Summary

Legislative debates are an understudied institution in the political science literature. Modern tools for automatic analysis of speech content has, fortunately, given us an opportunity to make inferences based on an ever increasing accessibility of vast corpora of texts that has been analyzed only in parts previously.

In this thesis, I study Norwegian parliamentary debates with the overarching hypothesis that parliamentary speech can be used to assess the effects of institutional and external shocks on MP behavior. In order to test this argument, we need the data to do so, the methods suited for doing so, and the contextual knowledge of how to interpret the results. The thesis has three main contributions.

First, it provides a new data set on Norwegian parliamentary debates (1998-2016); a large corpus of automatically annotated speeches accompanied with a wide set of meta data. These are both the first openly accessible structured data on parliamentary debates in Norway and, to my knowledge, the first open access linguistically annotated parliamentary speech data in the world.

Second, the thesis has a more general contribution in that I show how data structuring and contextual knowledge is an integral part of the text analysis process. On the one hand, I provide an analysis on which MPs get to take the plenary floor in the Norwegian parliament. This builds an important foundation for understanding the content of the speeches in parliament by, for example, showing that committee membership is essential for MP’s floor access. On the other hand, I show that the language features fed to our text models are important for subsequent inference. Even small scale language tweaks are shown to have strong impact on possible inferences made from these analyses.

Finally, I provide two examples of inferential analyses on MP behavior based on parliamentary debates. On the one hand, research on the effect of electoral reform on different political institutions are numerous, but this thesis provides the first analysis on the effect of electoral reform on the content of parliamentary debates. This confirms the theory stating that going from SMD systems to PR systems re-alters the vote-seeking incentives of MPs; going from more personal to more party based. On the other hand, even though the parties are very unified in the Norwegian parliament, I also show that disproportional external shocks across electoral districts can alter the behavior of MPs based on their constituency, and not necessarily based on their party affiliation.

In sum, the thesis makes three distinct contributions to the literature on parliamentary debates: 1) new and innovative data on Norway, 2) in depth analysis of pre-processing consequences, and 3) how institutional design and external shocks affect the content of parliamentary debates.