NEW PERSPECTIVES ON PARLIAMENTARY POWER – SOME NORDIC EVIDENCE

Erik Damgaard
Professor Emeritus, Dr. Scient.Pol.
Department of Political Science
Aarhus University

&

Henrik Jensen
Professor, Dr. Scient.Pol & PhD
Department of Political Science
University of Copenhagen

Centre for Voting and Parties
Department of Political Science
University of Copenhagen

CVAP Working Paper
Series
CVAP WP 1/2013
ISBN: ?
www.cvap.polsci.ku.dk
About the CVAP Working Paper Series
The CVAP Working Paper Series contains finished drafts and preliminary versions of articles and chapters within the field of studies of voting, elections, political parties, parliaments, etc., that are on their way in the publication process.

About the Centre for Voting and Parties
The Centre for Voting and Parties (Center for Valg og Partier, CVAP) is a research centre attached to the Department of Political Science at the University of Copenhagen. The Centre was established in 2008 and concerns itself with research within the fields of voting, elections, political parties, parliaments, etc., both at a national and a comparative level.

For more information on the Series or CVAP, visit www.cvap.polsci.ku.dk.
New Perspectives on Parliamentary Power – Some Nordic Evidence

ERIK DAMGAARD & HENRIK JENSEN

The aim of this paper is to examine perspectives and empirical results in some recent literature on aspects of power - or influence - of parliaments in the Nordic countries. The paper moves from the level of parliament itself via parliamentary committees and party groups to the level of individual MPs. On the whole, we find that the various arenas and actors on the four levels of analysis are important or influential, but the parliamentary party groups appear especially relevant and significant one way or another.
INTRODUCTION

In introducing an ambitious attempt at advancing the study of parliaments, a Nordic research team headed by Esaiasson and Heidar (2000a) claimed that the existing research suffered from the problem that it mainly dealt with single aspects of parliamentary operations, such as the role of parliaments in the policy-making process, the relationship between the legislature and the executive, the workings of the committee system or the function of parliamentary questions. While these studies are invaluable, they only highlight one aspect of the complex functioning of democratic parliaments. Understanding how parliaments operate requires a broader approach.

The authors further claimed that a parliament’s mode of operation can be specified in terms of four distinct relationships: the vertical (toward the electorate), the internal (among MPs, i.e. the organization of parliament), the horizontal (toward other elite decision-makers and national institutions) and external (toward the international community as well as the future). In short: ‘…a good answer to the how-question [how parliaments operate, ED/HJ] would address considerations of representation, internal organization, relations with competing political elites, and stance toward the outside world’ (Esaiasson & Heidar 2000b, 9). This is quite a challenge, and the research team presented a number of possible answers over 500 pages.

The four dimensions, or relationships, are helpful in attempts at categorizing the main features of parliamentary operations. Each of them accommodates various parliamentary activities, and they are all important. However, we should not assume that we can present answers to every conceivable question of relevance. In empirical studies we must be selective when choosing issues, themes and questions for investigation, hoping (perhaps) to eventually obtain a better general understanding of parliamentary activities. This paper examines the perspectives and empirical results in some recent literature on the power or influence of parliaments, the role of parliamentary committees, the role of party groups, and the position of individual MPs in the Nordic countries.

One might claim that the paper is a ‘meta-empirical’ balance sheet account of recent analyses of aspects of parliamentary power. We cannot review all of the research methods and data used by the
various scholars, but we have relied considerably on secondary analyses. Our outline moves from the parliamentary level via committees and party groups to the individual level.

On the whole, we find the various arenas and actors to be important or influential to some extent, but the parliamentary party groups appear especially relevant and significant one way or another.

PARLIAMENTARY POWER

A volume edited by David Arter (2006a) revisited the literature on classifying legislatures. Challenging the conventional classification of parliaments in terms such as ‘strong’ or ‘weak’, ‘active’ or ‘reactive’, ‘policy-making’ or ‘policy-influencing’, it aimed at painting the ‘bigger picture’ of the legislative performance of parliaments. According to Arter, the central question should be not how much ‘policy influence’ parliaments have, but rather: ‘How do legislators, both severally and collectively, work to perform their legislative roles in the three phases of the policy process – that is, in the formulation and deliberation of public policy and the oversight of the executive?’ (Arter 2006b, 255).

Arter argues that at least six questions are pertinent as a first step toward any assessment of the involvement of legislators in policy formulation. They concern ways in which legislators can be influential in that respect and include whether MPs and parliamentary committees have the right of legislative initiative and whether procedural rules require supermajority-building for major pieces of legislation. It is also important whether parliaments legislate on the basis of legislative – as opposed to executive – coalitions and if MPs participate in the preparation of legislative proposals initiated by the executive. Finally, it is important whether legislative and executive leaders consult on strategic policy matters.

All of these possible modes of influence in policy formulation are described and illustrated with examples from a variety of countries, but a clear and distinct picture cannot be claimed to appear across countries (Arter 2006c, 463-70).
The next step in the analysis is to consider the policy deliberation process in legislatures. The general question is how the individual legislature participates in the deliberation of proposed legislation in the various arenas available (floor, committee, party groups, and sub-groups of committees and party groups). Again, Arter suggests six relevant questions for closer investigation: Does the legislature convene regularly to engage in the deliberation of legislation? Does the legislature control the legislative agenda? Does the legislature inform itself? Does the legislature devolve the detailed deliberation of legislative proposals to committees of its members? Do the legislative committees scrutinize and report on legislation independent of executive control? Does the legislature deliberate along party lines? (Arter 2006c, 471-76).

Again, the picture varies somewhat across countries except that deliberation along party lines would appear to be a universal phenomenon.

The third part of the analysis concerns the process of policy oversight in legislatures. Arter proposes three basic questions in that respect: Does the legislature have the institutional capacity to oversee the work of the executive? Do legislators attach much importance to executive oversight? Does the legislature oversee the executive along party lines? (Arter 2006c, 476-78).

Arter’s overall contribution is his attempt to widen the notion of legislative performance from a measure of policy output to an emphasis on mapping the legislative process in its totality. We should not simply ask the Mezey question of how much policy influence a legislature has, but rather focus on how the members of the legislature act to exert varying degrees of policy influence. Arter thus proposes a relatively broad approach emphasizing what Esaiasson and Heidar would call parliamentary influence in the policy-making process and matters concerning the internal and horizontal relationships. However, Arter is not much concerned with the vertical and external dimensions of legislative operations.

Quite in line with Arter, McGann (2006) argues that although asking how much independent law-making power a legislature has makes no sense, we can still ask how significant legislatures are in the policy-making process, and in particular whether the legislature is a significant forum for public deliberation: ‘Do the parliamentary committees (or at least a party’s members on the committee) influence or even define policy as their areas of competence? Does parliament provide an arena
where opposition parties can test the governing coalition by searching for issues that split the governing coalition and may lead to an alternative coalition in the future? Do the proceedings of the legislature set the agenda for the broader national debate, and in particular for the main news media, thus giving the opposition some control of the agenda?’ (McGann 2006, 444).

McGann also reminds us that we should clarify what we mean by power when talking about legislative power. He draws an interesting distinction between ‘obstructive power’, that is, the power to prevent the executive from acting, and ‘constructive power’, that is, the power of parliament to enact its program. This distinction helps him to claim that the U.S. Congress is very strong in terms of policy obstruction, but certainly not in the policy-making sense. Finally, in discussing the power or significance of parliaments, it is not sufficient to look at parliament as such. We also need to take account of parliamentary committees, parliamentary party groups and individual MPs.

PARLIAMENTARY COMMITTEES

According to Mattson and Strøm (1995), it is generally agreed that committee systems can promote legislative efficiency through the division of labor and specialization (‘economies of operation’). Apart from that important point, the literature (mainly American) stresses three functions or perspectives. The first is ‘gains from trade’, which stems from the heterogeneous preferences of the legislators possibly deriving from their different constituents. Members from rural districts, for example, are more likely to favor farm subsidies and care less about urban transit than members from major cities. Given such differences, legislators may have an interest in logrolling deals. For that system to work, however, committees should be autonomous and members should have a way of securing assignment to the committees with the jurisdictions that they care about most.

The second perspective is ‘information acquisition’, which challenges the gains from trade theory and stresses the critical role of uncertainty in policy making. However, legislators can reduce their uncertainty by allowing committees to specialize in particular policy areas. Through specialization, committee members obtain information about the consequences of various policy instruments. As Mattson and Strom write: ‘Regarding committee assignments, the informational perspective implies that those members should be chosen who can specialize at low cost, for example because of their
professional training (medical personnel on health committees, lawyers on judiciary committees) or other prior experience’ (Mattson & Strøm 1995, 254).

The third and final perspective on committees is ‘partisan coordination’, as proposed by Cox and McCubbins (1993), which provides a new understanding of the relationships between parties and committees in Congress. Cox and McCubbins regard committees as instruments of the majority party and its leadership. When committee chairmen exercise their powers, they do so on behalf of their respective parties. Therefore, weak parties need not make for strong committees or vice versa, as often claimed in the literature (e.g. Shaw 1979, cf. Rommetvedt 2003).

Summing up, Mattson and Strøm conclude that:

“In the first perspective, members of each committee determine policy within their jurisdiction, irrespective of the policy preferences of the parent chamber and of parties. Committees therefore have a very independent role in the policy making process. In the second perspective, committees become agents of their parent chambers. They are established to develop expertise and acquire information in order to meet the chamber’s demands. Finally, committee members are viewed as agents or instruments of their parties in the partisan perspective. Party leaders control appointments, and give the committees an appropriate composition.” (Mattson & Strøm 1995, 255-6)

The authors are well aware that the literature referred to is mainly the one on the U.S. Congress. This raises the question of whether the three perspectives are also applicable to other parliaments and committees.

In his study of committees in the Nordic parliaments, Hagevi (2000) found that although parties were the main actors, the committee systems remained the core of internal party group specialization. MPs with a position on a standing committee typically gain recognition as the party spokesperson in a particular area and may affect the party line in that area. Concerning committee assignment, Hagevi emphasized two important norms: ‘committee-preference accommodation’ and ‘seniority’. These norms tend to constrain party group leaders when assigning committee seats, thereby creating opportunities for individual MP influence. Hagevi concluded that his findings
highlight ‘an oft-neglected part of the representative process in parliamentary systems: the individual parliamentarian’ (2000, 258). He suggests that the decision-making process in the party groups might be more decentralized than usually assumed.

In a contribution to Danish research on parliamentary committees – and legislative committees in general – Henrik Jensen (1995) sets out to ask whether the committees can best be regarded as unitary actors or rather as arenas for the political activities of committee members. His main thesis is that, compared to the unitary approach, it is more fruitful to analyze committees as if they were arenas for the activities of committee members and party groups. He admits that there are (rare) situations, mainly involving committee jurisdictions and procedures, in which committees possibly act as unitary actors. However, the main thesis receives support in the empirical analysis, while the idea of autonomous committees does not (cf. gains from trade).

Parliamentary committees cannot be considered autonomous actors, but it is well documented that committee members do specialize and in some ways behave according to the information acquisition model. Thus, Jensen (1995, 77) concluded that the committees can be considered as arenas for the experts (policy specialists) from the party groups. More specifically, he came up with three findings concerning the role of parliamentary committees (see also Damgaard, 2001):

1. Committee assignments occur with due respect for individual member preferences and the priorities of the party leaders.
2. Member activities do not aim at promoting the influence of committees, but rather outlining the policies of the parties and highlighting the activities of their representatives.
3. The committees are not unitary actors in policy matters, but arenas for party groups and their representatives on the committees.

While committees play an important role in the legislative process, it nevertheless seems as though parliamentary party groups show up most of the time, even in countries traditionally thought to have strong committees. Rommetvedt’s (2003) analysis of the Norwegian case offers a good example. He questions the widespread assumption that strong committees are a prerequisite for a strong parliament, even if he had himself previously agreed ‘...that the standing committees play an important, and very often decisive, role in the Storting’ (2003, 71). His data indicates an increasing level of parliamentary influence coinciding with a poorer functioning of parliamentary committees.
He noted an increase in the proportion of committee recommendations with disagreements, which is taken as an indication of a poorer functioning of committees *qua* committees. However, dissent in committee recommendations is compatible with the functioning of parliamentary parties. The development could mean that the relative significance of parties and committees has shifted to the advantage of the parties; thus, a closer examination of the parliamentary party groups would appear justified.

**PARLIAMENTARY PARTY GROUPS**

In a chapter on Nordic parliamentary party groups, Knut Heidar argued that in order to understand parliamentary democracy, one must understand how parties operate within parliament: ‘how decisions are taken, what decision-makers consider important, and who “really” decides within parliamentary party groups (PPG)’ (Heidar 2000, 184). To assist the analyses of power structures, Heidar proposed four ideal-types underlying the inquiry:

1. MP-directed group: Internal power is dispersed equally among party group members.
2. Parliamentary leader-directed group: Leader(s) formally or informally control group decisions.
3. EPO-directed group: Extra-parliamentary party organization (EPO) controls decision-making; either the central party organs issue orders or the PPG is told what to do by the constituency parties.
4. Government-directed group: The party line is finalized in ministerial discussions or in negotiations between coalition partners at the government level (Heidar 2000, 184-5).

Heidar was interested in two main questions: How strong are the Nordic PPGs and what characterizes their mode of decision-making? Among other things, he found that PPGs certainly have power (as revealed in MP surveys, for example). In fact, with the exception of the Swedish case, they are the most important actors within the parliament. The parliamentary party groups are often called the real centers of power in Nordic parliaments. Their power is inferior only to that of cabinet members and (just barely) to that of party leaders. With the exception of Sweden, party groups are considered more powerful than committees.

If forced to choose, Heidar (2000, 205) would conclude that the MP-directed party group type forms the basis of the Nordic model. But it is not a clear-cut case, as government ministers are
considered the most powerful actors when the party is in office. Thus, party group operations are also marked by a strong dose of government directedness.

In his book on Danish parliamentary party groups, Henrik Jensen (2002, 209) examines three main questions: How are the party groups generally organized? How do they work? And how do they make decisions in the Folketing? He finds that all the party groups are largely characterized by three common features: a horizontal division of labor reflecting the committee structure, mutual representation of party group members and unitary actor behavior. These ‘how’ questions are supplemented with a ‘why’ question, and Jensen briefly suggests that part of the explanation for this common way of organizing the party groups is the heavy workload of party group members. Finally, Jensen discusses two important questions: How are the relations between the party groups as actors and the standing committees as institutions, and in which sense are the party groups unitary actors?

If the party groups are the real actors, why focus that much on the parliamentary committees? A first answer, according to Jensen, is that a party group’s internal division of labor mirrors the committee structure. Second, the structure of influence in the party groups to some extent follows the committee structure. Third, the committees not only delineate specialization patterns in the party groups but also indicate the MPs in the various parties that have contact with one another – within and outside of the committees. Fourth, committee procedures reflect the basic fact that the members are party group representatives. Finally, the committees are important as institutional instruments in the competition between government and opposition parties, in particular to the opposition party groups.

Jensen (2002, 215) compares his own analyses of Denmark with Magnus Isberg’s analyses of Sweden and finds a number of similarities and a few differences. The most salient difference is that the party group meetings in Sweden, at least in the major groups, are not really as significant as in Denmark. His explanation is that group size (and position in opposition or government) takes care of that difference. The largest Swedish party group has as many members as the entire Danish parliament, and the relatively large party groups do not often make decisions at party group meetings. If that is indeed the case, who, then, makes the ‘real’ decisions? Are we back with the question of parties as unitary actors? The answer is both yes and no. Party groups are not unitary
actors in the sense that their members have the same attitudes and knowledge in matters on which
they make decisions. They are unitary actors in the sense that they display a common decision-
making behavior in the Folketing. Where, then, are the ‘real’ decisions made? Obviously not on the
floor, not in the parliamentary committees, and only to some extent in the party group meetings.
The best – but still incomplete – answer is perhaps that important policy decisions are made in
ministerial offices where spokesmen from the governing party groups regularly meet and bargain
with ministers who, as heads of ministries, have the legal expertise at their disposal to draft
legislation. But even that is not the whole story.

Danish governments are usually minority coalitions, where the preferences of partners in
government must be taken into account. The law-making process is indeed very complex. Jensen
concludes that it is an atomized process, where work, responsibility and influence on current
decisions are spread out in time and space, primarily on the ministers and the individual
spokesmen. Jensen goes so far as to state that it is wrong to ask ‘where the real decisions’ are made
because of the atomized decision-making process, which cannot be located at a certain time in a
certain space (Jensen 2002, 217).

As indicated above, party groups are usually unitary actors in the sense that they display a common
decision-making behavior in parliament. Torben K. Jensen concluded that the Nordic parliamentary
parties may be close to the world record when it comes to following the party line in parliamentary
voting (T. K. Jensen 2000). Why do the parties display such unitary behavior? According to Jensen,
three institutional/structural factors are at play. First, all of the Nordic countries (with the partial
exception of Finland) have a parliamentary government. In such a system, the ability of parties to
gain and maintain power depends on their ability to act as a unit. A second explanation is the
electoral system with proportional representation, multimember constituencies and party lists
creating a need for MPs to ‘cultivate’ their parties. Third, the increase in the workload of the
individual MP has resulted in a specialization and division of labor among MPs that has rendered it
impossible for individual members to follow all issues closely. They are forced to rely on party
experts. MPs therefore follow the party line unless special circumstances make breaking with the
party line possible and desirable.
Jensen emphasized that the high level of party cohesion could not have been achieved without a supportive normative system (2000, 233). He may be right. The conviction that the party is the main focus of representation stands strong in all of the Nordic countries, and direct support for the norm of party cohesion is massive throughout the Nordic region. Most MPs in Denmark, Norway and Iceland appear to have internalized the norms rather than followed them due to fear or a sense of duty, whereas MPs in Sweden and Finland have a more instrumental relation to the norms.

Given the existing research – some of which is summarized above – it comes as no surprise that Magnus Isberg writes that ‘... it is the parties, not the individual members or some other association of them, that are the real decision-makers in the Riksdag’ (Isberg 1999, 17). He admits that the Swedish committees sometimes appear to be actors in the process as opposed to arenas for party decisions. However, the party representatives in committees normally just retain the policy attitudes they have participated in developing and over which they have determining influence. Should a conflict nevertheless occur between the group and the representative, the attitudes of the group prevail. After all, if the party groups are to function as effective organizations, the individual interests of members must be united with the collective interests of the party. Isberg (1999, 28) refers to the latter as ‘a classical conflict of interests’.

The emphasis on party groups compared to committees is clearly warranted. Thus, the role of political parties is clearly confirmed in analyses of the five Nordic countries, whether we think about the ‘Westminster’ model or the renewed relevance of the ‘Madisonian’ model (Bergman & Strom, 2011). But there is also space for individual MPs in parties and committees. For instance, it is worth noting that an increasing workload is acute for small parties which may only have a handful of group members. This opens up for the influence of individual MPs.

**INDIVIDUAL MPs**

The classical image of Swedish MPs and party groups, which also largely pertains to the relationships in the other Nordic countries, may have changed since the 1990s, however. At the least, it has acquired some new features. Thus, Isberg discovered (1999, 179, 186) that MPs apparently did not want to remain in the Riksdag as long as previously had been the case. Early retirement had become more common, but it is often difficult to tell whether or not retirement is
indeed ‘voluntary’. A second new feature is a growing individualization of parliamentary work, which may be promoted by new electoral rules allowing for more effective individual voting. A more recent book on the Swedish Riksdag provides more data and information on these matters.

Thus, Lars Davidsson (2006), building on sophisticated principal-agent theory, analyzes whether the introduction in 1998 of an element of preference voting in the electoral system, i.e. no longer a sheer party based electoral system, and the introduction of ‘budget frames’ (rambudget) have affected the inclination of Swedish MPs to defect from the party line in committee work and in the chamber. Swedish MPs generally stick to the party line, but Davidsson is able to show that the electoral reform has not influenced the tendency to defect from the party line in committee work; however, with the Social Democrats as the only exception, the reform has increased the number of defections in the Chamber which, contrary to committee work, is open to the public. The defections mainly stem from MPs whose personal re-election is threatened and who can benefit from drawing public attention to their behavior in the Chamber, thereby attempting to help their chances of re-election (Davidsson 2006, 305). Regarding the effects of the budget reform, Davidsson shows that the reform has most likely reduced the MPs’ already low tendency to defect in budget matters (Davidsson 2006, 310, 341). And, independently of the two reforms, a generational pattern is identified so that the youngest generation of MPs tends to defect from the party line to a higher degree than their older colleagues (Davidsson 2006, 311-2). Another result from Davidsson’s analysis is that in most party groups, the MPs act as agents for the party in the committees. In the government party groups, however, MPs in committees work more as veto points when the party line is decided upon.

Three Swedish scholars (Wängnerud, Hermansson & Öberg, 2007) also describe important changes in the system of democratic governance in Sweden and elsewhere. They are particularly interested in the ongoing change from party democracy to ‘audience democracy’, drawing on the work of Bernard Manin (2002). In the party democracy model, parties dominate the political arena. Parties, not individuals, compete with each other, and political representatives are basically regarded as party workers. The ongoing change is not total, and it would be erroneous to claim that audience democracy has replaced party democracy. The point is, rather, that audience democracy is moving forward at the expense of party democracy.
In audience democracy, the people have the role of a public evaluating the alternatives presented to them. But many people are well informed, interested in politics and well educated. Representatives are not merely party workers but also individual entrepreneurs. The central question for the three scholars is whether the increased number of voluntary retirements can be considered as an indicator of the dawning of the entrepreneur as a new type of representative. According to the authors, the answer is ‘yes’.

Similar studies have yet to be carried out in the other Nordic countries. However, data from the Folketing’s secretariat and website in Denmark at least indicate an increased number of MPs breaking away from their party since 2000, opting to become independents or defecting to a different party (www.ft.dk). In the 1980s and 1990s, the number was only 7 compared to 21 in the 2000s.

A comparative Western European investigation of 18 countries attempted to cast more light on the relationship between parliamentary parties and their individual MPs (Damgaard 1995). The study focused on three main questions considered to be important: First, how are MPs appointed to parliamentary committees? Second, what is the interplay between committees and their parties in initiating and processing legislative items? Third, can and does the party leadership apply sanctions if their committee members do not conform to the party line, and if so, which sanctions? The first question relates to leadership control through the selection of committee members, the second to the behavior of MPs in everyday committee work, and the third to the influence of the leadership through the application of more or less severe punishments (or rewards) of recalcitrant of MPs.

The analysis confirms a number of observations made in several other studies, such as the general importance of parties and variables affecting the likelihood of committee assignment. But it also found reasons to ask two other questions regarding the committee work. First, are individual MPs also specialists or experts that may actually determine the policy positions of the party groups? Second, may MPs not only represent the interest of the party, but also cater to other interests, perhaps to preserve or enhance re-election opportunities?
In his book on the Swedish committees, Hagevi (1998, 245-60) concluded, first, that MPs act strategically in order to maximize their influence on the party line and Riksdag decisions in the areas that are closest to their hearts. The power of committees thus gives members influence in the party group. A second main result is that the Riksdag has become more individualized since the 1960s due to the new committee system giving the MPs increased opportunities to realize their goals and influence. However, Hagevi is skeptical as regards the degree to which party leaders can discipline the rank-and-file members. He claims that there are few and clearly limited possibilities for party leaders to force loyalty upon members or to use rewards and punishments, and it should be remembered that the consensus on values is strong within the party groups.

CONCLUSION

We have thus far outlined some perspectives and empirical results in the recent literature on the power or influence of parliaments, the role of committees and party groups and the positions of individual MPs in the Nordic countries. Now, do we see a clear and distinct image appear across the Nordic countries and across the different levels of analysis?

Well, we should be aware that the perspective from which a parliament is seen has an influence of its own. For instance, a macro perspective – the parliamentary level of analysis – tends to show the individual MPs as small parts of a larger structure, whereas a micro perspective in which a parliament is seen through the eyes of the individual MP tends to ignore structural limits on the individual MP’s activities. Nonetheless, we feel relatively confident in claiming that the empirical results show that, as party group members, individual MPs generally do have opportunities to influence the policy decisions within their respective party groups, although these opportunities may be unevenly distributed within and between party groups. Thus, ministers in large governing party groups are still more influential policy makers than the back benchers. And the combination of a heavy workload and a small party group inevitably leaves the individual MPs with policy influence. We feel safe when claiming that although both committees and party groups are important in order to understand how the Nordic parliaments operate, focusing on the party groups is clearly warranted if one wants to understand the policy decisions and power relations of the Nordic parliaments. The party groups still seem to be the most decisive actors in the Nordic parliaments in policy matters.
REFERENCES


