

Do Committees Preempt Party Domination?

An Analysis of State Legislatures

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Abstract

United States legislatures are distinguished by a relatively weak party organization and bipartisan committee systems. To better understand the interaction of committees with political parties, this article will examine the relative influence of these institutions at the level of the state legislature. Recent research suggests that a committee system with more influence results in a more bipartisan legislative environment, reducing the influence of parties in the legislative process. The theory is evaluated using survey data from state legislators in conjunction with legislators' perceptions of the relative influence of committees and parties by state. The findings are that state legislatures with more complex committee systems were less likely to have strong party caucuses or party leaders.

Introduction

United States legislatures are distinguished by a relatively weak party structure and a strong bipartisan committee system. Compare this structure with the British parliamentary system, and the differences are striking. The British system supports strong parties by combining executive and legislative functions in the Parliament, with committees comprised entirely of majority party members. Legislatures in the United States, however, are comprised of relatively independent, bipartisan legislative committees. Does this institutional structure affect the influence of the party organization?

Scholars of the United States Congress have focused on parties and the committee system. Woodrow Wilson concluded that the bipartisan committee structure weakened parties, resulting in reduced transparency and accountability. David Mayhew concluded that party control of the executive and legislative branch is relatively unimportant to the passage of legislation, and that Congressmen are encouraged to vote with their constituency over their party. In his study of Congress, Richard Fenno focused on the committee system as important to all activities of Congressmen.

In order to better understand the interaction of committees with the party system, this paper will explore these institutions at the level of the state legislature. The goal is develop a better understanding of why the American system of government promotes weak parties, and whether the institutional effects are the same across multiple legislatures. What is the relationship between committees and political parties at the state level?

The analysis of this paper does not focus on the origins of parties or committees. Rather, my research will attempt to analyze the current effects of the existing committee system on party strength during the legislative process. Committees could effect party organization by acting as rivals to party control. Party control will be measured both by surveys of member perceptions and Mayhew's Traditional Party Organization, which identifies persistent party factionalism by state. Committee strength will be measured by legislator perceptions and the institutional complexity of the committee system.

Parties and Committees in American Legislatures

The legislative committee system is a peculiar institution. In one sense, committees are indispensable for increasing efficiency and dividing labor, allowing a legislature to address the demands of an increasingly complex world. An opposing perspective is that committees are an affront to democratic theory, disconnecting most of the legislative body from certain issues, and concentrating power in the hands of a minority. The inherent dilemma behind the committee system has made for a rich and often conflicted body of literature.

As previously mentioned, scholars from Wilson to Fenno have considered the committee system to be the locus of power within the U.S. Congress. Wilson believed in 1884 that the U.S. House and Senate were not led by the party leaders, but rather by the chairs of the standing committees (Wilson 1884). The future President came to this conclusion about committee power

even before the “seniority system” of assigning committee seats was instituted, which took much of the partisan control away from the assignment process. Furthermore, the party caucus was believed to be the antidote to powerful committees under Wilson’s model; party caucus power and committee power were believed to be rivals. According to this model, stronger committees would frustrate organization of the party caucus, as the chairs of the standing committees would be assigned power above and beyond the party leaders.

What is the intended purpose of the committee system? Most contemporary scholars believe that, like parties, committees were created to serve the interests of members. Richard Fenno and David Mayhew, for their part, both believe that the committee system exists to fulfill certain needs of elected representatives (Fenno 1973; Mayhew 1991). Fenno’s analysis adds complexity to the model by including “influence in the House” and “making good public policy” in addition to reelection among the goals of individual congressmen. Committees as an institution serve the policy-making interests of individual members, often with very little partisan influence (Fenno 1973).

By treating committees as institutions created for the purpose of policy-making, Fenno concludes that partisan influence varies by committee based upon the policy area the committee covers. For example, the Ways and Means Committee and the Education and Labor Committee are far more partisan than the Post Office or Foreign Affairs Committees (Fenno 1973). The types of issues the committee deals with influence the level of partisanship. In fact, Fenno concludes that the subject area of the committee determines the decision making process within the committee. From the state legislative perspective, it may be that the types of issues the committees deal with in each individual legislature determine the level of partisanship in committees. Understanding and creating a measure of the jurisdictional boundaries of the

committee system in each state, however, is a daunting task that presents many methodological difficulties (see Squire and Hamm 2005).

Concerning the purpose of committees, Keith Krehbiel argues that committees are not autonomous actors, but rather information gatherers (Krehbiel 1991). Under this perspective, committees serve the interests of the floor, rather than controlling the agenda. Krehbiel's model has gained some empirical support (see Martorano 2006). However, the model doesn't explain the significant control committees have over the agenda through gate-keeping. If the purpose of committees is to provide information on specialized legislation, why are committees able to block legislation unilaterally? Committees have institutional powers that extend far beyond simple legislative research.

The common theme among these models is that committees exist to serve elected representatives. If this is true, committees may serve some of the same functions as parties. Therefore, committees and parties may be rivals, in that they compete to serve a similar purpose, or they may be complements. Evidence from the data I wish to analyze may show that committees are indeed rivals to party power.

Scholars who study the theory behind agenda setting have come down in favor of either committees or parties as agenda setters. Shepsle and Weingast conclude that committees are unrepresentative of the parent body because they remove alternatives to multi-dimensional issues (Shepsle and Weingast 1994). The removal of these alternatives creates a Structure Induced Equilibrium (SIE) that restricts the agenda according to the preference of the committee leaders. Gary Cox and Mathew McCubbins support a conflicting theory of agenda setting. According to this model, parties structure everything that happens. The authors point to the fact that committees almost never roll party proposals, and that party members operate on the basis of

shared fate (Cox and McCubbins 1994). Therefore, the Cox and McCubbins model assumes that parties organize members across multidimensional issues and set an agenda that committee leaders almost never veto. However, just because committee leaders almost never roll party proposals does not mean that the party controls the agenda. Committee members may have no incentive to disagree with the party's proposal; party leaders may simply be making proposals that are already in line with the committee members' preferences. The notion of committees as agenda setters has yet to be decisively refuted; the committee system as an important center of power is still a distinct possibility.

What does it mean for a committee system to be powerful? Early measures of committee power focused on establishing criteria for "committee system autonomy". Alan Rosenthal's (1973) measure of committee autonomy established five criteria; strong committees should be able to:

"1) receive legislation, 2) screen legislation, 3) shape the nature of legislation, 4) affect the passage of legislation, and 5) study problems and formulate legislation during interim periods" (Rosenthal 1973)

The rational basis for these criteria is sound, but it leaves out some other possible committee powers. One possible committee power is to set the legislative agenda in their issue area. Institutional measures of committee power, therefore, may miss the mark by oversimplifying the complex function of committees in the legislative process.

Later studies have attempted to describe the committee system of state legislatures through survey data. Francis and Riddlesperger (1982) conclude that the use of committees in state government is on the rise because of the efficiency gains offered by legislative specialization. The authors also concluded that states controlled by one party are more likely to

utilize the committee system, and that decisions made in committees are more bipartisan. The Francis study, however, does not address the issue of party strength. Are parties able to create an agenda and enact meaningful legislation? Can the party leaders influence their members, and do they have meaningful influence on the committees? The conclusions of Francis and Riddlesperger suggest that despite the fact the single party states utilize committees, legislation enacted by these committees is relatively non-partisan. Is there any meaningful party competition in these one-party states?

Francis and Riddlesperger's study mentions that one-party states tend to utilize the committee system, as if the party structure influences the formation of committees. What if the committee system itself is impacting the structure and functioning of parties? If the committee system does influence party strength in the legislature, committees could play an even more important role in the functioning of our legislatures than previously thought.

John Aldrich (1995), in his study of the origins of American Political Parties, argues that parties were created as a rational method for ambitious politicians to, among other things, gain electoral and policy success. In this same vein, it has been argued that committees were themselves created to aid in these very same pursuits by allowing for specialized control over policy areas. What if the power created by these institutions is not mutually self-reinforcing? Furthermore, what if the committee system actually undermines the party's agenda setting ability? If committees do in fact have such an effect, party leaders are at this point powerless to abolish them. Committees are too entrenched in the U.S. Congressional system, and even if a majority of legislators had incentives to remove them, such an institutional reformation would be very difficult.

What does it mean to have stronger political parties? Often parties are considered strong because of their influence over the electoral process. David Mayhew measured party organization by analyzing, among other things, the control the party had over primary elections (Mayhew 1986). If a party is able to control the candidates on the ballot, it can also control the ideologies of those who have a chance of being elected. The ways in which this electoral control is translated into legislative control, however, are difficult to measure.

Gerald Pomper, in an article analyzing party power, concludes that state political parties exert most of their influence during the period leading up to an election (Pomper 1990). This perspective downplays the party's influence over the legislative process. According to this analysis, the structure of political parties is set up to influence elections, not influence policy outcomes. Aldrich, however, argues that contemporary parties serve the various needs of members (Aldrich 1995). If we accept Fenno's set of member goals, these needs go beyond simple reelection to include policy formation. Therefore, party caucuses and party leaders should try to promote loyalty by offering policy benefits. Otherwise, legislators could use the party to gain a seat, then leave the party and use their incumbency advantage to gain reelection. Parties, therefore, need to be strong enough to maintain loyalty during the session, and to threaten incumbents with electoral sanctions.

Party caucuses are consistently playing a game of "chicken" with their party members (Cox and McCubbins 1994). In order to be successful, party caucuses need to convince their members that their expulsion from the caucus would result in serious consequences, the most serious of which would be the inability to win reelection. In a state with persistent factionalism, however, this threat would be mostly empty because parties exert very little direct control over candidates. Therefore, state parties that experience persistent factionalism should have less

direct influence over their members. The party's ability to exert influence over the primary, therefore, translates directly into party caucus control over the state representatives.

Do the states with weaker parties suffer in their transparency and accountability, as Wilson would have us believe? Schaffner (2007) concluded in a study of Kansas, Iowa, and Nebraska that strong political parties result in committees that are more representative of the full legislature. The study concluded that committees are simply a by-product of the partisan structure and organization. Is a stronger committee system with weaker parties even possible, and if such a legislature were to exist, would it be less democratic?

The interaction between committees and parties requires further study. Committees could also strengthen parties, because a position on a committee is a post that a party leader can use to reward party loyalty in violation of the seniority norm. However, some key factors may weaken or reverse the party strengthening effect of committees. First, the seniority system allows most representatives to gain a seat on a committee without necessarily catering to his or her party's demands (although, as Squire and Hamm point out, the seniority system cannot be assumed to be in place in all state legislatures). Studies of the effect of "majority party stacking" (being in the majority party making legislators more likely to gain a seat on a committee) have found little direct evidence of party influence in committee formation (Krehbiel 1991). Also, committee posts have frequently been used to entice members to switch parties (Yoshinaka 2005). In fact, in the U.S. Congress, members who switch parties are more likely to receive committee posts in violation of the seniority norm than members who stay with their own party (Yoshinaka 2005). The effect of the "party switching incentive" could be to weaken the hierarchical structure of party organizations and create more factionalism within the legislature.

Recent research on the roles of parties and committees has discredited the “Partisan Theory” that committees serve the needs of the majority party (Martorano 2006). A 2006 study tested several theories of committee functioning, including Distributive Theory (committee control over property rights and issue areas), Informational Theory (committees as information gatherers), and Partisan Theory (that committees serve the majority party). The study concluded that informational theory best describes committee autonomy, relying on evidence that supports the positive relationship between policy complexity and committee power. However, the study tells us little about the party/committee relationship; Martorano only uses one variable to measure party competition in the state, and no direct measures of party influence during legislative proceedings.

If committees are a strong institutional factor affecting party strength, they could have a significant impact on legislative productivity. Rogers (2005) concludes in his study that legislatures divided by party (e.g. different parties controlling each chamber) are almost 30% less productive than unified legislatures. Could there be an institutional explanation for this productivity? Francis and Riddlesperger conclude that committees help promote efficiency in the legislative process, and that they promote bipartisan compromise. Therefore, more party competition could be an indicator of weaker legislative committees, resulting in less efficiency. If party influence and committee influence co-vary, however, what is the direction of causality? Does committee bipartisanship weaken parties?

In order to test the causal effects of the committee system, the following hypothesis will be examined.

Hypothesis: The stronger the committee system in a state legislature, the weaker the legislative influence of the party organization will be.

This hypothesis builds off of the conclusions of Wilson, Mayhew, and Fenno. If the committee system is strong, then the true leaders of the legislature should be the committee chairs, not the party leaders. This would relegate party leaders to a more symbolic role. The literature supports the concept that committees and parties may be related to some degree in the legislative setting. However, the causal relationship between the two institutions is still unclear.

Conventional political wisdom states that the party-in-elections affects the party-in-government. If my hypothesis were correct, the converse may also be true: the strength of the party-in-government would influence the strength of the party-in-elections. Considering Mayhew's measure of party organization, the causal process behind my hypothesis can be further developed. Committees could promote party factionalism by creating factionalism within the legislature. The committee system promotes specialization, creating cleavages around new issue areas that interest only specific representatives. From a game-theoretic perspective, committees also give these organized interests considerable power in the game of "chicken" between parties and committees. If a large enough group of committee members organizes against the party leadership, they would have a much greater chance of challenging the leaders than individual members. Therefore, the effect of the committee system is that it can serve as a rival to party control, weakening the influence of parties both in the legislature and during elections.

Some of these questions are admittedly beyond the scope of the proposed study. This review has only brought up some of the implications of an institutional approach to examining committees and parties. Studies of committee systems in legislatures have mostly focused on the U.S. Congress, and evidence supporting or refuting existing theories of committee versus party

power is largely inconclusive. Existing theory and empirical evidence supports the hypothesis that the structure and functioning of committee systems may have an impact on party strength, as measured by organization and control over the legislative process. The current literature supports the relationship between parties and committees in legislative bodies; perhaps comparisons between state legislatures can further clarify the relationship.

Measurement

Testing this hypothesis requires the accurate measurement of two variables: committee strength and party strength. I will consider each variable individually, beginning with the independent variable, committee strength.

Committee strength can be thought of as both the complexity of the committee organization, and of the perceived importance of the committee system in the legislative process. Wayne Francis and James Riddlesperger (1982) have completed a survey that provides appropriate data for testing these committee properties for each state. The authors surveyed state legislators in all 50 states about their perceptions of the legislative process. Legislators were asked about the relative importance of standing committees in the legislative process, the level of committee staffing, and the number of committee meetings per week on average. These measures provide a good description of the perceived importance of the committee system at the individual level by state. These data also provide a good measure of the (perceived) power of the committee chairs to control the agenda and proceedings of the committee.

The Francis and Riddlesperger data also provide a measure of the complexity of the committee system by providing information about the level of staffing of the committees, the number of committees that handle legislation, and the average number of subcommittees. More complex committee systems are assumed to have independent staff for each committee. More

staff indicates both more complex policy, and greater budgetary importance of the committee system. It is assumed that a more complex committee system also indicates a more specialized and diversified system. A more specialized system would have more control over legislation, because it would indicate that the committees have claimed and control specific policy areas.

Admittedly, measuring committee strength through survey research at the member level can be problematic. Individual perceptions vary, and the variability in issue areas, level of professionalization, and institutional procedures can affect outcomes. An additional measure that would be useful for this study would be the number of bills that passed both the committee and floor votes and the number of bills that only passed the committee. Unfortunately, complete data of this nature is currently unavailable at the state level.

Keith Hamm, Ronald Hedlund, and Nancy Martorano developed another measure of committee strength in 2006. The authors measure committee power according to institutional rules governing their ability to gather information, propose legislation, control their own agendas, and hold public hearings (Hamm et al. 2006). They conclude that state governments explicitly chose to adopt rules that created either strong or weak committees. While Hamm's methods may be more direct measures of the institutional rules that should govern committee strength, the Francis measures are more desirable. Individual perceptions, although they may be flawed, are measures of how important committees truly are in practice, rather than theoretical measures of how powerful committees should be given a set of institutional rules.

Party strength can be measured along similar criteria to committee strength. I propose to first measure the strength of parties within the legislature using Francis and Riddlesperger's survey questions from the same study regarding the number of significant decisions made in party caucuses by state. The influence of the partisan caucus is an excellent measure of party

strength because it indicates both the relative importance of parties in the decision making process as well as the level of party organization.

An additional measure of party strength included is Mayhew's Traditional Party Organization (TPO). Mayhew uses several measures to come up with an ordinal ranking for the party organization of each state. These measures include party control over primaries and the fragmentation of the vote within these primaries. This measure can be used as an indicator of a more organized party control in the absence of fragmentation. Another variable Mayhew uses is party expenditures per personal income by locale. These measures are then used to categorize state parties as weak, modest, significant, powerful, or very powerful. Some states, such as Rhode Island and Connecticut, have single dominant parties that are uniquely powerful because party committees have significant influence over the selection of candidates during primaries (Mayhew 1986, 27-29). Other states, such as Maryland, have strong single parties, but they are more factional than monopolistic in that they have less control over state candidates and platforms (Mayhew 1986, 84). "Factions" can take the form of rival organizations within parties that compete for control.

Mayhew's methodology is very useful for this study because it is an adequate measure of not only party organization, but also the ability of the party to constrain candidates. States with persistent factions can be expected to have a higher degree of inter-party pluralism, and a less coherent partisan agenda. This factionalism could be expected to translate into more pluralism and weaker party control in the state legislature.

These measures of party strength are less desirable for our purposes than a simple survey of the perceived importance of the party organization at the legislative level. The TPO Index measures the strength of parties to control candidates during elections, not during the legislative

process. Also, the relationship between party domination and legislative control is unclear. John Aldrich, for example, finds that a more competitive party system (i.e. weaker single party control) leads to more representative committees (Aldrich and Battista 2002). Single party control (which would result in a strong TPO) could also result in factions, which would weaken the ability of party caucus leaders to control the agenda. However, single party control could also strengthen party leaders by giving them uncontested control over the legislative process (assuming they can keep party members in line).

To sum up, for our purposes, a measure of party strength needs to be a direct measure of strength in the legislature. Measures of party strength by citizen ideology, control over the primary process, or proportion of seats held in the legislature is problematic because there is no way to measure for *consistency* among the party, and rule out the possibility of highly factional parties.

Methods

Before statistical analysis could be completed, it was first necessary to narrow down the variables contained within the Francis datasets to include only the most useful indicators of committee strength and party strength. Measures of committee strength were reduced to include questions relating to where significant decisions were made within the chamber, the level of staffing, the number of committees and subcommittees, and the number of meetings per week. These represents useful measures of committee strength because the questions reflect the perceived locus of power from the individual perspective, as well as the level of complexity of the committee system. Table 1 contains descriptive statistics for the Francis et al. committee strength measures.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

The survey question allows for the respondent to indicate that significant decisions were most often made by the party caucus or by presiding officers (majority party leaders). This survey question represents a good measure of partisanship within the legislatures because it reflects the perceptions of individual members of party importance within day-to-day proceedings.

Other measures of partisanship from the Francis dataset were also valuable to this analysis. Another survey question asks respondents to identify where partisanship is evident within their chambers. States with more positive responses for partisanship evidence in floor proceedings were assumed to have a stronger party system. Also, a possible response for this survey question was “parties are not evident in my chamber at all”. This “lack of partisanship” response is a very useful indicator of party strength in the legislative process. States with strong parties are expected to have almost no positive responses to the “no partisanship evident” question.

A Probit regression was employed to examine the effect of committee complexity on the probability of respondents citing “party caucus” or “party leaders” as the locus of significant decision making in their chamber. Probit is the proper technique for this analysis because the dependent variable is binary (the locus of power being “Party Caucus or Party leaders” or “All Else”). I ran models containing two sets of committee strength indicators for comparison: first, a model composed of indicators of committee strength from Francis et al.’s survey, and second, a model composed of Hamm et al.’s institutional measures of committee strength. Finally, predicted probabilities from the Probit regression were calculated using the observed value approach (Hanmer and Kalkan 2009).

Both models included control variables for legislative professionalism and TPO. Hopefully by controlling for these variables, the possibility of some spurious relationships can be removed. Party competition, for example, could indicate a more engaged electorate who demands more from their state legislator, increasing both the significance of parties and of committees. TPO could also be driving both committee and party significance in legislatures because states with powerful parties on the TPO scale may have committees that are dominated by the powerful party, increasing the evidence of committee significance. Legislative professionalism could weaken committees because more professional legislators have more personal staff and expertise that can remove the need for committees to gather information.

To examine the effect of committees on Traditional Party Organization, states were divided into “strong” and “weak” TPO categories, and the mean values for committee significance were compared between these two groups. If the mean committee significance for states with strong TPO is lower, then party organization and committee strength have a negative relationship, refuting the hypothesis of stronger parties utilizing committees to enact their own agenda.

Results

Evidence from the Francis survey of state legislators generally supports the hypothesis of stronger, more complex committee systems resulting in weaker parties in legislatures. However, the results for committee strength are mixed as not all indicators produced an effect in the expected direction. Table 2 shows the results of a probit regression of committee strength measures on the perceived significance of the party caucus or party leaders in a legislature.

[Insert Table 2 about here]

The results of two models of committee strength are displayed in Table 2: the Francis et al. and Hamm et al. models. As previously discussed, the Francis model of committee strength is preferable because of the focus on actual legislator perceptions; therefore, the analysis will focus on the results from the Francis model.

The first measure of committee complexity from the Francis model is number of staff assigned by committee. The probit regression reveals that the more staff assigned to a committee, the less significant the party caucus or party leader in the legislative process. However, the effect of staffing is not significant at conventional levels. The next coefficient, for number of committees that handle legislation, is in the opposite direction from what we would expect: as the number of committees rises, the importance of the party caucus and leaders also rises. Again, however, the relationship is not statistically significant at conventional levels.

The next two measures of committee complexity, number of committee meetings per week and number of subcommittees, do reveal statistically significant relationships with party significance that are in the expected directions. As the number of committee meetings per week rises, and the number of subcommittees rises, the significance of the party caucus or party leaders falls.

The relationship between number of committee meetings per week and party significance is also substantively significant. Table 3 displays predicted probabilities for the parties being the primary locus of power by number of committee meetings.¹ Although committee meetings per week range from 0 to 85 (Table 1), 10 committee meetings per week are enough to consume a significant part of legislators' time. On the other end, zero committee meetings per week would indicate a complete absence of committee importance during a typical week in session. As the

¹ All predicted probabilities are calculated using the observed values approach (Hanmer and Kalkan 2009). Confidence intervals for predicted probabilities are calculated using the method of statistical simulation.

number of committee meetings per week rises from 0 to 10, the probability of the party caucus or party leaders being the center of power in the legislature decreases by 3.64 percentage points.

This effect is significant at the .10 level.

[Insert Table 3 about here]

Number of subcommittees also has a substantively significant effect on the importance of party caucus or party leaders in the legislative process. The average number of subcommittees per committee is about 2, and ranges from 0 to 9 (Table 1). Moving from 0 to 5 subcommittees reduces the probability of party significance by about 4.37 percentage points on average (Table 4).

[Insert Table 4 about here]

One measure of party strength that seems to have little to no impact on significant decisions and partisanship in states is Mayhew's Traditional Party Organization (TPO). The TPO measure is a five category rating that ranges from weak to very powerful. The distribution among the states is heavily skewed towards weak TPO (36 states are classified as weak or modest, whereas only 13 states are classified as powerful or very powerful). This reflects the propensity towards weak parties in the American political system.

The skewed distribution of TPO ratings also makes it difficult to compare TPO with measures of party and committee significance using a regression analysis, because the variation

is so small. Therefore, states were organized into two categories in order to compare their mean significant decisions and partisanship. The first category, “weak TPO”, includes all states rated “weak” or “modest” on Mayhew’s scale. The second category, “strong TPO”, includes all states rated “significant”, “powerful”, or “very powerful” on the Mayhew scale. Tests between mean responses in these two categories yielded statistically significant differences between responses relating to committee significance in the two groups.

The results of Table 5 indicate that there is a negative relationship between TPO and significant decisions made within regular committee. States with stronger party organization make fewer decisions within committees, possibly because the locus of decision-making is the party. The bipartisan setting of committees is not amenable to dominant parties that are found in states with a powerful TPO.

Legislative professionalism, the other control variable in both models, had a significant positive effect on the significance of the party caucus and party leaders. Although professionalism is not a part of the committee complexity model, further research could explore the relationship between professionalism and the strength of parties in the legislative process. More professional legislatures typically have more expensive campaigns; perhaps the higher importance of the campaign makes the party more important to the reelection of individual members, resulting in more partisan control over the legislative process. Without a better defined theory, however, the relationship between professionalism and party control is still speculative.

To sum up, two key measures of committee complexity did appear to be associated with less influence of partisan control over the legislative process. The more committee meetings per

week, and the more subcommittees per committee, the less likely the party caucus or party leaders are to be perceived as the most important actors in the legislature.

Analysis and Conclusions

The results support some of the proposed theories of the committee-party relationship, and provide some new insight into the effect of committees on the legislative process. The most important findings from these analyses can be summed up in three significant conclusions. First, state legislatures that relied more on their committee meetings to make significant decisions were less likely to have strong party caucuses or party leaders. Second, states with more complex committee systems (as measured by number of subcommittees) were less likely to report party caucus or party leader control. The third conclusion is that states with strong party organizations are less likely to use committees to reach decisions within their legislature. Therefore, the original hypothesis that strong committees are associated with weaker parties at the state level is supported by the data.

The first conclusion, identifying a negative relationship between partisan influence and committee influence, requires some further analysis. What can be concluded from the Francis data is that parties have a difficult time influencing committee decisions in state legislatures. When most decisions are made within committee meetings, parties have had very little success influencing the legislative process.

Fenno's model of committee decision-making seems best suited for explaining the bipartisanship of state committees. Fenno's study concluded that committees that dealt with more practical, "bread and butter" issues were more likely to be bipartisan. For example, Appropriations and Post Office showed much lower levels of partisanship during Fenno's study

because a seat on these committees serves the interests of members and their constituents, not parties and their ideologies (Fenno 1973). Education and Labor, by contrast, was a highly partisan committee because the subject area often aligned with partisan cleavages, creating an atmosphere of charged partisanship during committee proceedings.

State committees, therefore, may have a strong tendency towards bipartisanship simply because, overall, state legislative committees do not deal with subject areas that align well with partisan cleavages. A cursory glance at the subject areas of some state legislative committees reveals an abundance of “bread and butter” subject matters: “Budget and Taxation”, “Pensions”, “Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs”, “Finance”, etc. (MD General Assembly “Senate Standing Committees”). Parties may have little influence on these committees because the committees exist to serve the needs of members and their constituents. Partisanship would only get in the way of this function.

Of course, the hypothesis that the subject area of state legislative committees makes them resistant to partisan influence would require further study. Studies of the jurisdictions of state legislative committee systems face many difficulties, chief amongst them being that many states do not have formal rules codifying committee jurisdictions (Squire and Hamm 2005). What can be concluded from this study is that state legislatures with influential committees have been shown to have less influential parties. This conclusion suggests that the Informational Model of committees is not well suited for describing committee functioning in state legislatures. Committees have influence over legislative proceedings that goes beyond supplying information to the floor, in that they also can control issue areas in ways that can shut out partisan influence.

The second and third conclusions are damaging to the Partisan Theory of committees. There is no evidence that state legislative committees exist to serve the interests of the majority

party. They may indirectly serve the party by helping individual members to serve their constituents and gain reelection, but parties have little ideological control over committee proceedings in state legislatures. The comparison between overall evidence of partisanship in the chamber and regular committee meeting significance is conclusive. Not only is partisanship barely evident in committee proceedings, but state legislatures with more significant committee meetings report less evidence of partisanship in the entire chamber. The ability of parties to gain influence on committees, therefore, is directly related to the levels of partisanship overall.

Comparing Mayhew's TPO measure with regular committee meeting significance further strengthens this conclusion. Parties that are not able to influence committee proceedings are weaker in their influence and their organization. State political parties that are interested in growing stronger, therefore, should have an interest in gaining influence on committee proceedings.

What do these conclusions mean for the future study of parties and committees? To begin with, further study must focus on the dynamic relationship between the subject areas of state legislative committees and the party platforms of state parties. Party identification is often considered to be an ineffective measure of partisanship because parties represent different things in different states (Erikson et al. 1993). Therefore, in order to further refine the study of parties at the state level, we must understand the different meanings of the terms "Republican" and "Democrat" in each state, as well as the political culture in each context.

Furthermore, we must also take into account the differences in institutional structure between state committee systems. As Squire and Hamm (2005) make clear, state legislative committees are not always directly comparable. Some states, for example, rely on the seniority system; others do not. Some states place a cap on the number of committees and assignments

per member; others do not (Squire and Hamm 2005). Term limits could also have an effect on the role of committees. Future studies of state legislative committees must take these variables into account when comparing these state institutions.

Fenno's landmark study on committees concluded that the subject areas of committees have a direct effect on partisanship. Committees that deal with partisan issues are more likely to have partisan influence. Therefore, in order to understand why certain states have more or less partisan influence on their committees, we must understand both the subject areas of the committees and the state level cleavages between political parties. In order to really understand what makes state legislatures with stronger committees have less influential parties, future studies must include more in-depth analysis of the meaning of political parties and the function of legislative committees at the state level.

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Tables and Charts:

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Francis et al. Measures of Committee Complexity

	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Number of Subcommittees	2028	1.852	2.643	0	9
Committees that handle legislation	1995	2.873	1.500	0	8
Staff Assigned	2028	6.250	16.722	0	99
Meetings per Week	1969	3.698	5.709	0	85

Table 2. Probit Regression of Committee Strength Measures on Party Significance

	Francis Model	Hamm Model
Number of Staff Assigned	-0.005 (0.004)	
Committees that Handle Legislation	0.011 (0.020)	
Meetings per Week	-0.009* (0.005)	
Number of Subcommittees	-0.022* (0.012)	
Legislative Professionalism	1.061*** (0.235)	1.011*** (0.289)
Traditional Party Org. (TPO)	0.004 (0.019)	0.013 (0.024)
Information Gathering Ability		0.005 (0.040)
Committee Position Protected on Floor		-0.076** (0.037)
Ability to Initiate Legislation		0.053 (0.046)
Constant	-0.154* (0.086)	-0.339*** (0.105)
Observations	1941	1331

Standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Cell entries are probit coefficients

DV: Significant Decisions (1=party caucus or party leaders, 0=all else)

Source: Francis et al. 1982, Hamm et al. 2006, Mayhew 1986

Table 3. Predicted Probability of Party Significance by Committee Meetings

Meetings Per Week	Predicted Probability	Simulation Mean	90% Confidence Interval	
0	53.33%	53.37%	[51.00%	55.53%]
10	49.70%	49.81%	[46.83%	52.49%]
Effect	-3.64	-3.56	[-6.98	-0.199]

Source: Francis et al. 1982, Hamm et al. 2006, Mayhew 1986
 Predicted Probabilities calculated by the Observed Values Approach
 Confidence intervals calculated by the method of statistical simulation

Table 4. Predicted Probability of Party Significance by Number of Subcommittees

Number of Subcommittees	Predicted Probability	Simulation Mean	90% Confidence Interval	
0	53.46%	53.52%	[51.21%	55.83%]
5	49.09%	49.19%	[46.02%	52.38%]
Effect	-4.37	-4.33	[-8.19	-0.26]

Source: Francis et al. 1982, Hamm et al. 2006, Mayhew 1986
 Predicted Probabilities calculated by the Observed Values Approach
 Confidence intervals calculated by the method of statistical simulation

Table 5. Perceived Committee Importance by Party Strength

Group	Mean	Standard Deviation	(N)
Weak TPO	0.273	0.164	50
Strong TPO	0.174	0.124	50
Unpaired t-test, separate Variance estimate			
Degrees of Freedom	31.19		
One-tailed p	.014		

Source: Francis et al. 1982 and Mayhew 1986

Appendix: Summary Statistics

Append. Table 1. Party Significance by Number of Subcommittees

	Number of Subcommittees				Total
	None	0 to 3	4 to 6	7 to 9	
<u>Significant Decisions</u>					
All Else	511	230	147	88	976
Percent	46.41	47.72	53.65	51.46	48.13
Party Caucus or Leader	590	252	127	83	1,052
Percent	53.59	52.28	46.35	48.54	51.87
Total	1,101	482	274	171	2,028
	100	100	100	100	100

Pearson Chi-squared = 5.43, p = .142

Source: Francis et al. 1982

Append. Table 2. Party Significance by Number of Committees that Handle Legislation

	Committees that Handle Legislation				Total
	None	1 to 3	4 to 6	7 to 9	
<u>Significant Decisions</u>					
All Else	36	678	208	35	957
Percent	45.57	49.38	43.42	54.69	47.97
Party Caucus or Leader	43	695	271	29	1,038
Percent	54.43	50.62	56.58	45.31	52.03
Total	79	1,373	479	64	1,995
	100	100	100	100	100

Pearson chi-squared = 6.4, p = .094

Source: Francis et al. 1982

Append. Table 3. Party Significance by Number of Committee Meetings per Week

	Meetings per Week				Total
	0 to 3	4 to 6	7 to 9	10 or more	
<u>Significant Decisions</u>					
All Else	624	234	31	59	948
Percent	46.05	52.23	51.67	55.66	48.15
Party Caucus or Leader	731	214	29	47	1,021
Percent	53.95	47.77	48.33	44.34	51.85
Total	1,355	448	60	106	1,969
	100	100	100	100	100

Pearson chi-squared = 8.07, p = .045

Source: Francis et al. 1982

