

## Shadowing with glass figures?

A comparative analysis of committee chair powers in Western European democracies

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Paper presented at the workshop “Institutional Determinants of Legislative Coalition Management”,  
Tel Aviv, November 16-19, 2015

**\*\* Very first draft. Please do not circulate \*\***

*Recent work on coalition governance argues that government parties use the chairs of parliamentary committees to monitor their coalition partners. To support this claim, they show that ministers are often ‘shadowed’ by committee chairs from other coalition parties. The link between the theoretical argument and the empirical evidence rests on the empirically largely neglected assumption that committee chairs enjoy special powers (beyond those enjoyed by every committee member) to monitor ministers and affect policy-making in the committee. The paper tests this assumption based on the first comparative measure of committee chair powers in fifteen Western European democracies. The analysis shows that most committee chairs have very limited formal powers and that the share of shadowing chairs does not increase when committee chairs are more powerful. Both findings cast doubt on the interpretation of shadow chairs as a monitoring instrument to control coalition partners. Instead, we offer an alternative explanation according to which coalition parties employ the shadowing strategy in order to increase public visibility and counteract issue ownership by the minister’s party. Beyond the question of shadowing, we show that chair powers tend to be negatively related to committee strength which indicates that parliamentary actors are less inclined to accept internal hierarchy if the stakes are higher.*

**Keywords:** institutional power; parliamentary committees; committee chairs; monitoring; coalition governance

# 1 Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Committees are (together with political parties) the most important organizational structures within legislatures. The literature on the origins, structure, and consequences of committees was for a long time dominated by research on the US Congress (e.g. Krehbiel 1991; Maltzman 1997; Shepsle and Weingast 1995; for a recent review see Evans 2011). However, recent work in the European context has begun to develop an original theoretical framework for understanding when and how committees matter in parliamentary democracies characterized by strong political parties and the confidence relationship between parliamentary majority and cabinet.

A prominent approach in this literature conceptualizes committees as arenas through which coalition partners can control each other. Coalition governance always incurs the risk of agency loss because policy-making authority is delegated to ministers whose preferences often do not match those of all coalition partners. Accordingly, ministers have incentives to renege on a coalition compromise in favor of implementing policies closer to their parties' ideal points. To avoid this behavior, coalition parties can use various means of controlling each other, for example via the appointment of junior ministers (Lipsmeyer and Pierce 2011; Thies 2001; Verzichelli 2008), comprehensive coalition agreements (Indridason and Kristinsson 2013; Müller and Strøm 2008), the creation of coalition committees and other informal arenas (Andeweg and Timmerman 2008; Miller 2011) and, last but not least, via the parliamentary committee system (Carroll and Cox 2012; 2004, 2005, 2011, Martin and Vanberg 2014; Kim and Loewenberg 2005).

Two prominent studies in this literature specifically focus on the role of committee chairs and argue that holding these offices provides government parties with the opportunity to control ministers

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<sup>1</sup> We thank Michelle Andersson, Carolin König, and Britta Müller for research assistance and the German Research Foundation (Grant SI 1470/2-1) as well as the Zukunftskolleg at the University of Konstanz for financial support.

from a coalition partner (Carroll and Cox 2012; Kim and Loewenberg 2005). In support of this claim, they show that a disproportionate share of committee chairs are held by coalition partners that do not control the respective ministry and that the likelihood of such 'shadow chairs' increases with ideological conflict within the coalition and the power of parliamentary committees. This monitoring argument rests on a crucial yet empirically untested assumption: Holding the committee chair gives parties additional powers to monitor the minister. Only if such prerogatives exist, the assumed causal mechanism is credible according to which coalition parties shadow ministers from other parties *because* this allows them to monitor and if necessary correct the minister's behavior. Furthermore, the use of committee chairs as monitoring devices should be the more attractive the stronger the chair's institutional prerogatives are.

This paper subjects these expectations to an empirical test. Using a novel comparative measure of the institutional powers of committee chairs in fifteen Western European parliaments, we show that most committee chairs hold very few formal powers that would give them additional means to detect and revert policy drift. Second, we find no empirical relationship between the powers of committee chairs and the frequency of shadowing chairs. These findings cast serious doubt on the interpretation of observed patterns of chair allocation as a monitoring strategy. In the conclusion, we briefly outline an alternative explanation for these patterns according to which coalition parties choose to shadow ministries held by other coalition parties in order to counterbalance public visibility of the minister's party with regard to the relevant policy field.

Going beyond the question of whether committee chairs are used to monitor ministers, we also investigate the relationship between the strength of committees and the power of their chairs. We show that the two tend to be negatively related suggesting that parliamentary actors are less willing to introduce hierarchy within committees the more powerful these bodies are. This finding lends support to rationalist views of legislative organization (e.g. Martin 2011; Sieberer and Müller 2015) and highlights the continued importance of the government-opposition dimension in explaining the structure of parliamentary committees.

The next section briefly outlines the relevant literature on parliamentary committees and the role of chairs in monitoring ministers. Section 3 discusses conceptual issues in measuring chair powers, justifies our focus on formal institutional powers, and introduces the variables. Section 4 empirically maps the position of chairs in 15 Western European parliaments using these variables and our newly developed Committee Chair Power Index (CCPI). Section 5 shows that this index is not related to the frequency of shadowing chairs and correlates negatively with the power of committees. Section 6 concludes by outlining our alternative explanation for observed patterns of shadowing.

## **2 Why care for the power of committee chairs?**

The argument that committees are (at least also) arenas for mutual control of coalition partners is advanced most forcefully in Martin and Vanberg's work on legislative review (Martin and Vanberg 2004, 2005, 2011, 2014). The authors argue theoretically that strong parliamentary committees allow government parties to monitor the behavior of ministers from other parties via two complementary processes: Strong committees decrease informational asymmetries between coalition partners and provide an institutional arena in which bills originally drafted by ministries can be rewritten to correct any ministerial drift that may have occurred prior to the parliamentary stage (e.g. Martin and Vanberg 2011: Ch. 3). Empirical analyses provide ample support for the theory as bills receive more scrutiny (in temporal terms) and are rewritten more comprehensively when the ideological distance between the drafting minister and other coalition parties increases. By contrast, these patterns are not observable in weak committee systems indicating that strong committees are indeed a necessary condition for legislative review (Martin and Vanberg 2011).

While Martin and Vanberg analyze parliamentary committees as collective actors, a second strand of research focuses on a specific actor within the committee – the chair (Carroll and Cox 2012; Kim and Loewenberg 2005). These authors argue that government parties deliberately choose to chair specific committees in order to keep tabs on their coalition partners. Indeed, empirical patterns show that chairs are allocated in such a shadowing fashion: Analyzing 19 parliamentary democracies

between 2001 and 2007, Carroll and Cox (2012) report that more than half of the ministers were shadowed by a committee chair from another cabinet party in 13 out of 19 countries. Furthermore, their analysis shows that the likelihood of a minister being monitored increases significantly with the strength of legislative committees and the ideological distance between the minister and other coalition parties. In a longitudinal study of the German Bundestag, Kim and Loewenberg (2005) show that governing parties more often choose to chair committees monitoring a minister from a different cabinet party the larger their ideological distance from the minister's party is (Kim and Loewenberg 2005).

Both studies interpret these allocation pattern as support for the monitoring argument. While the original authors are not very explicit about it, their argument seems to rest on the following process and causal mechanism: (1) Ministers have incentives to draft bills that diverge from the coalition compromise towards their own position. (2) Other coalition partners want to avoid this drift but have problems to detect it (due to informational asymmetries) and to correct it (because drafting is done in the ministry). (3) Parliamentary committees provide arenas to do so. (4) Committee chairs have special prerogatives in the committee that enable them to acquire information and affect the policy content of bills in ways that regular committee members cannot achieve.

While steps (1) to (3) follow the standard argument in the literature on the mutual control of coalition partners and are thus fairly uncontroversial, step (4) is more problematic. So far, we have very little systematic empirical knowledge about the role that chairs play in committee proceedings. Committee chairs in the US Congress command broad agenda setting rights and other prerogatives with regard to committee procedures and staff (Smith et al. 2011: 202-13), but it is totally unclear whether this is also true for chairs outside the United States. The different roles of parties in Congress compared to parliamentary democracies raise serious doubts whether arguments on chair powers can easily be transferred. For example, Laver and Shepsle (1996) argue that in parliamentary democracies government ministries play a role analogous to that of congressional committees. Similarly, the role of Speaker of the House is very different from that of presidents of European

legislatures (Jenny and Müller 1995) suggesting that formally 'same' positions may not have equivalent roles and powers. Given these differences, the existence of special prerogatives that privilege committee chairs in monitoring ministers should not simply be assumed but demonstrated empirically.

Surprisingly, the relevant studies hardly discuss the role of chairs. Kim and Loewenberg (2005: 1110-1) briefly state that German chairs do not dominate committee proceedings but can exert some influence on information acquisition by the committee via the organization of hearings. Their interpretation gives more weight to committee chairs than most other work on the Bundestag that see chairs mainly as moderators who may occasionally influence committee proceeding due to their personal style but not mainly because of clear powers (Ismayr 2012: 175-7; von Oerzten 2005: 213-6). Carroll and Cox do not address the powers of committee chairs at all, focusing instead on the power of committees as such. While it is plausible that powerful committees are in a better position to monitor ministers than weak committees, this difference by itself does not imply that *chairs* have privileged access to control instruments. The same is true for the ability of committees to correct ministerial drift via amending legislation as committee decisions are generally made by majority rule. Additional influence of the chair thus presupposes some special powers with regard to agenda setting within the committee.

This discussion shows that the argument of committee chairs as instruments for intra-coalitional monitoring crucially rests on an assumption that is not obviously true and has not been corroborated empirically. Testing this assumption requires a comparative measure of the powers of committee chairs. With such a measure, we can analyze two claims that could support the causal mechanism underlying the monitoring argument. First, committee chairs must command competencies with regard to information acquisition and policy-making within the committee that go beyond those of regular members. Second, committee chairs should be the more useful for monitoring purposes the more powers they command. Thus, we should observe more monitoring in countries with stronger

committee chairs.<sup>2</sup> The next section discusses conceptual issues in designing a measure of committee chair powers and the variables we use for this purpose.

### **3 Conceptualizing and measuring committee chair powers**

The power of committee chairs (or any political officeholder) are hard to measure because it consists of complementary elements that can substitute each other to some degree. First, committee chairs hold *formal powers* according to institutional rules. These formal powers may include for example control of the committee agenda and special powers to call witnesses. Second, chairs can have additional *informal powers* due to established conventions. For example, a chair may structure debates in committee or serve as contact and representative of the committee vis-à-vis other political and bureaucratic actors even if this is not formally provided for in the rules. Third, the chairperson may have *political power* based on her<sup>3</sup> exalted position and possibly her personal standing as an experienced politician, which may for example provide her with more leverage when requesting information from the ministerial bureaucracy than a regular committee member would have.

Measuring these dimensions raises different problems. Formal powers of committee chairs can be coded reliably from institutional rules, most importantly parliamentary standing orders. However, it is not clear how well these formal powers reflect the reality of committee work, i.e. we may face a validity problem. Informal powers can only be reconstructed from interviews with committee

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<sup>2</sup> In addition, there could be a positive interaction between the powers of committee chairs and the ideological distance between the minister and other coalition partners in the relevant policy field because the monitoring strategy should be particularly attractive if coalition parties fear ministerial drift due to heterogeneous preferences *and* see good chances to avoid such drift by holding the chair of the relevant committee. Due to the aggregate level of analysis, we cannot address this possibility in this paper.

<sup>3</sup> For purely stylistic reasons, we use the female form when referring to chairpersons. Of course the argument applies irrespective of the officeholder's gender.

members and possibly outside observers. While such expert judgements may provide a more valid picture of actual power, this measurement approach requires massive resources, especially in a cross-national setting, and will most likely contain large measurement error.<sup>4</sup> The political dimension of chair power, finally, is the most difficult to measure comparatively because such powers are often used discreetly or even implicitly, are perceived differently by observers, and involve a strong personal element. At the same time, this dimension may well be the most important one for the influence a committee chair can take in practice. Given the different strengths and problems, an ideal indicator of chair power would combine measures for the three conceptual dimension. However, such a comprehensive approach is currently not feasible.

The measure we develop in this paper focuses on formal chair powers codified in parliamentary standing orders. This focus is not only based on pragmatic concerns regarding data availability and the possibility to measure power reliably across countries, but can also point to several substantive arguments (Müller and Sieberer 2014: 311). First, formal rules have the important advantage of being enforceable. This is particularly important in situations of political conflict, which are exactly the circumstances under which monitoring is most important for political actors. In cases of conflict, it is not clear why a rational minister would constantly yield to informal, non-enforceable conventions that limit her freedom of action. Second, parliamentary actors often formalize conventions that were subject to conflicting interpretations in the past so that we can expect that most truly important rules are formalized in highly institutionalized parliaments. Finally, informal power often rests upon underlying formal competencies and thus usually reflect similar power relations as formal rules because actors who are advantaged by formal rules can invoke these rules if informal conventions harm them. In sum, our focus on formal powers probably paints an incomplete

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<sup>4</sup> As reported above, the qualitative judgments of seasoned experts diverge even for a single country like Germany, and this problem is likely to increase when putting different countries on a single scale.

picture of committee chair powers but should adequately capture the relative differences in power between these offices in different countries.

Measuring formal powers of committee chairs requires us to define a list of relevant variables to be coded. Existing literature provides basically no guidance on this issue because available measures of committee powers contain hardly any variables on committee chairs (Döring 1995; Martin and Vanberg 2011: Ch. 3; Martin 2014; Mattson and Strøm 1995, 2004; Schnapp and Harfst 2005).<sup>5</sup> Thus, we have to draw up a list of relevant variables from scratch. In doing so, we focused on four clusters of competencies that committee chairs may hold and affect their ability to dominate different areas of committee work: (1) Prerogatives of the committee chair regarding policy-making in the committee, (2) prerogatives regarding information acquisition, (3) prerogatives regarding intra-committee procedures, and (4) prerogatives regarding coordination and communication with other parliamentary actors.<sup>6</sup>

First, we measure prerogatives of the chair regarding policy-making in the committee. Parliamentary committees have long been acknowledged as the most important arenas for policy-making in parliament (e.g. Martin 2014: 352; Mattson and Strøm 1995: 250; Strøm 1990). Recently, the ability of committees to amend government bills has been critical to Martin and Vanberg's theory of legislative review in which parliamentary actors – i.e. committees – must not only be able to recognize ministerial drift but also need means to correct it via amending legislation (Martin and Vanberg 2011: Ch. 3, esp. 34-5). We rely on the concept of institutional agenda control to capture the

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<sup>5</sup> Mattson and Strøm (1995) as well as Schnapp and Harfst (2005) discuss the procedures for selecting chairs but do not analyze their powers once they in office.

<sup>6</sup> Another potentially relevant aspect is control over committee staff which may be especially important in decreasing informational asymmetries in contexts in which parliamentary parties and individual MPs have limited staff and other resources. Unfortunately, standing orders do not contain any information on how committee staff and other committee resources are controlled.

ability of committee chairs to affect policy-making within the committee (e.g. Döring 1995; Rasch 2014; Rasch and Tsebelis 2011a). This concept can be further divided into control of the timetable and control of the voting agenda (Döring 2005; Rasch and Tsebelis 2011b; Sieberer 2006).

We capture timetable agenda with three binary variables that code whether the chair can *set the agenda* for committee meetings, whether she can *alter the agenda* later on and whether she can *interrupt or postpone committee meetings*.<sup>7</sup> We code two powers of the chair with regard to the voting agenda. The dummy variable *choice of amendments* is coded one if the chair can influence which amendments are dealt with in the committee, i.e. if she can choose or block amendments for not purely formal reasons. The variable *determine voting agenda* measures whether the chair can influence the ultimate voting process, e.g. by determining the voting method, deciding on the precise question wording or being able to postpone voting.

Second, we analyze prerogatives of the chair with regard to information acquisition. Arguments on shadowing ministers critically depend on the ability to decrease information asymmetries inherent in delegation relationships that (together with preference heterogeneity) create the danger of ministerial drift. All measures of committee power include some variables on the committee's ability to extract information from the executive branch (Martin and Vanberg 2011: Ch. 3; Martin 2011; Mattson and Strøm 1995; Schnapp and Harfst 2005). However, we do not know who within the committee controls these powers. The argument that holding the committee chairs provide particular benefits with regard to monitoring implies that the chair has special prerogatives in this area. We analyze this claim with two dummy variables that measure whether the chair has additional rights compared to regular committee members with regard to *requesting testimony of ministers and*

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<sup>7</sup> We also coded the right of chairs to call and direct committee meetings. Hardly surprising, all chairs in the analysis hold these powers. As the variables do not discriminate between more or less powerful chairs, we do not include them in the analysis.

*bureaucrats* and regarding *summoning documents and extracting information from other outside sources* such as an audit court or external experts.

Third, we study prerogatives of the chair regarding intra-committee procedures relying on three concepts. For one, we code the ability of the chair to structure the debate within the committee which could influence the general course of committee proceedings and thus indirectly their outcome. We use two dummy variables that measure whether the chair can *limit speaking time* of other committee member and whether she enjoys special *speaking rights* within the committee. In addition, we analyze the *voting rights* of the chair in the committee. While most chairs have the same voting rights as any committee member, a few chairs enjoy an advantaged position because their vote is decisive in case of a tie. Finally, we code whether chairs have special prerogatives with regard to *subcommittees*, i.e. can decide about their creation or automatically chair them.

Fourth, we investigate two prerogatives of the chair regarding coordination and communication with other parliamentary actors. First, chairs may play a special role in coordinating parliamentary business. While all chairs act as the representatives of their committees in one way or another, some enjoy more formalized powers as automatic *members of a coordinating body* of parliament. Second, chairs can be more or less central for the interaction between the committee and the plenary. As committees usually cannot make final decisions but need the approval of the plenary for their proposals (e.g. proposed amendments to bills), the presentation of committee work to the plenary is important (Yoshinaka et al. 2010). We capture the chair's role in this process by measuring whether she enjoys special privileges with regard to *committee reports* to the plenary by choosing the rapporteur or generally acting as rapporteur herself.

Thus, we code 13 different powers that committee chairs may hold with regard to eight concepts.

Table 1 presents an overview of the coding of these variables.

**Table 1: Institutional Powers of Committee Chairs**

<b>Concept</b>	<b>Variable</b>	<b>Raw Coding (prior to adjusting for discretion and exclusiveness)</b>
Timetable agenda setting	Set committee agenda [sca]*	1 = Chair has the power to set the agenda of committee meetings
	Alter committee agenda [aca]*	1 = Chair has the power to alter the original agenda of committee meetings
	Interrupt / postpone committee meetings [icm]*	1 = Chair has the power to interrupt or postpone committee meetings
Voting agenda setting	Choice of amendments [ca]*	1 = Chair has the power to choose which amendments to a bill are dealt with in the committee and this decision involves more than purely formal requirements
	Determine voting agenda [dva]*	1 = Chair has power over the voting agenda by choosing the voting method (e.g. recorded vs. anonymous), the precise question wording, or the timing of the vote (any of the three)
Information acquisition	Request testimony by ministers / bureaucrats [rtm]*	1 = Chair has special power (in addition to rights that every committee member may have) to request testimony by ministers or bureaucrats
	Extract other information [eoi]*	1 = Chair has special power (in addition to rights that every committee member may have) to request documents or information from other extra-parliamentary sources (e.g. audit institution, external experts)
Speaking Rights	Limit speaking time [lst]*	1 = Chair has the power to limit speaking time of regular committee members
	Special speaking rights [ssr]*	1 = Chair enjoys special speaking rights (in addition to rights that every committee member may have) in committee
Voting Rights	Voting rights [vr]	Voting rights of the chair in committee 1 = Chair has decisive vote in case of a tie
Subcommittees	Subcommittees [sc]*	Special power of the chair with regard to subcommittees 0 = none .5 = chair may create subcommittees 1 = chair automatically chairs all subcommittees
Coordination within Parliament	Member of coordinating body [mcb]	1 = Chair is automatically member of a parliamentary coordinating body
Interaction with Plenary	Committee reports [cr]*	Role of the chair in committee reports to the plenary 0 = none 1 = chair designates rapporteur 2 = chair automatically acts as rapporteur

\* For this variable, we also code the discretion and exclusiveness variables discussed in the text.

So far, we ignored the question whether committee chairs face any formal constraints in exercising the aforementioned rights. Conceptually, we can distinguish two types of constraints: The discretion of the chair may be limited by substantive prescription on how and under what conditions he may exercise a certain right. Second, a right may not be exclusive to the chair but may also be granted to other actors. To capture these constraints, we code two additional properties for most of the

institutional powers discussed above.<sup>8</sup> With regard to *discretion*, we distinguish between (1) full discretion, (2) limited discretion in which formal rules define restrictions on the use of a power, and (3) no discretion if a chair has to implement clearly specified formal rules without any apparent leeway. The *exclusiveness* of an institutional power varies widely across countries and powers, which is why we opt for a rather detailed scheme with five categories. Exercise of a power by the chair may be (1) the fallback position if other actors choose not to exercise their rights, (2) the chair may only be able to exercise a power with the explicit consent of others, (3) the chair may be one of several actors with equal rights, (4) the chair may be the only actor but others may be able to constrain her power, or (5) a power may be given exclusively to the chair. If the institutional rules do not contain any provision regarding discretion and exclusiveness, we code the variables as full discretion and exclusive right, respectively.

Our measures of institutional powers of committee chairs combine the information on the raw powers with the data on discretion and exclusiveness by decreasing the scores for constrained chairs. First, we set the score to zero if a chair has no discretion in using a power or if she can only exercise a power with the consent of other actors (empirically most often the majority of the committee). Both instances erase the particular benefits of holding the chair. Second, we weigh the score of a variable by the factor 0.5 if the chair is constrained but retains some independent power. This is the case if the chair enjoys limited discretion due to restrictive rules, is one of several actors with a specific right, can be constrained by others in exercising her power, or holds a power as fallback option in case other actors choose not to act.

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<sup>8</sup> Discretion and exclusiveness are not applicable to the variables voting rights, coordinating body, and primary contact.

## 4 The power of committee chairs in Western European Democracies

We code these variables for the lower chambers of 15 Western European democracies: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. For the United Kingdom, we analyze the chairs of General Committees charged with lawmaking (the former Standing Committees) and Select Committees responsible for ministerial oversight separately because their powers differ substantially. Our choice of countries is compatible with recent work on committee powers in parliamentary democracies. The limitation to Western Europe is mostly due to language issues because the variables must be coded from the Standing Orders of the respective parliaments that are often only available in a country's official language. Our data reflects the rules in force in August 2015.<sup>9</sup>

Our empirical analysis of chair powers proceeds in two steps. First, we provide a descriptive overview of the individual variables discussed above. This step demonstrates that many powers are empirically quite rare. Second, we aggregate the variables into an overall index of committee chair powers.

Table 2 displays the scores of the thirteen individual variables adjusted for the discretion and exclusiveness the chair enjoys regarding the respective powers. This first look at the data reveals a number of noteworthy features. The most obvious point is the large number of zeros and as a result the low mean values of the individual variables reported in the last row of Table 2. Most committee chairs in the sample do not hold most of the powers we analyze. Only two powers – automatic membership in a coordinating body of parliament and the power to interrupt or postpone committee meetings – are somewhat common (available in 10 and 7, respectively, of the 16 cases). Interestingly,

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<sup>9</sup> The original coding was done by four student assistants who had the necessary language skills. All codes on which the coders were not totally sure were discussed by the relevant coder, Daniel Höhmann and Ulrich Sieberer. These discussions led to unanimous codings and ensure consistency across coders.

both of these rights are largely procedural and have little direct bearing on policy-making or information acquisition. All other powers are enjoyed by less than 20 percent of the chairs in the sample.

**Table 2: Institutional Powers of Committee Chairs in 15 Western European Parliaments**

	Set committee agenda	Alter committee agenda	Interrupt / postpone committee meetings	Choice of amendments	Determine voting agenda	Request testimony by ministers / bureaucrats	Extract other information	Limit speaking time	Special speaking rights	Voting rights	Subcommittees	Member of coordinating body	Committee reports
<b>Austria</b>	0	0	1	0	0,5	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0,5
<b>Belgium</b>	0,5	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
<b>Denmark</b>	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0,5
<b>Finland</b>	0	0	0	0	0,5	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0,5
<b>France</b>	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0,25	1	0
<b>Germany</b>	0,5	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0,25
<b>Ireland</b>	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0,5	0	1	1	0
<b>Italy</b>	0,5	0,5	0,5	0	0	0	0,5	0	0	0	0	1	0
<b>Luxembourg</b>	0,5	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Netherlands</b>	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Norway</b>	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0
<b>Portugal</b>	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
<b>Spain</b>	0	0,5	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Sweden</b>	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0
<b>UK (Gen. C.)</b>	0	0	0,5	1	0,5	0	0	1	0	0	1	1	0
<b>UK (Sel. C.)</b>	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
<b>Mean score</b>	0,19	0,06	0,38	0,13	0,16	0,06	0,03	0,13	0,03	0,13	0,14	0,63	0,11

Note: The scores are adjusted for the discretion and exclusiveness of these powers as described in the text.

Second, formal powers of committee chairs with regard to information acquisition are particularly rare. Only Danish chairs may by themselves request testimony from the executive branch, and only their Italian counterparts are privileged in extracting information from other sources. These findings call into question the first element of the causal mechanism underlying the shadowing argument according to which holding a committee chair enables parties to extract information from ministries that they could not obtain otherwise.

Third, a cursory look at the data does not reveal obvious patterns of strong and weak chairs. Some chairs with few powers still hold a specific right that few colleagues enjoy (e.g. Denmark and Norway) whereas otherwise strong chairs lack some relatively frequent powers (e.g. Ireland).

In a second step, we aggregate the information in the several variables into an overall measure of institutional chair power. In general, there are two approaches to aggregation, both of which have been used in previous work on parliamentary committees and the institutional power of parliaments more generally. The first approach makes a priori assumptions on the dimensionality underlying the various variables and their relative weight and constructs additive indices on this basis (e.g. Hallerberg 2000; Martin 2011; Schnapp and Harfst 2005; Yläoutinen and Hallerberg 2009). The second approach uses data reduction methods like factor analysis to estimate the underlying dimensionality and the weight of the various variables from the data, either in an exploratory way (e.g. Mattson and Strøm 1995) or confirmatorily based on previous hypotheses (e.g. Martin and Vanberg 2011: Ch. 3; Sieberer 2011).

For several reasons, we opt for the first approach and develop an additive index of chair powers. First, given the scarcity of previous work, we do not have strong a priori expectations regarding the dimensionality of the phenomenon that could be used as starting point for a confirmatory factor analysis. Second, our variables have few values each (at most three) which turns factor analytic methods problematic as these methods assume a multivariate normal distribution of the variables to be factored (Kim and Mueller 1994: 142-3). Third, the highly skewed distribution of many variables and the finding that different parliaments hold rare powers make it unlikely that we find a clear factor structure because these few extreme cases can only be captured by additional factors or retain high uniqueness values.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> The correlations among the variables are generally low. For 40 of 78 cases, their absolute value is below 0.20, in another 29 cases it ranges between 0.20 and 0.40. Only nine correlations have absolute values above 0.40.

We should be explicit about some important decisions and assumption we make in constructing our index. First, the additive link assumes that different competencies of chairs can substitute each other, i.e. no single competence is considered a necessary condition for counting as a powerful chair. This assumption (which is common in many indices on committee powers, see above) seems reasonable in many instances. For example, the power to change the committee agenda may substitute for the right to set it in the first place, the ability to select rapporteurs or even report directly to the plenary may offset the right to restrict debate within the committee, and the power to select amendments to be dealt with in the committee may substitute for the ability to choose the method of voting on these amendments.

Second, any index depends on the choice of variables to be included. This choice is particularly critical if – as in our case – many variables have few non-zero values because including or excluding such variables can considerably alter the score and relative placement of individual cases. This problem can be alleviated somewhat by incorporating many variables and thus decreasing the impact of individual variables on the overall index. For this reason, we choose to include all 13 variables discussed above in the construction of the index instead of excluding those with very few non-zero values.

Third, any additive index has to make assumptions about the weight of the individual variables, ideally based on a theoretical argument about their relative importance. If theory does not provide strong arguments for differential weights, the customary fallback position is to treat all variables as equally important. As there is very little theoretical argument and empirical knowledge about the relative importance of different competencies of committee chairs, we rely on the standard assumption of equal weights. However, several of our concepts are measured with more than one variable (three variables on timetable agenda control and two each on voting agenda setting, information acquisition and speaking rights) forcing us to decide whether equal weight should be given to the individual variables or to the concepts they capture. We choose the second option to avoid an implicit weighting in favor of concepts for which we have more than one measure. Thus, we

use the average score of all relevant variables to measure the power of chairs with regard to timetable agenda control, voting agenda control, information acquisition, and speaking rights.<sup>11</sup>

Based on these decisions, our Committee Chair Power Index (CCPI) is calculated according to the following formula (using the abbreviations listed in Table 1):

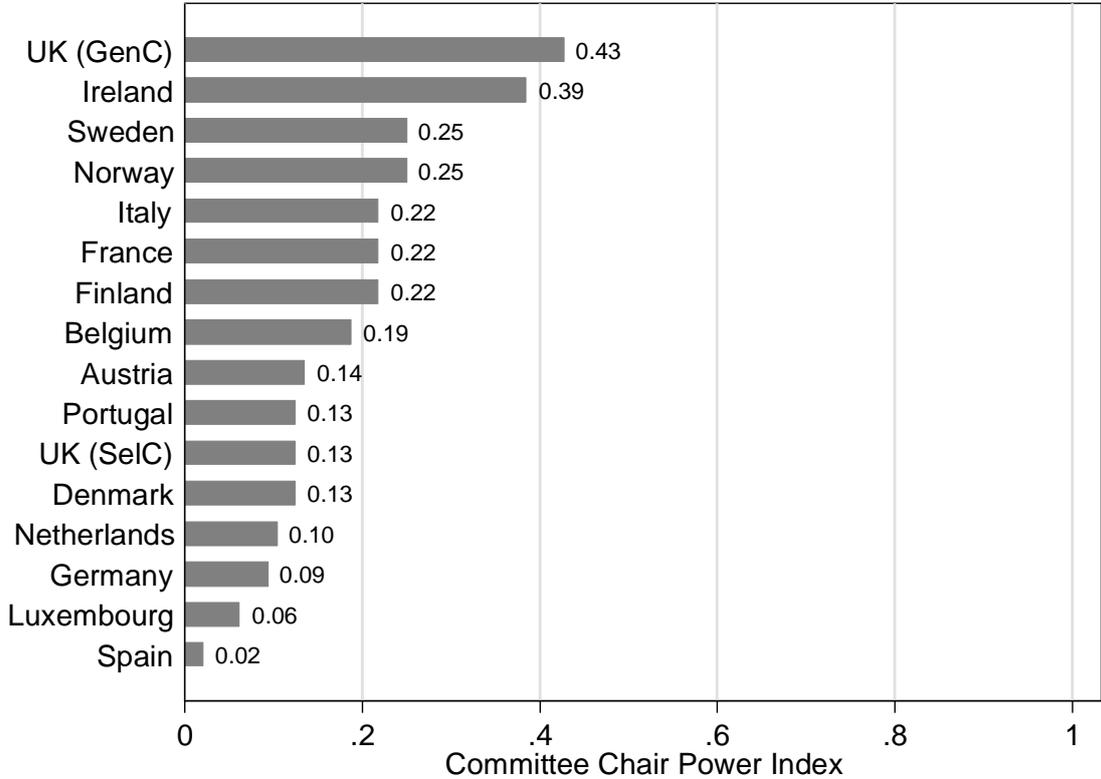
$$CCPI = \left[ \frac{sca + aca + icm}{3} + \frac{ca + dva}{2} + \frac{rtm + eoi}{2} + \frac{lst + ssr}{2} + vr + sc + mcb + cr \right] / 8$$

Figure 1 shows the index scores in our fifteen parliaments. By our measure, chairs of the General Committees in British House of Commons and chairs in the Irish Dáil hold by far the most powers, followed by a group of six countries with relatively similar scores (Sweden, Norway, Italy, France, Finland, and Belgium). Another group of six rather similar countries follows (Austria, Portugal, the British Select Committees, Denmark, the Netherlands, and Germany). At the end of the list we find Luxembourg and in particular Spain with institutionally very weak committee chairs. These findings are rather surprising as the institutional power of committee chairs does not seem to parallel established knowledge regarding the strength of the committees in a parliament. Committees in the UK, Ireland, and France are usually considered very weak, but their chairs (in Britain at least those of the General Committees) score highly. The reverse is true for countries like the Netherlands and Germany with strong committees but weak chairs. We analyze the relationship between chair power and committee strength in more detail in the following section.

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<sup>11</sup> We report results for the alternative choice that treats all variables equally in the appendix.

**Figure 1: The Committee Chair Power Index in 15 Western European Democracies**



In addition to the placement of individual countries, we can draw two more general conclusions from this data. First, the overall institutional powers of most committee chairs are weak. While the possible range of the index runs from zero to one, almost all parliaments reach at most one fourth of this score. Note that the index only contains powers that are empirically observed in at least one parliament in the sample. Thus, its range is not artificially inflated by including empirically irrelevant features.

Second, the observed clustering of parliaments with very similar scores is interesting because the descriptive analysis of the individual variables in Table 2 did not reveal obvious clusters. The aggregation shows that many committee chairs reach similar overall power scores by holding different rights that are treated as substitutes in the additive index. One direct consequence of the small differences between many countries is that the index is quite sensitive to the choice of variables and their weighting. For example, aggregating the index on the basis of the individual

variables instead of the eight concepts leads to shifts in the placement of several countries (see Figure A-1 in the appendix). Most notably, Sweden and Norway score lower on this alternative index whereas the Netherlands and Germany receive higher values. Given the sensitivity of the index we should bear in mind that conclusions on the relationship between chair powers and other variables may not be robust towards other decisions in index construction.

## 5 Chair Powers, Shadowing, and Committee Strength

In this section, we relate our new index of chair powers to patterns of shadowing ministers via committee chairs and to committee powers more generally. The shadowing argument advanced by Carroll and Cox conceptualizes committee chairs as privileged actors who can monitor ministers (Carroll and Cox 2012; see also Kim and Loewenberg 2005). While the authors do not discuss the powers of committee chairs, their argument clearly implies that chairs are the more useful for shadowing ministers the more powerful they are. Thus, the usage of this monitoring strategy should increase with the committee chair powers index. Carroll and Cox (2012: 225) report a simple country-level measure of the usage of shadow chair: the percentage of committee chairs from governing parties that oversee ministries led by another governing party.

Figure 2 shows the relationship between this variable and our new measure of committee chair powers. As Carroll and Cox study a different sample of countries, we only have nine observations and in particular lose the strongest chairs in our sample.<sup>12</sup> Within this limited sample, however, we clearly see that the two variables are independent. The linear best fit line (based on a bivariate OLS regression) is almost flat and the confidence band could accommodate a large range of different slopes.<sup>13</sup> This result sheds further doubt on the causal mechanism underlying the findings on committee chairs shadowing ministers: Neither do most chairs command many institutional

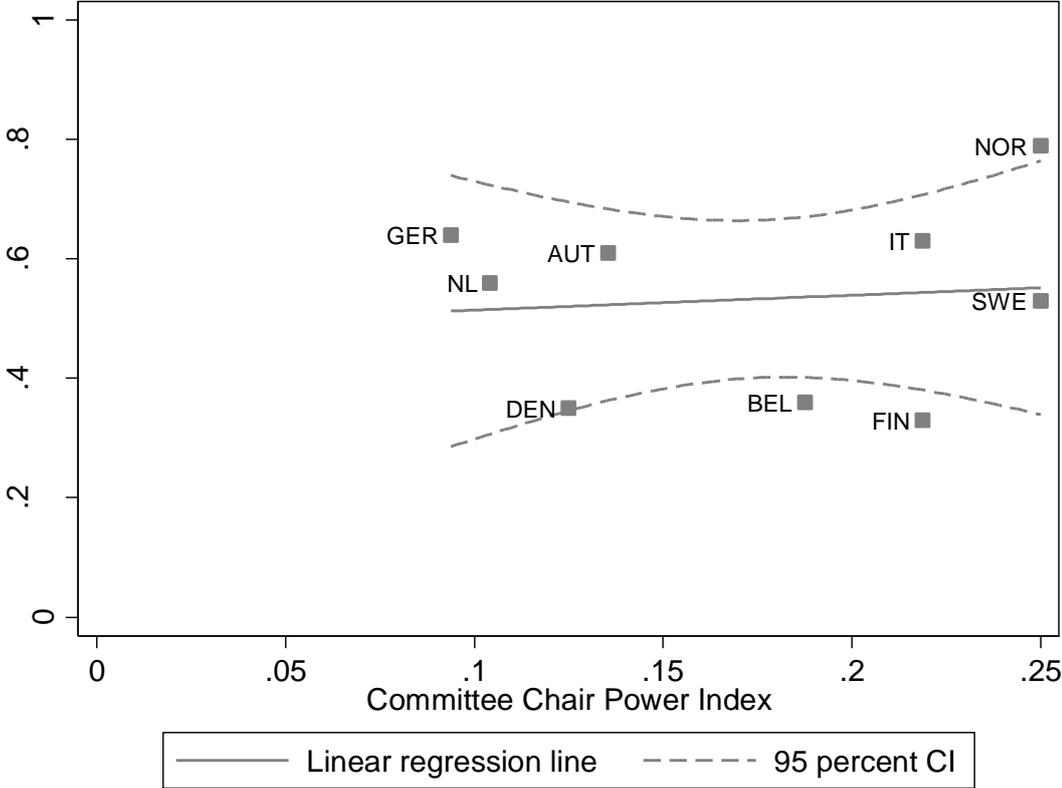
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<sup>12</sup> Note that there may also be slight distortions due to the fact that Carroll and Cox analyze shadowing patterns in the period 2001 to 2007 whereas our institutional data is based on rules in 2015.

<sup>13</sup> The regression coefficient is 0.25 with a 95 percent confidence interval from -2.00 to 2.50.

prerogatives that could give them a privileged position to monitor ministers, nor do relatively stronger rights of a chair compared to her counterparts in other parliaments lead to a higher frequency of shadow assignments. Note, however, that our bivariate analysis does not control for other variables in the model and is situated on the country level instead of studying the allocation of individual chairs. Thus, it raises doubts regarding the findings by Carroll and Cox but cannot ultimately refute them which can only be done by incorporating chair powers into the original analysis.

**Figure 2: The relationship between committee chair powers and shadowing behavior**



Going beyond the frequency of shadowing, we also analyze the relationship between the powers of chairs and the strength of the committees they preside over. This relationship is important in two respects. First, Carroll and Cox (2012) use the power of committees as an explanatory factor for the use of the shadowing strategy. Thus it is interesting to see whether chair powers are highly correlated with the strength of committees and may thus be indirectly included in their analysis.

Second, the relationship between chair powers and committee strength is interesting beyond the question of shadowing because research on committees in European democracies is divided about the question of which actors profit from strong committees. While one strand highlights the advantages that strong committees provide to opposition parties, especially in the presence of minority cabinets (Powell 2000; Sjölin 1993; Strøm 1990), a second strand conceptualizes strong committees mainly as benefiting governing parties in coalition cabinets (Martin and Vanberg 2004, 2011, 2014).<sup>14</sup> If powerful committees go hand in hand with powerful committee chairs, the partisan allocation of chairs (both according to formal rules such as a proportional allocation of chairs to all parties and according to observed allocation patterns) could provide new empirical leverage for analyzing which actors are more or less likely to profit from strong committees.

Existing literature offers a number of comparative measures of committee power that have slightly different foci. Martin and Vanberg's index of policing strength is designed to capture the formal powers committees can use to identify and correct ministerial drift in legislation (Martin and Vanberg 2011: Ch. 3). With this focus it is theoretically closest to the argument on shadowing chairs. Mattson and Strøm (1995) provide two different measures (generated inductively via factor analysis) that capture the power of committees to control their own agenda and their authority in drafting bills. Finally, Shane Martin relies on variables identified by Strøm (1990) in constructing an overarching index of committee strength.

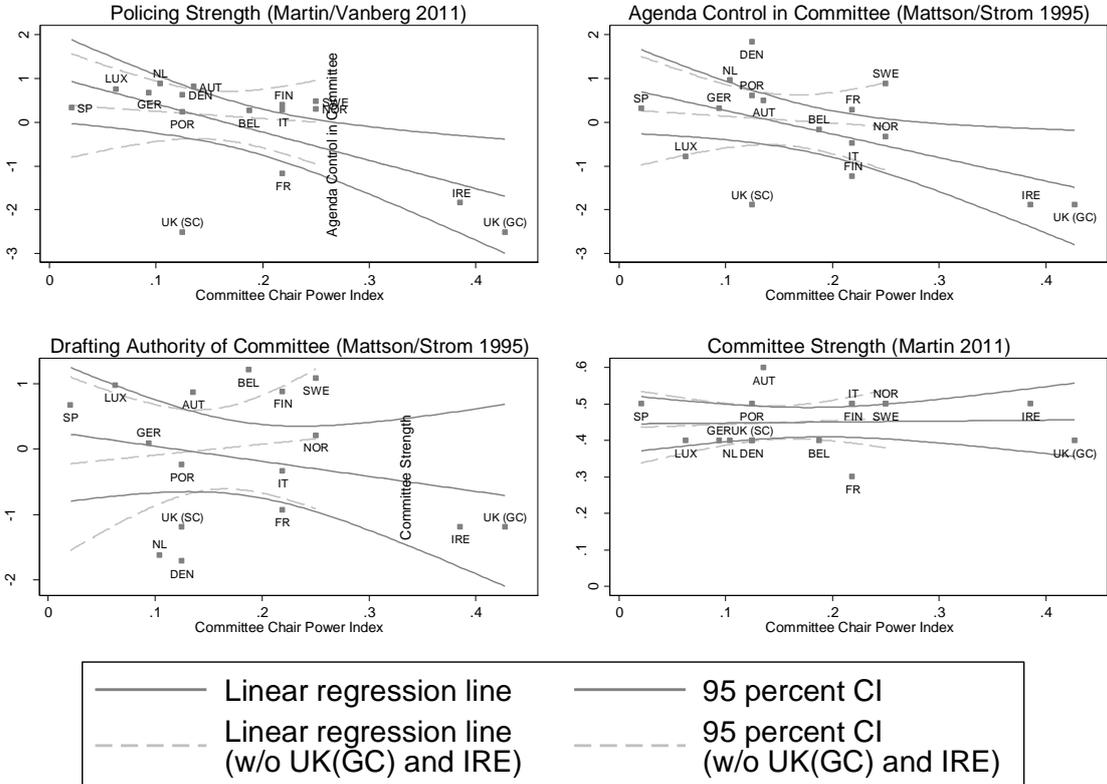
Figure 3 shows the relationship between our committee chair power index and these different indicators of committee strength. We observe negative relationships for three of the four measures of committee power. Despite the very low number of only 16 cases, the negative slope is even statistically significant at the five percent level for the two graphs in the upper row. These findings suggest that chairs are more powerful if the committees they preside over are weaker. The only

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<sup>14</sup> Note that the Martin and Vanberg argument on legislative review by coalition parties does not necessarily involve a special role of the chair and is thus distinct from the shadowing logic of Carroll and Cox (2012).

indicator for which we do not observe any relationship is Martin’s (2011) measure of committee strength. Note however that this measure displays very little variation in the countries studied here. Visual inspection of the plots shows that Ireland and the General Committees in the UK are extreme cases on the committee chair power index and score very low on most of the committee power measures. Figure 3 also reports the regression lines if these two cases are excluded from estimation (dashed grey lines). In fact, the relationships become much weaker and are no longer statistically significant.

**Figure 3: The relationship between chair powers and committee power indices**



## 6 Discussion and Conclusion

Chairs of parliamentary committees have recently gained scholarly attention as a mechanism through which government parties can monitor the behavior of their coalition partners and prevent ministerial drift in policy-making. While patterns of chair allocation show evidence for a shadowing

logic, the core assumption that holding the chair of a committee provides distinct advantages with regard to monitoring and thus the underlying causal mechanism has not been explored empirically. If the theory is true, committee chairs must hold powers that go beyond those of regular committee members and shadowing should be observed more frequently in systems in which these advantages are more pronounced. To test these claims, this paper presented the first comparative measure of formal committee chair powers. We developed an additive index based on thirteen formal powers and measured it in fifteen Western European parliaments, relying on institutional rules provided in the parliamentary standing orders.

Our findings cast serious doubt on the causal mechanism underlying the monitoring argument. First, we find that committee chairs are institutionally weak in most parliaments. Holding the chair does not provide actors with many additional rights that could be used to keep a tab on coalition partners. Second, at least on the aggregate level, we do not observe any relationship between the power of committee chairs and the frequency of shadow chairs even though the theoretical argument implies a positive relationship. Third, we see that more powerful committees are not headed by more powerful chairs. The two factors are even negatively related, though this relationship is largely driven by comparatively strong positions of the chairs in Ireland and the General Committees in the United Kingdom. Thus, the positive effect of committee power on the use of shadow chairs (Carroll and Cox 2012) cannot be attributed to the role of chairs and thus is not directly related to the causal mechanism suggested by the shadowing argument.

While our findings are suggestive, we are quick to acknowledge the limits of our analysis. First, a more thorough test of the shadowing argument should be conducted on the level of the allocation of individual chairs (as in Carroll and Cox 2012) rather than on the aggregate country level. Second, our measure only captures formal powers of committee chairs. While there are reasons to expect that rational ministers will not accept massive and durable constraints in cases of conflict based solely on informal rules, we cannot rule out that informal and political power give committee chairs additional leverage they can use to keep tabs on coalition partners. Third, the shadowing pattern as such is not

affected by our analysis. It is still true that ministers are more likely to face a committee chair from the ranks of a coalition partner rather than from their own party if the ideological position of the minister is further more distant from that of her coalition partners and if committees as such are stronger (Carroll and Cox 2012; Kim and Loewenberg 2005). These findings support the shadowing logic whereas our results on the powers of committee chairs contradict the causal mechanism assumed to underlie this logic.

How can we reconcile these findings or, put differently, is there an alternative theory that can account for observed patterns of chair assignment without reference to powers of the chair that are crucial for the monitoring logic? One alternative explanation is that coalition parties value committee chairs not because they give them advantages in information acquisition and policy-making but because they provide increased public visibility that can partly counterbalance the dominance of the minister in public debate. In the tradition of the saliency theory of electoral competition, one can argue that intra-coalitional conflict is not only about the content of policy but also about parties trying to be recognized as important in a policy field – vote-seeking parties compete about issue ownership (Bélanger and Meguid 2008; Budge and Farlie 1983; Dolezal et al. 2013). Given the dominance of ministries in modern democracies, the public will most often ascribe issue ownership to the party of the minister, which is one reason why parties seek to control ministries on issues that are particularly important to their electoral agenda (Bäck et al. 2011; Budge and Keman 1990). However, many issues are similarly salient for different coalition parties. Thus, parties who do not control the ministry have incentives to seek other offices they can use to claim responsibility for an issue and to communicate their policy message. Committee chairs may be particularly attractive posts for this purpose because they are not hierarchically inferior to the minister as for example junior ministers are.

This argument on public visibility and issue ownership does not require committee chairs to enjoy particular advantages with regard to monitoring ministers and influencing policy in the committee. Furthermore, it is consistent with the observed patterns on ideological conflict and committee

power: First, visibility should be more important for coalition partners if issues are disputed within the coalition and thus are likely to enter electoral competition, which accounts for the positive effect of policy disagreement on the likelihood of shadowing chairs. Second, public visibility of the committee chair should indeed increase if committees as such play an important role in policy-making, which explains the positive finding on committee power. Future work should spell out this alternative explanation based on visibility in more detail and derive observable implications that could be used to test it against the prevalent monitoring argument.

Finally, our findings on committee chair powers have implications for our understanding of parliamentary committees more generally. First, a proportional sharing of committee chairs between all parliamentary parties is often considered an important feature that gives opposition parties some influence over policy-making (Powell 2000: Ch. 2; Strøm 1990: 71). The low scores of most committee chairs suggest that the additional influence opposition parties can gain via chairing committees may be rather limited. On the other hand, we see that committee chairs are tentatively less powerful if they preside over strong committees. Thus, parliamentary actors seem less inclined to accept internal hierarchy if the stakes are higher. Taken together, these findings suggest that political actors consider the consequences of the internal design of committees for political competition and thus strengthen arguments on the rational design of parliamentary institutions in general (e.g. Martin 2011; Sieberer and Müller 2015). Furthermore, they indicate that in addition to the recent focus on intra-coalitional monitoring the design of parliamentary committees cannot totally ignore the relationship between parliamentary majority and opposition.

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**Appendix**

**Figure A-1: Committee Chair Power Index with aggregation based on variables instead of concepts**

