports that identify the principle procedures of parliamentary control in different countries, ask
what are the objectives that they seek to achieve with the different procedures, show how they vary in their frequency of use, and evaluate the effectiveness of the different forms and instruments of parliamentary control. Thinking about the possibility of including many of the papers in an edited volume with a major press, the directors we would like to receive a few papers that analyze the key theoretical issues relating to parliamentary control of the executive. The majority of the papers, however, will be a mixture of empirically grounded comparative analysis and case studies. The workshop directors would especially like to include participants from, or specialists on, the lesser-studied cases in southern and eastern Europe in order to have a full cross-section of cases and research styles on the topic.

References: