

Who runs Parliamentary Committees? Insights from the Austrian Case

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Zusammenfassung

In Europa zählen Ausschüsse zum ‚Maschinenraum‘ nationaler Parlamente. Nach welchem Prinzip Parteien ihren Abgeordneten Ausschussmandate erteilen, ist jedoch nicht ausreichend erforscht. Dieser Artikel betrachtet den Nationalrat (1945-2019) und testet auf der Basis eines Paneldatensatzes zu 44,533 Ausschuss-Abgeordneten-Beobachtungen Theorien, die die Besetzung von Ausschüssen unter dem Gesichtspunkt der Distribution, des Informationsaspekts oder der Parteiloyalität betrachten. Ergebnisse zu 12 unterschiedlichen Ausschüssen zeigen, dass die Frage „Wer bekommt was“ in erster Linie durch die Bildung und dem Herkunftsberuf des Abgeordneten entschieden wird. Des Weiteren sind Nähe zu den Kammern und der Gewerkschaft entscheidend. Führungspositionen in der Bundespartei sowie dem Anciennitätsprinzip kommt weniger Bedeutung zu als dem Geschlecht der Abgeordneten.

Stichwörter: Nationalratsausschüsse, Besetzungspolitik, Paneldaten, Österreich

Abstract

In the European context, committees are the “work horses” of legislatures. Nevertheless, today we have little solid knowledge of the committee allocation system. To fill this gap, this study on the Austrian *Nationalrat* (1945-2019) sets out to test the distributional, informational, and partisan theories of committee formation based on a unique panel dataset including 44,533 committee and Members of Parliament (MP) observations. The major insight gained from analyses of 12 different committees is that “who gets what” is determined, first and foremost, by MPs’ expertise. Social partnership ties as well as the role of regional and *Land* constituency representatives also matter. National leadership positions, parliament, and even committee seniority turn out to be of secondary importance while gender has an impact on the intra-party calculus in allocating seats to MPs.

Keywords: parliamentary committees, committee assignments, panel data, Austria

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Who runs Parliamentary Committees? Insights from the Austrian Case

Parliamentary committees are ubiquitous around the world. They are best understood as the “work horses” of legislatures (Mickler 2022, 25) that promote deliberation, cooperation, and debate in parliaments through the legislative division of labour. In policy formation, committees make neither first nor final decisions but rather draft bills or reports with recommendations that form the basis for decisions made through voting in the plenary. In theoretical terms, the legislative study of committees is concerned with what Polsby (1990, 140f.) has dubbed “transformative legislatures,” in which knowledgeable experts “mould and transform proposals from whatever source into laws” while the plenary belongs, in contrast, to the “arena legislature” in which debate is conducted, issues are aired, and legislation is enacted.

Committees are true subsets of the legislature, which implies that only legislators may be committee members and that the total membership of each committee is smaller than that of the parliament as a whole (Mattson/Strom 1995). Its competencies are broad ranging, especially in the Austrian case studied here, from the right to initiate legislation and summon witnesses to the full control over the time when a committee report is introduced to the plenary. Most committees specialise in particular policy areas (e.g., Budget, Family Affairs) that roughly correspond to a ministerial portfolio (Hansen 2019) and are not only places of legislation but also of socialisation (Sarcinelli 1989), as the members of parliament (MPs) learn through committee work, inter alia, how to debate issues and find consensus in their respective parliamentary party groups (PPGs).

How consequential are parliamentary committees in shaping public policy? Assessments of impact are ambiguous unless a (hypothetical) baseline situation is defined (Gaines et al. 2019, 333). In an ideal world, one would, for example, vary a committee’s composition to understand whether a given piece of legislation would have been different if a committee’s membership were different. Experimental tests, however, have not yet been conducted. In general, empirical research on the

significance of committees in Europe¹ remains rather inconclusive as committee sessions are often closed to the public and access to data on committee activities is, in most cases, restricted. Most recent research on Germany suggests that the textbook portrayal of committees as “policy-making paradises” is overdone as their actual work reveals that committees mainly have a preparatory role for the plenary activities (Siefken 2021). The emerging scholarly consensus around committees is that even if PPGs are by far the most important actors in the parliamentary setting, committees are significant insofar as they function as hubs for the expression of MPs’ demands and reservations (Siefken/Rommetvedt 2021).

Thus, whoever wants to know how parliaments work needs to open the “black box” of the committee system. Within studies of committees, a specialised stream of literature is dedicated to understanding how committee members (and chairs) are selected. Exemplary studies are Hansen (2011) on the Irish *Dáil Éireann*, Chiru and Gherghina (2019) on the Romanian *Camera Deputaţilor*, or Mickler (2018) on the German *Bundestag*. The current study aims to extend the knowledge base by adding the Austrian *Nationalrat*.²

The article is structured as follows: (1) A short literature review of established knowledge on the Austrian committee system that builds especially on Sickinger (2000); (2) Introduction of three testable explanatory models for the selection of committee chairs; (3) Description of the panel data set used to test hypotheses deduced from theoretical models; (4) Concluding remarks on which theories are best supported by the Austrian case.

¹ Research on parliamentary committees has the longest tradition among legal scholars studying US congress (which is different from parliaments in Europe given its weak PPGs) dating back to a landmark study by the political scientist and US president Woodrow Wilson (Wilson 1892). Only recently has a non-US focus emerged in the literature that, among, other things, discusses the applicability of “congressional theories” to the European context (Mickler 2022).

² The Austrian parliament consists of two chambers: the National Assembly (*Nationalrat*) and the Federal Council (*Bundesrat*). The *Nationalrat* is the main legislative body for the preparation and implementation of legislation, leaving the *Bundesrat* nothing more than the right to a suspensive veto.

1. Theoretical Background

1.1 The Austrian Committee System

As pointed out by Sickinger (2000), legislation in Austria is heavily impacted by pre-parliamentary consultations with “social partnership” organisations and bargains between coalition partners. In most cases, laws are created through government bills. The stylized legislative cycle of bills (for more details, see Biegelbauer/Mayer 2008) starts with civil servants approaching the minister’s cabinet with first drafts of a law, followed by negotiations with stakeholders such as social partnership organisations. Based on this first round of consultations, a draft of the law is issued (*Ministerialentwurf*) that is commented on by party leaders, representatives of the states, law departments at universities, the Court of Audit (*Rechnungshof*), and others. Expert civil servants in the relevant ministry address the feedback provided, and the final draft is approved by the minister and presented in the Minister’s Council (*Ministerrat*), where amendments can be demanded. Once the draft has been passed through the Minister’s Council, it becomes a bill (*Regierungsvorlage*) subject to parliamentary procedures. It is, thus, only at the end of a long “legislative pipeline” that committees start the discussions of bills.

Nevertheless, committees in Austria are far from being insignificant, as best illustrated by their impact during the COVID-19 pandemic: By amendment of legislation the Federal Minister of Health had to seek the consent of the Main Committee (in which government parties command a majority) before issuing lockdowns, and many COVID-19-related bills and ordinances were profoundly amended in the competent parliamentary committee (Stöger 2021).

In his comparative analysis of committee systems of 33 legislatures in Europe, Mickler (2022) comes to the conclusion that only in Sweden, Germany and Estonia do committees enjoy higher autonomy than in Austria. In Austria, committees can, among other things, rewrite bills or even “kill” bills, the right to compel witnesses is unrestricted, control over the timetable rests with committees, and documents are prepared by their own staff. Two types of permanent committees can be distinguished: specialist committees (*Fachausschüsse*) that correspond to ministries (e.g., Foreign Affairs, Finance) and other committees dedicated to organisational purposes (e.g., Rules of Procedure Committee), the implementation of legislation (e.g., Main Committee), or government control (e.g., Audit Committee). The frequency of (private) meetings is the highest in the case of the Main, Budget, and Audit

Committees (Sickinger 2000); permanent committee size varies between 13 and 27 members and membership is (at least roughly) proportional with seat allocation based on the relative sizes of the PPGs (Strøm 1998).

1.2 Theorising Committee Assignments

At the beginning of each legislative period (LP) of the *Nationalrat*, there are vacant committee seats and incoming freshmen without seats. Leadership of the PPGs receives (informal) requests from incumbents and freshmen alike for one or multiple desired committee seats that are considered during the ensuing party-internal assignment process. One position taken in the literature is that the appointment of MPs to committees happens rather randomly (Hansen 2011). The dominant perspective is, however, that one can identify systematic assignment patterns determined by a mixture of factors that reoccur over time. The growing empirical literature on committee assignments evades “mindless empiricism” (Swedberg 2012) by postulating testable small-scale theories that each focus on one of three abstract rationales: the distributive rationale, the informational rationale, and the partisan rationale (Martin/Mickler 2019).

Distributive rationale: This theoretical perspective emphasises that MPs seeking re-election from *their* constituencies self-select into “committees that have the greatest marginal impact over their electoral fortunes” (Weingast/Marshall 1988, 145). Thus, if an MP has a special interest in an area or represents a constituency with special interests, he or she will seek appointment to a committee dealing with a subset of policy issues that seem to be of utmost importance to either the MP’s territorial constituency or an interest group with which he or she is affiliated. It is assumed that through the committee work the MP has the comparative advantage of being in the position to claim that a specific bill directed at a constituency or interest group has been implemented in a certain way due to his or her individual efforts.

Since 1945, the main characteristic of the Austrian electoral system has been its multi-tiered proportional design that allows MPs to establish, at least partly, an electoral connection to their territorial constituencies. If the distributive rationale applies, MPs winning a mandate in the first tier representing, for example, the interests of *Mühlviertel* or in the second tier representing a Land such as *Salzburg* will seek different committee appointments than a MP with a nationwide mandate.

Hypothesis 1a: MPs occupying a regional or Land seat in the Nationalrat seek distinct committee appointments.

By far the most important interest groups in Austria are the so-called “social partners”: Economic Chamber (WK), Chamber of Agriculture (LK), Chamber of Labour (AK), and the Trade Union Federation (ÖGB). “Social partnership” – essentially an institutionalised network of cooperation between employers and employees (Tálos 2019) – works, among other things, through individuals holding multiple offices (*Personalunion*), such as top officials in Austria’s federations and chambers who were elected to the *Nationalrat*. Since 1945, there has been a close dovetailing between the long-standing government party SPÖ and the AK and ÖGB, on the one hand, and the ÖVP and the WK and LK, on the other. If interest groups ties matter, then a trade unionist will strive for different committee memberships than, for example, a WK functionary.

Hypothesis 1b: MPs are more likely to serve on committees that correspond to their electoral link with a social partnership organisation.

Informational rationale: At the heart of this second theoretical perspective is the assumption that PPGs aim to vote for or against bills based on as much information as possible (Krehbiel 1991). The legislative architecture with its committee system works towards this goal by allowing legislators to acquire and share specialised knowledge. PPGs leaders seek to tap into the special talents of their MPs that guarantee that they can specialise in information with relatively low cost, particularly by tapping into the committee members’ prior experience in the policy area. The informational rationale is especially likely to be significant as very little financial resources are allocated to the professional assistance of committees (Hansen 2011).

Hypothesis 2a: MPs self-select into committees in which they hold sector knowledge given their educational background.

Hypothesis 2b: MPs self-select into committees in which they hold sector knowledge given their professional background.

Hypothesis 2c: *Higher committee seniority increases the likelihood of a reassignment to a committee.*

Partisan rationale: While the distributive and informational perspectives focus on MPs' interests and abilities that determine the committee assignment process, the partisan perspective rejects this approach and theorises the process as being steered by self-selection (Cox/MacCubbins 1993). Even if MPs' preferences for committee membership may play a major role, in the end it is always party leaders who determine the allocation of assignments. Their choice of "carrots and sticks" depends on whether they intend to use assignments to reward loyal partisans or punish those who, for example, overstep the line with their requests. Party loyalty, thus, functions as *the* key predictor.

Hypothesis 3a: *MPs serving the longest in the Nationalrat are the most likely to serve on committees whose jurisdiction concerns an important area of the party.*

Hypothesis 3b: *The likelihood of being assigned to a powerful committee increases with national party seniority.*

Which *Nationalrat* committee ranks the highest in prestige hierarchy is not firmly established. Anecdotal evidence suggests, however, that seats in the Main, Budget, and Audit Committee are commonly viewed as more rewarding than, for example, seats in the Foreign Affairs or Family Committee. In what follows, I evaluate the validity of these three middle-range theories in a selected empirical setting hitherto neglected by research – the committee system of the Austrian *Nationalrat* between 1945 and 2019.

2. Data, Measurements, and Method

2.1 Data

I used a unique panel dataset on all politicians who served in the *Nationalrat* ($N = 1,516$) between legislative period V (starting in 1945) and legislative period XXVI (ending in 2019). The study thus covers a timespan of 74 years. Data was collected from the online *Who is Who* edited by the Parliamentary Administration,³ and information on committee membership was matched with biographical information. I considered selected memberships in all (standing) expert committees and committees with specific remits, thereby neglecting all other types of committees (e.g., subcommittees or investigating committees). The committee positions considered were chair (*Obmann/Obfrau*), deputy chair (*Stellv. Obmann/Obfrau*), secretary (*Schriftführer/in*), and full member (*Mitglied*). Committee data had to be harmonised a posteriori since committees were, in some cases, renamed or assigned new policy agendas (see Appendix A1). I decided to concentrate the analysis on 12 selected committees.⁴ In addition, I gathered selected information from online biographies such as gender, chamber memberships, or total mandate duration in days. The pooled sample includes 44,533 committee-MP observations.

2.2 Measurement of Variables

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for all variables used in this study:

Committee membership. The dependent variable of this study is dichotomous: MPs selected for a given committee in the respective LP are coded 1, while all others are coded 0. No distinction is made between whether the assignment was made at the beginning, in the middle, or towards the end of an LP and between different committee functions.

Woman. Gender was included as a control variable to probe whether female MPs are disproportionately often selected to a distinct set of committees.

³ <http://www.parlament.gv.at/WWER/>, latest accessed on: 22th of April 2022.

⁴ Please note that a few committees such as the *Ausschuss für Arbeit und Soziales* did not exist throughout the Second Republic and predecessors were impossible to identify (see Appendix A1).

Education. For higher education graduates the following degree programmes were considered: economics; law; science, technology, engineering, mathematics, and medicine (STEMM); social and human sciences (SHS). Whether graduates held a PhD degree or not was coded separately.

Prior occupation. The analysis considers jobs held for more than a year and immediately before the launching of a political career. Jobs were coded using a national version of the International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO-08) created by Statistics Austria⁵; about 200 different job codes were assigned. I decided to only consider the following ISCO main groups: journalists and writers; legal profession; managers and businessmen; primary sector, agriculture; teachers and professors; workers. Moreover, MPs who have never practised any effective occupation outside of politics were categorised as career politicians.⁶

Committee seniority indicates the number of LPs during which an MP has previously been a member of a particular committee.

Total length of parliamentary service is measured in days and considers one or multiple National Council mandates that do not need to be consecutive.

National party leader is a dichotomous variable in which 1 stands for a party leadership position at the national level, such as party chairman, deputy party chairman, parliamentary leader (*Klubobmann/Klubobfrau*), member of the National Party Executive Committee, or member of the Party Presidium. In terms of biography, most Austrian party leaders have had a long career within their party before assuming the leadership position (Ennsner-Jedenastik/Müller 2014).

Mandate type. Since 1992 Austria has employed a three-tier, closed-list proportional electoral system with a seat allocation mechanism that connects all three tiers in a bottom-up process: A statewide electoral quota is used to allocate seats at both the regional constituency and state levels; seats won by a party at the regional constituency level (39 regional districts) – direct mandates – are subtracted from its corresponding statewide seat total (9 *Länder*), and the remaining mandates come from the party's

⁵ https://www.statistik.at/web_de/klassifikationen/oeisco_08/index.html.

⁶ King (1981) gave the following poignant description of a career politician: He regards politics as his vocation, he seeks fulfilment in politics, he would be deeply upset if circumstances required him to retire from politics. In short, he is hooked.

state lists. Finally, all 183 National Council seats are distributed at the federal level. Two variables capture whether a MP occupied a regional/lower tier district or a Land seat.⁷

Social Partnership Organisations. Three variables measure whether a MP was affiliated with a trade union (ÖGB), the Chamber of Agriculture (LK), or the Economic Chamber (WK). I considered not only national leadership positions but also less prestigious jobs in all three key organisations of Austrian partnership.

Government party. I further distinguished between government and non-government parties. It is noteworthy that the ÖVP and SPÖ formed what was considered for many years a “grand coalition” – the hallmark of post-war Austria.

⁷ The electoral system in Austria underwent major reforms in 1949, 1970, and 1992 (Müller 2005). Under the 1945 system, there were 165 seats in 25 districts. For the 1949 election, the 25 lower-tier districts were grouped into 4 upper-tier districts. The 1990 electoral reform extended the assembly size from 165 to 183 seats, and the 25 former lower districts were grouped into 4 upper-tier districts. The 1970 electoral reform again merged the 25 former lower-tier districts into 9 districts, each district embodying an Austrian province (*Land*). The 4 upper-tier districts were merged as well into 2 districts.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for All Variables Used in This Study (pooled data, 1945-2019)*

Variable type	Variables	Mean	SD	Min.	Max.
Identifier	ID	750.6	438.3	1	1522
Dependent Variable	Committee Membership	0.15	0.36	0	1
Expertise	<i>Highest level of higher education:</i>				
	PhD	0.25	0.43	0	1
	<i>Higher education degree program:</i>				
	Economics	0.08	0.27	0	1
	Law	0.15	0.36	0	1
	SHS	0.09	0.29	0	1
	STEMM	0.06	0.23	0	1
	<i>Occupation background:</i>				
	Career Politicians	0.09	0.29	0	1
	Journalists & Writers	0.02	0.14	0	1
	Legal Profession	0.04	0.19	0	1
	Managers & Businessmen	0.04	0.20	0	1
	Primary Sector, Agriculture	0.11	0.31	0	1
	Teachers & Professors	0.11	0.31	0	1
Workers	0.09	0.29	0	1	
Legislative Experience	Committee Seniority	0.24	0.71	0	9
	Log (Length previous parliamentary career in days +1)	5.09	3.66	0	9.32
Interest Groups	Member of the Chamber of Agriculture	0.10	0.29	0	1
	Member of the Economic Chamber	0.11	0.31	0	1
	Member of the Trade Union	0.19	0.39	0	1
Type of Mandate	Land seat	0.54	0.50	0	1
	Regional seat	0.39	0.49	0	1
Party Influence	Party leader	0.33	0.47	0	1
	Government party	0.80	0.40	0	1
Control Variable	Female	18.4	0.39	0	1

Note: Calculated on all observations (N = 44,533 committee-MP observations).

* Three of the 12 considered committees existed during fewer LPs (see Appendix A)

2.3 Method

The unbalanced panel dataset captures the “committee life cycle” of each MP. In most cases, MPs are assigned to multiple committees in each legislative period. The structure of the dataset has a clear hierarchical structure with individuals being nested in parties that may attach different importance to different committees or may rely on different appointment criteria. To deal with such clustered panel data, several techniques under the name of “multilevel data analysis” have been developed. The applied multilevel regression modelling (MLRM) has several advantages over the existing alternative modelling strategies such as complete pooling of data (and the use of party-dummies and clustered standard errors)

or party-separated regression models: It allows us to include predictors at different levels and, at least in principle, to vary components of the regression equation across parties.

When I say “in principle,” this is because MLRM relies on large sample sizes (Hox 2010). In our case, however, the number of higher-level units, which are PPGs, is very small. I thus decided to include random effects for lower-level units only.

The following model was used for the analysis:

$$\text{Log} \left(\frac{p_{ic}}{1-p_{ic}} \right) = \beta_0 + \beta_{\text{women}} + \beta_{\text{PhD}} + \beta_{\text{economics}} + \beta_{\text{law}} + \beta_{\text{SHS}} + \beta_{\text{career politicians}} + \beta_{\text{journalists \& writers}} + \beta_{\text{legal profession}} + \beta_{\text{managers \& businessmen}} + \beta_{\text{primary sector}} + \beta_{\text{teachers \& professors}} + \beta_{\text{workers}} + \beta_{\text{Chamber of Agriculture}} + \beta_{\text{Economic Chamber}} + \beta_{\text{Trade Union}} + \beta_{\text{party leader}} + \beta_{\text{government party}} + \beta_{\text{Seat:Land}} + \beta_{\text{Seat:regional}} + \beta_{\text{career length}} + \beta_{\text{committee seniority}} + MP_i$$

P is the probability for MP_i to be assigned to committee c and random intercepts are fitted for all considered MPs (with $l=1, \dots, n_l$). MP_i can also be read as “intercept condition on subject id.” The models were estimated in “R” using the “lme4” package (Douglas et al. 2022). Numerical results on all random and fixed effects are reported in Appendix A2.

The coefficients from this logistic regression are logits or log odds that are challenging to interpret substantively. To facilitate interpretation of the coefficients, it is standard practice to exponentiate them to obtain odds ratios, that is, the ratio of the odds for one group relative to another group. If, for example, the odds for males is 0.2 and the odds for female is 0.3, the odds ratio is $0.2/0.3 = 0.667$. Note that an odds ratio of 1 or smaller means that a certain variable does not impact the odds of committee membership (see the red-coloured coefficients in Figure 1). I also report findings from a robustness check in the Appendix applying a probability model, which can show whether the conclusions regarding differences between groups regarding the effect on committee membership are similar on the probability scale to those obtained using the log odds scale.

3. Results

A crucial issue is the performance of the regression models applied. The logistic regression model's overall fit with the sample data is commonly assessed using various goodness-of-fit-measures that capture differences between observed and model-predicted values. The measures presented in Table 2 build on classification tables whereby committee membership (y) is one of the binary outcome categories and the other is predicted committee membership (\hat{y}), which is estimated using probabilities and a predefined classification threshold of 0.5.

The measure of model accuracy is easy to understand. If there were, for example, 95 MPs members and 5 non-members of a particular committee, and a model would classify all observations as committee members, the overall accuracy would be 95%. As shown in Table 2, all regression models have a high overall accuracy that ranges between 89% and 95%. The *balanced* model accuracy is lower due to lower model specificities that are calculated as the number of correct positive predictions divided by the total number of positive predictions. Thus, the models are stronger in predicting that an MP *is not* a member than in predicting that an MP *is* a member of a given committee, which applies especially to the Family and Immunity Committee. Nevertheless, even the measure of balanced accuracy that considers equally a model's sensitivity and specificity clearly suggests a high internal validity of all models.

Overall, the results from the analysis on the log odds scale and the probability scale point to the same conclusions (see Figure 1 and Appendices A2 and A3). With the exception of the model results for the Family Committee, we find that higher-level educational or professional expertise function as the best predictors. MPs with a legal profession have, for example, an 80% higher probability of membership in the Immunity Commission, and all MPs who studied law have an 85% higher probability of membership in the Constitution Committee. MPs with an educational background in economics are most likely to be appointed for the Budget Committee; MPs with jobs in the primary sector appear predestined for the Agriculture Committee; teachers and professors enter the Education Committee with ease. The models reveal some surprising, if not counterintuitive, results as well: Journalist and writers have even a higher probability of being selected for the Foreign Affairs Committee and the Main Committee than career politicians.

Table 2. Percent correctly predicted

	Agriculture	Audit	Budget	Constitution	Economy	Education	Employment & Social Affairs	Family	Foreign Policy	Immunity	Justice	Main Committee
$y = 1; \hat{y} = 1$ [A]	446	455	441	448	242	444	199	145	354	197	407	443
$y = 0; \hat{y} = 1$ [B]	56	63	58	77	40	56	23	25	64	32	58	67
$y = 1; \hat{y} = 0$ [C]	162	242	280	257	215	189	84	176	253	205	216	365
$y = 0; \hat{y} = 0$ [D]	3431	3335	3316	3313	3015	3406	1562	1952	3423	3661	3414	3220
Accuracy	95 %	93%	92%	92%	93%	94%	94%	91%	92%	94%	93%	89%
Balanced accuracy	86 %	82%	80%	81%	76%	84%	84%	72%	78%	74%	82%	76%
Sensitivity	98 %	98%	98%	98%	99%	98%	99%	99%	98%	99%	98%	98%
Specificity	73 %	65%	62%	64%	53%	70%	70%	45%	58%	49%	65%	55%

Notes. y = committee membership; \hat{y} = predicted committee membership

Sensitivity = $A/(A+C)$

Specificity = $D/(B+D)$

Accuracy = $(A+D)/(A+B+C+D)$

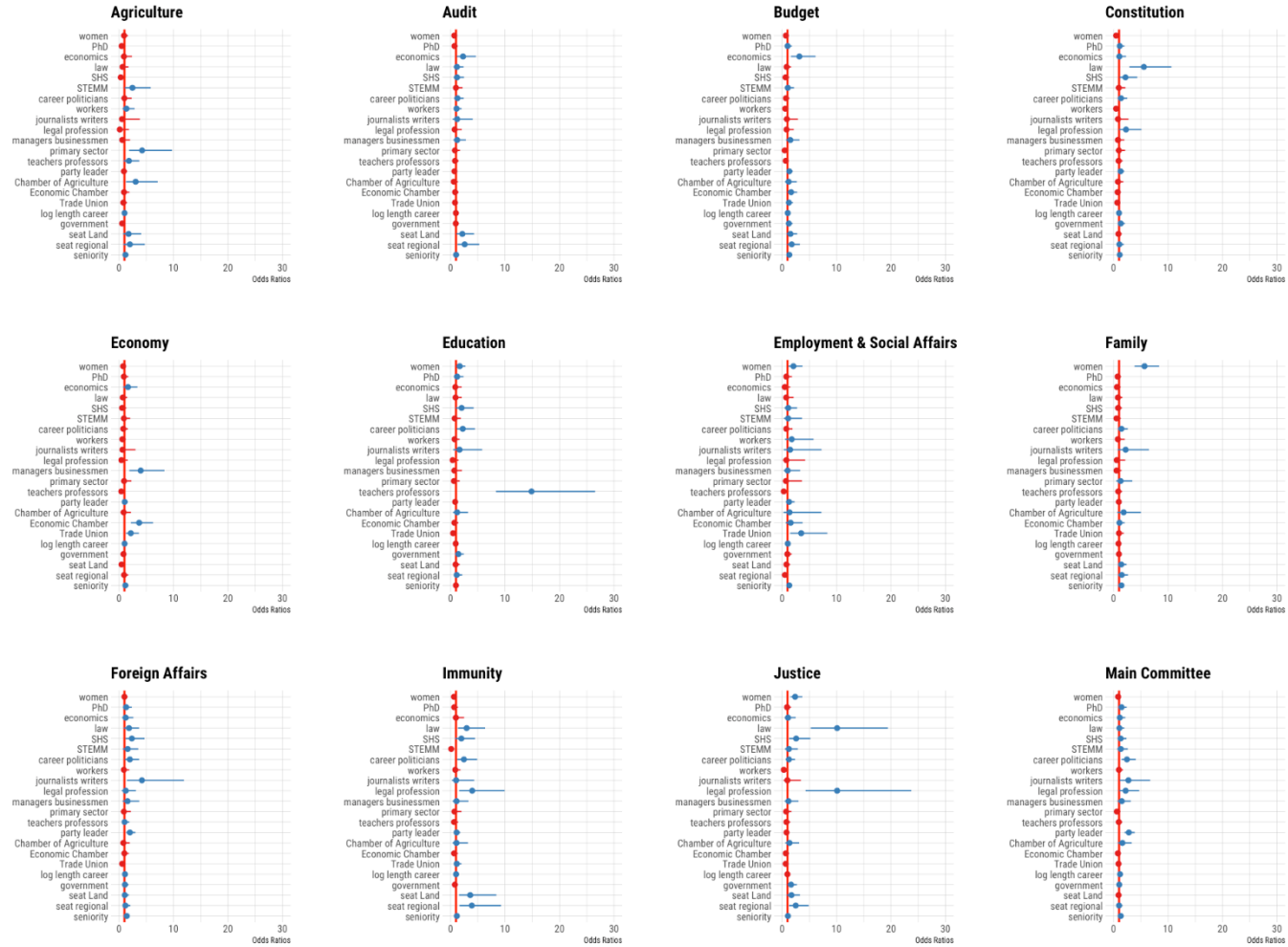
Balanced accuracy = $(\text{sensitivity} + \text{specificity})/2$

Expertise, however, is not the only predictor of committee membership. In many models we can observe that membership in social partnership institution matters. Trade Unionists are significantly more likely to join the Employment and Social Affairs Committee; members of the Economic Chamber are more inclined toward the Economy Committee and Budget Committee; and members of the Chamber of Agriculture are more likely to join the Agriculture Committee.

Further, MPs who were selected to the National Council due to a top ranking in Land district lists and, therefore, can be expected to represent the interests of their respective Land parties have very high probabilities of being selected for the Audit and Immunity Committee. Finally, national party leadership is significantly associated with membership in the Main Committee.

Two other results deserve special attention. In nearly all the models, the committee seniority variable – that is, the amount of previous committee experience – does not have significant predictive power. The result that past committee membership is not the best predictor of committee membership deviates not only from our intuition but also from most findings on committees in other European countries (Mickler 2022). Gender turns out to be an important variable in the party decision calculus of selecting members for committees. Female MPs are much more likely than male MPs to work for the Education Committee, the Employment and Social Affairs Committee, or the Family Committee. Whether this tendency stems from self-selection or discrimination cannot be definitively answered.

Figure 1. Point Estimates of Log Odds Ratios



Concluding Remarks

The well-established literature on legislative recruitment and candidate selection processes (see, for example, Gallagher/Marsh 1988) focuses on the key question of who becomes a member of parliament. Only recently have scholars begun to extend this question to parliamentary committees, the “work horses” of legislatures. This study contributes to the recent literature on parliamentary committees in the European party centred-context (Mickler 2022) by adding a case study to the growing body of research. Based on a unique dataset on all committee members in the Austrian *Nationalrat* between 1945 and 2019, three sets of hypotheses were examined empirically that identify different selection criteria: expertise, mandate type and responsiveness, interest group influence, legislative experience, and party leadership.

The data provide the most evidence for the importance of the informational rationale in selecting MPs for committees: MPs are assigned to committees whose agenda matches their expertise that was acquired in different educational and/or professional worlds outside of politics, which allows MPs to easily become specialists in particular policy areas (“low-cost expertise”). This finding can be interpreted to indicate that committees aim to base their recommendation on internal expert opinions. Given the fact that parliamentary committees are free to reach out for expertise by, for example, organising hearings with outside experts, the main finding that the selection procedures are information-driven is *not* trivial.

Some results are also consistent with the so-called distributive theories of committees sharing the core assumption that legislators seek continuing support from their territorial constituencies or interest groups, which impacts their electoral fortunes, by self-selection to interest-driven committees. This analysis has found, on the one hand, that a Land seat heavily impacts the probability of being assigned to the Audit Committee, which studies reports of the *Rechnungshof* (Court of Audits) on the financial management of all public institutions, including the provinces (*Länder*). Representatives of social partnership organisations, on the other hand, have the highest probabilities of being allocated a seat in the Committee of Agriculture, the Economy Committee, or the Committee of Employment and Social Affairs.

To my surprise, parliamentary and committee seniority turn out to play a mostly insignificant role, which is not only inconsistent with the literature but also contradicts, at least partly, the observation that expertise is key to the committee assignment. This finding should, however, be cautiously interpreted. What holds true for all committee members does not necessarily hold true for committee chairs, who are known in Austria to be “seasoned leaders” (Chiru 2020).

Finally, almost no empirical support was found for partisan theories of committees that assume that loyal members are rewarded by party leadership in committee assignments (for similar results, see Mickler 2022). It is only in the cases of the Foreign Affairs and the Main Committee that party leaders have higher odds of committee assignment. Instead, gender turned out to be a quite strong predictor, suggesting a gender bias in the assignment system. Even if the crucial question of whether the bias stems from gendered norms or expectations of a “good” MP can only be clarified through future in-depth investigation, this study suggests the need for further gender-sensitive theoretical frameworks that are so far missing in the literature.

A final insight gained is that while in general partisan considerations matter the least and education as well as professional background matter the most, assignment practices vary between committees. Most notably, affiliations with outside social partnership organisations such as the various Chambers only play a significant role with regard to selected committees. The variety of theories in the field, thus, appears to be a strength rather than a weakness.

This study is best understood as a first endeavour to systematically shed light on the system of committee assignment in Austria. Clearly, additional research such as interview studies with MPs is needed to fully understand which processes drive intra-PPG committees. Such research could, among other things, help us to understand whether PPGs attach different prestige to different committees or whether research should shift the focus to committee (vice) chairs, as they act as important “watchdogs” in parliament.

5. Appendix

A1. Harmonised committee codes

Code	Committee name (Legislative periods)	Range (Legislative periods)
Agriculture	Ausschuss für Land- und Forstwirtschaft (V-XXVII)	V –XXVII
Audit	Rechnungshofausschuss (V –XXVII)	V –XXVII
Budget	Finanz- und Budgetausschuss (V-XVI) Budgetausschuss (XV–XXVII)	V –XXVII
Constitution	Verfassungsausschuss (V –XXVII)	V –XXVII
Economy	Ausschuss für Verfassung und Verwaltungsreform (VI-VII)	IX-XXVII
	Ausschuss für wirtschaftliche Integration (IX-XXVI)	
	Ausschuss für Wirtschaft und Industrie (XXIII-XXV) Ausschuss für Wirtschaft, Industrie und Energie (XXVI-XXVII) Wirtschaftsausschuss (XIX-XXII)	
Education	Ausschuss für Unterricht (V)	V –XXVII
	Unterrichtsausschuss (VI –XXVII)	
Employment & Social Affairs	Ausschuss für Arbeit und Soziales (XVIII-XXVII)	XVIII-XXVII
Family	Familienausschuss (XVI-XXV)	XVI –XXVII
	Ausschuss für Familie und Jugend (XXVI-XXVII)	
Foreign Affairs	Ausschuss für auswärtige Angelegenheiten (V)	V –XXVII
	Außenpolitischer Ausschuss (VI-XXVII)	
Immunity	Immunitätsausschuss (V –XXVII)	V –XXVII
Justice	Justizausschuss (V –XXVII)	V –XXVII
Main Committee	Hauptausschuss (V –XXVII)	V –XXVII

A2. Binary multi-level logistic multi-level regression on committee membership

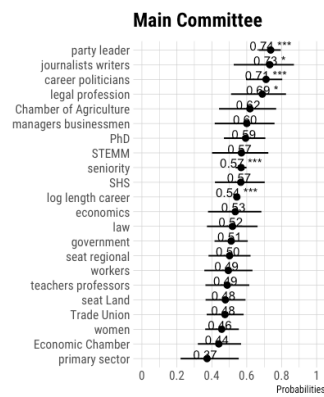
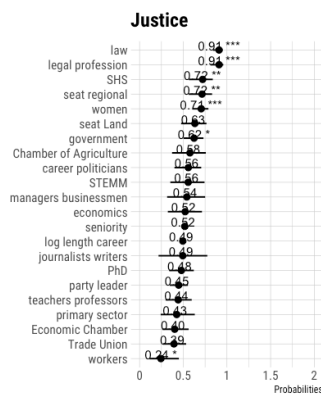
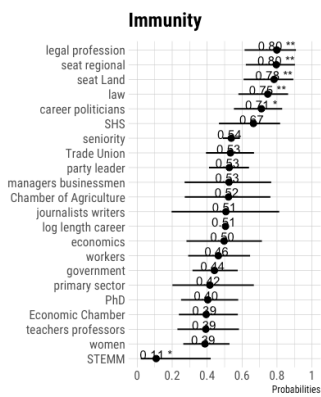
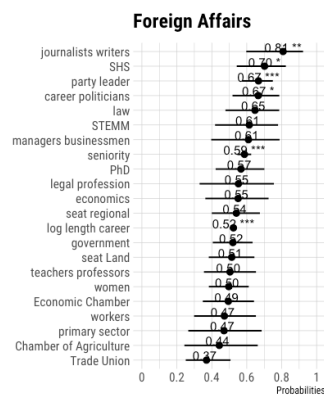
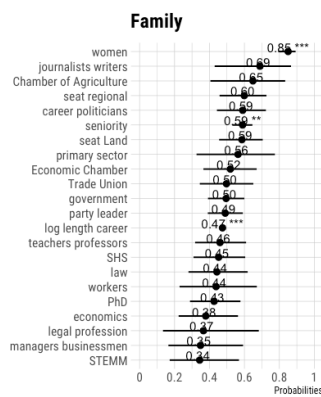
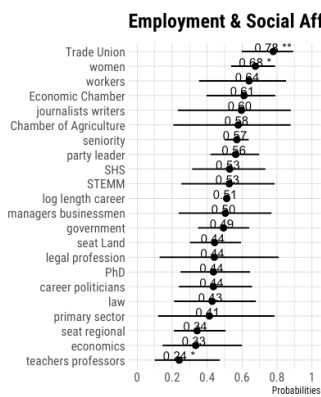
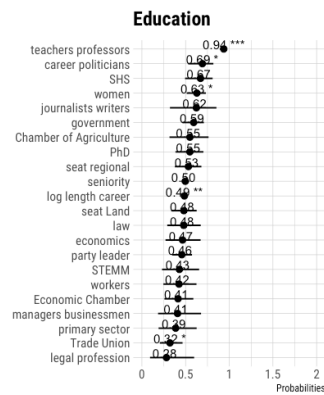
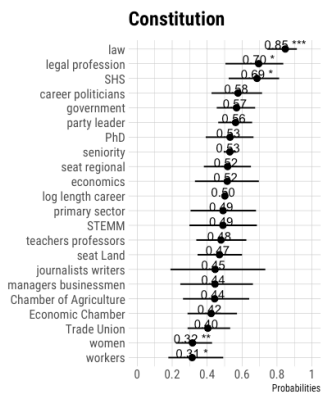
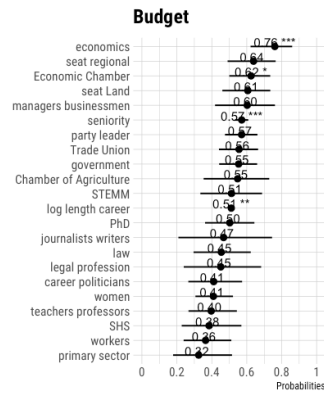
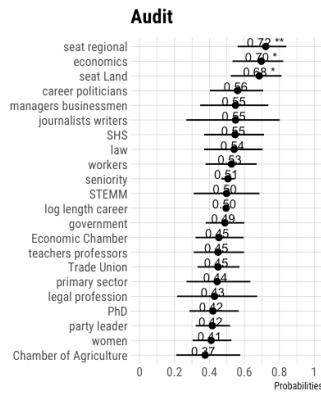
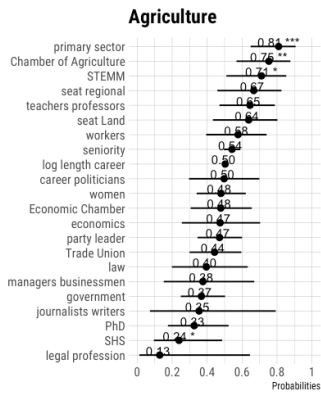
	Agriculture			Audit			Budget			Constitution			Economy		
	OR	CI	p	OR	CI	p	OR	CI	p	OR	CI	p	OR	CI	p
(Intercept)	0.06	0.02 – 0.16	<0.001	0.08	0.04 – 0.18	<0.001	0.05	0.03 – 0.11	<0.001	0.07	0.04 – 0.15	<0.001	0.13	0.06 – 0.26	<0.001
women	0.92	0.52 – 1.64	0.778	0.70	0.44 – 1.11	0.128	0.69	0.44 – 1.09	0.111	0.46	0.29 – 0.75	0.002	0.76	0.47 – 1.25	0.285
PhD	0.48	0.21 – 1.10	0.082	0.72	0.40 – 1.31	0.288	1.01	0.57 – 1.81	0.969	1.13	0.64 – 1.99	0.664	0.88	0.46 – 1.71	0.714
economics	0.90	0.34 – 2.38	0.835	2.30	1.14 – 4.64	0.020	3.18	1.64 – 6.15	0.001	1.06	0.49 – 2.29	0.876	1.65	0.81 – 3.39	0.169
law	0.65	0.25 – 1.77	0.390	1.18	0.59 – 2.38	0.642	0.83	0.42 – 1.65	0.601	5.56	2.91 – 10.61	<0.001	0.69	0.32 – 1.52	0.359
SHS	0.31	0.10 – 0.95	0.039	1.20	0.59 – 2.47	0.612	0.62	0.29 – 1.32	0.219	2.18	1.10 – 4.33	0.026	0.57	0.24 – 1.34	0.197
STEMM	2.46	1.04 – 5.87	0.040	0.99	0.45 – 2.19	0.984	1.05	0.50 – 2.20	0.893	0.96	0.43 – 2.18	0.927	0.89	0.38 – 2.05	0.778
career politicians	0.99	0.42 – 2.32	0.980	1.28	0.67 – 2.42	0.452	0.70	0.36 – 1.34	0.282	1.36	0.74 – 2.50	0.322	0.78	0.38 – 1.63	0.512
workers	1.36	0.65 – 2.85	0.411	1.11	0.61 – 2.04	0.733	0.57	0.31 – 1.05	0.071	0.46	0.22 – 0.97	0.042	0.61	0.31 – 1.23	0.169
journalists & writers	0.55	0.08 – 3.83	0.544	1.22	0.36 – 4.07	0.748	0.88	0.26 – 2.92	0.832	0.80	0.23 – 2.75	0.728	0.64	0.14 – 3.01	0.573
legal profession	0.15	0.01 – 1.87	0.135	0.75	0.27 – 2.06	0.578	0.82	0.31 – 2.15	0.691	2.28	1.02 – 5.11	0.045	0.44	0.12 – 1.61	0.216
managers businessmen	0.60	0.18 – 2.03	0.413	1.22	0.53 – 2.81	0.641	1.52	0.72 – 3.20	0.274	0.80	0.33 – 1.96	0.628	3.98	1.90 – 8.34	<0.001
primary sector	4.24	1.85 – 9.77	0.001	0.80	0.37 – 1.74	0.569	0.48	0.22 – 1.06	0.071	0.97	0.44 – 2.13	0.930	0.92	0.37 – 2.27	0.862
teachers & professors	1.82	0.89 – 3.77	0.102	0.82	0.45 – 1.49	0.507	0.66	0.36 – 1.19	0.166	0.92	0.51 – 1.67	0.788	0.41	0.19 – 0.89	0.025
party leader	0.89	0.53 – 1.50	0.661	0.71	0.47 – 1.08	0.107	1.33	0.91 – 1.95	0.146	1.29	0.86 – 1.92	0.214	1.04	0.68 – 1.60	0.855
Chamber of Agriculture	3.06	1.31 – 7.11	0.009	0.60	0.26 – 1.36	0.221	1.21	0.55 – 2.69	0.637	0.80	0.35 – 1.78	0.578	0.85	0.33 – 2.19	0.733
Economic Chamber	0.91	0.44 – 1.90	0.812	0.83	0.47 – 1.47	0.524	1.66	1.00 – 2.77	0.050	0.73	0.40 – 1.33	0.308	3.69	2.18 – 6.26	<0.001
Trade Union	0.79	0.43 – 1.48	0.466	0.81	0.50 – 1.33	0.414	1.25	0.79 – 1.99	0.341	0.68	0.40 – 1.14	0.141	2.16	1.29 – 3.64	0.004
log length career	1.01	0.97 – 1.06	0.488	0.98	0.95 – 1.01	0.259	1.05	1.01 – 1.08	0.006	1.01	0.97 – 1.04	0.706	1.02	0.98 – 1.07	0.285
government	0.58	0.33 – 1.01	0.055	0.95	0.61 – 1.50	0.837	1.24	0.79 – 1.94	0.347	1.32	0.83 – 2.08	0.238	0.82	0.50 – 1.33	0.419
seat Land	1.76	0.76 – 4.07	0.184	2.17	1.09 – 4.32	0.027	1.54	0.85 – 2.77	0.153	0.89	0.53 – 1.50	0.661	0.46	0.26 – 0.83	0.010
seat regional	2.00	0.85 – 4.73	0.114	2.59	1.28 – 5.26	0.008	1.77	0.96 – 3.26	0.067	1.07	0.62 – 1.86	0.808	0.92	0.50 – 1.69	0.791
seniority	1.18	0.98 – 1.42	0.074	1.02	0.88 – 1.20	0.765	1.33	1.14 – 1.56	<0.001	1.13	0.98 – 1.30	0.094	1.17	0.96 – 1.42	0.114
σ^2	3.29			3.29			3.29			3.29			3.29		
τ_{00}	6.44 ID			4.72 ID			3.90 ID			4.13 ID			3.55 ID		
ICC	0.66			0.59			0.54			0.56			0.52		
N	1436 ID			1436 ID			1436 ID			1436 ID			1272 ID		
Observations	4095			4095			4095			4095			3512		
Marginal R2 / Conditional R2	0.137 / 0.708			0.023 / 0.599			0.066 / 0.573			0.110 / 0.605			0.113 / 0.573		

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	Education			Employment			Family			Foreign Affairs			Immunity		
	OR	CI	p	OR	CI	p	OR	CI	p	OR	CI	p	OR	CI	p
(Intercept)	0.06	0.03 – 0.14	<0.001	0.08	0.03 – 0.18	<0.001	0.08	0.04 – 0.16	<0.001	0.03	0.01 – 0.06	<0.001	0.02	0.01 – 0.04	<0.001
women	1.69	1.05 – 2.73	0.031	2.09	1.16 – 3.75	0.014	5.68	3.85 – 8.37	<0.001	0.99	0.62 – 1.57	0.960	0.63	0.36 – 1.12	0.116
PhD	1.22	0.62 – 2.38	0.565	0.77	0.33 – 1.82	0.559	0.74	0.41 – 1.37	0.340	1.31	0.73 – 2.35	0.366	0.68	0.33 – 1.37	0.279
economics	0.87	0.37 – 2.05	0.749	0.50	0.17 – 1.50	0.217	0.61	0.29 – 1.29	0.196	1.23	0.57 – 2.64	0.603	0.99	0.39 – 2.49	0.981
law	0.92	0.41 – 2.06	0.834	0.75	0.27 – 2.11	0.587	0.79	0.39 – 1.62	0.527	1.83	0.92 – 3.68	0.087	2.95	1.38 – 6.35	0.005
SHS	2.03	0.97 – 4.25	0.059	1.12	0.46 – 2.75	0.801	0.83	0.45 – 1.53	0.544	2.36	1.19 – 4.68	0.014	1.99	0.88 – 4.49	0.099
STEMM	0.75	0.30 – 1.90	0.547	1.11	0.34 – 3.67	0.861	0.52	0.21 – 1.32	0.171	1.59	0.72 – 3.53	0.250	0.12	0.02 – 0.73	0.021
career politicians	2.25	1.13 – 4.49	0.022	0.77	0.31 – 1.92	0.579	1.44	0.79 – 2.61	0.231	1.99	1.08 – 3.68	0.028	2.46	1.24 – 4.88	0.010
workers	0.74	0.33 – 1.67	0.463	1.78	0.55 – 5.77	0.339	0.78	0.30 – 2.04	0.611	0.89	0.43 – 1.88	0.767	0.87	0.41 – 1.83	0.707
journalists & writers	1.66	0.47 – 5.81	0.431	1.48	0.30 – 7.25	0.629	2.21	0.75 – 6.50	0.148	4.21	1.48 – 11.93	0.007	1.03	0.24 – 4.35	0.967
legal profession	0.39	0.10 – 1.49	0.168	0.79	0.15 – 4.24	0.783	0.58	0.15 – 2.15	0.412	1.23	0.49 – 3.09	0.655	3.98	1.59 – 9.94	0.003
managers businessmen	0.69	0.23 – 2.10	0.511	1.02	0.31 – 3.32	0.978	0.54	0.20 – 1.45	0.220	1.56	0.66 – 3.71	0.313	1.11	0.37 – 3.29	0.857
primary sector	0.63	0.24 – 1.68	0.354	0.70	0.14 – 3.66	0.676	1.29	0.48 – 3.44	0.611	0.89	0.36 – 2.18	0.792	0.71	0.25 – 2.01	0.520
Teachers & professors	14.86	8.33 – 26.54	<0.001	0.32	0.11 – 0.89	0.030	0.85	0.47 – 1.56	0.607	1.02	0.55 – 1.88	0.957	0.64	0.30 – 1.39	0.265
party leader	0.84	0.53 – 1.34	0.470	1.29	0.72 – 2.31	0.392	0.96	0.64 – 1.44	0.850	2.00	1.34 – 2.99	0.001	1.11	0.70 – 1.78	0.653
Chamber of Agriculture	1.22	0.46 – 3.22	0.691	1.37	0.26 – 7.22	0.711	1.85	0.68 – 5.01	0.228	0.79	0.32 – 1.97	0.620	1.09	0.37 – 3.21	0.870
Economic Chamber	0.70	0.35 – 1.43	0.334	1.57	0.66 – 3.77	0.311	1.08	0.58 – 2.03	0.807	0.98	0.53 – 1.79	0.943	0.65	0.31 – 1.36	0.253
Trade Union	0.47	0.26 – 0.87	0.016	3.51	1.49 – 8.31	0.004	0.99	0.53 – 1.86	0.975	0.59	0.33 – 1.03	0.062	1.14	0.65 – 2.02	0.644
log length career	0.94	0.91 – 0.98	0.004	1.05	0.99 – 1.11	0.103	0.90	0.86 – 0.95	<0.001	1.10	1.06 – 1.14	<0.001	1.02	0.98 – 1.06	0.326
government	1.45	0.87 – 2.45	0.157	0.98	0.53 – 1.79	0.935	0.98	0.64 – 1.50	0.928	1.09	0.68 – 1.73	0.730	0.79	0.46 – 1.35	0.393
seat Land	0.92	0.51 – 1.68	0.795	0.79	0.43 – 1.46	0.459	1.41	0.84 – 2.39	0.197	1.06	0.62 – 1.81	0.836	3.61	1.56 – 8.40	0.003
seat regional	1.14	0.60 – 2.14	0.690	0.52	0.27 – 1.02	0.058	1.50	0.84 – 2.65	0.168	1.18	0.67 – 2.08	0.575	3.90	1.64 – 9.28	0.002
seniority	0.98	0.82 – 1.18	0.867	1.32	1.00 – 1.76	0.052	1.44	1.13 – 1.82	0.003	1.42	1.21 – 1.67	<0.001	1.17	0.96 – 1.42	0.123
σ^2	3.29			3.29			3.29			3.29			3.29		
τ_{00}	5.74 ID			5.23 ID			1.88 ID			4.11 ID			4.63 ID		
ICC	0.64			0.61			0.36			0.56			0.58		
N	1436 ID			793 ID			942 ID			1436 ID			1436 ID		
Observations	4095			1868			2298			4095			4095		
Marginal R2 / Conditional R2	0.130 / 0.682			0.084 / 0.646			0.173 / 0.474			0.112 / 0.605			0.098 / 0.625		

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	Justice			Main Committee		
	OR	CI	p	OR	CI	p
(Intercept)	0.02	0.01 – 0.05	< 0.001	0.03	0.02 – 0.06	< 0.001
women	2.40	1.54 – 3.72	< 0.001	0.84	0.57 – 1.25	0.388
PhD	0.92	0.51 – 1.64	0.772	1.46	0.88 – 2.41	0.139
economics	1.09	0.48 – 2.50	0.835	1.15	0.61 – 2.16	0.672
law	10.11	5.26 – 19.43	< 0.001	1.08	0.59 – 1.96	0.808
SHS	2.59	1.29 – 5.18	0.007	1.30	0.72 – 2.37	0.383
STEMM	1.25	0.54 – 2.90	0.597	1.32	0.67 – 2.62	0.420
career politicians	1.26	0.66 – 2.40	0.477	2.45	1.47 – 4.08	0.001
workers	0.32	0.13 – 0.82	0.017	0.98	0.56 – 1.72	0.940
journalists & writers	0.98	0.28 – 3.46	0.972	2.73	1.11 – 6.71	0.029
legal profession	10.11	4.31 – 23.72	< 0.001	2.21	1.04 – 4.71	0.039
managers businessmen	1.18	0.46 – 3.02	0.733	1.50	0.71 – 3.15	0.284
primary sector	0.74	0.32 – 1.72	0.484	0.59	0.28 – 1.24	0.167
teachers & professors	0.79	0.42 – 1.48	0.467	0.95	0.57 – 1.59	0.856
party leader	0.81	0.53 – 1.24	0.330	2.80	2.02 – 3.88	< 0.001
Chamber of Agriculture	1.36	0.59 – 3.14	0.469	1.62	0.79 – 3.32	0.188
Economic Chamber	0.67	0.35 – 1.28	0.226	0.79	0.47 – 1.31	0.356
Trade Union	0.65	0.37 – 1.14	0.133	0.91	0.59 – 1.39	0.654
log length career	0.98	0.94 – 1.02	0.258	1.19	1.15 – 1.23	< 0.001
government	1.66	1.01 – 2.72	0.046	1.05	0.71 – 1.54	0.823
seat Land	1.72	0.91 – 3.28	0.096	0.91	0.57 – 1.46	0.703
seat regional	2.51	1.28 – 4.90	0.007	1.01	0.62 – 1.64	0.980
seniority	1.07	0.91 – 1.26	0.394	1.31	1.15 – 1.49	< 0.001
σ^2	3.29			3.29		
τ_{00}	4.10 ID			2.67 ID		
ICC	0.55			0.45		
N	1436 ID			1436 ID		
Observations	4095			4095		
Marginal R2 / Conditional	0.180 /					
R2	0.635			0.175 / 0.545		



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