Who gets what and why?
On the politics of committee assignments in the Austrian *Nationalrat*

Parliamentary committees that deliberate on selected matters in greater depth in small groups than is possible in the whole Chamber are ubiquitous around the world. They are generally understood as the "work horses" of parliaments that make legislatures efficient by, inter alia, developing expertise through the consultation of experts and putting forth detailed proposals. 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. While it is rather uncontroversial that committees play a pronounced role in the legislative process, their degree of impact is difficult to judge not least because committee sessions are (often) closed to the public. Any impact assessment has to stay ambiguous unless a 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 the committee´s members were different. Such experimental tests, however, have not yet been conducted. In general, most recent studies on the actual work of committees in Europe[1] suggest that they serve as important hubs for the expression of demands and reservations by Members of Parliament (MPs) that, if voiced, may or may not influence debates and decisions made in the plenary (Siefken/Rommetvedt 2021).

Given the fact that an efficient parliament is hard to imagine without dividing the myriad of policy realms into manageable subunits that are assigned to specialized committees, in recent years scholars who are interested in the inner working of parliaments have started to shed light on these circles of specialized legislators that operate in spaces secluded from the public eye. The research focus is

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[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).

mostly on committee chairs and their ability to provide opposition parties with the opportunity to scrutinize government policy proposals (e. g., Fortunato et al. 2019), on the maintenance or refreshment of expertise in committees with high membership turnover after elections (e.g., Alexander 2022), on the variation of formal and informal committee powers across countries (e.g., Nikolenyi/Friedberg 2019), and on the logics of committee assignments (e.g., Martin/Mickler 2019). Scholars in the last strand of literature ask one central question: How do parliamentary actors—the parliamentary party groups (PPG)—fill committee seats?

Addressing this question is worthwhile because just as the Chamber decentralizes legislative work to committees, parties decentralize it to their sector specialists in the various committees (van Schendelen 1976). These informed MPs provide advice to their party affiliates who have limited informational resources on how, for example, to vote on a bill. Such a division of work allows parties, on the one hand, to deal simultaneously with many bills with a small risk of error and, on the other hand, vests selected MPs with informational power to potentially draw an outcome towards one´s preference. Yet, we only have little and rather inconsistent knowledge on how the "politics of committee assignments" work (Fernandes et al. 2022).

This article wants to fill the research gap by adding the *Austrian Nationalrat*[2] to a series of studies on the politics of committee assignments that have investigated so far the Irish *Dáil Éireann* (Mickler 2018a), the *German Bundestag* (Mickler 2018b), the Danish *Folketing* (Hansen 2019), the Israeli *Knesset* (Itzkovitch-Malka/Shugart 2022), and the British *House of Commons* (Fernandes et al. 2022). The case study is structured as follows: (1) A description of the Austrian committee system; (2) hypotheses that only build on the main theory models in the existing literature; (3) a description of the data set and of the empirical strategy used; (4) concluding remarks on which theories are best supported in the Austrian case.

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[2] The Austrian parliament consists of two chambers: the National Assembly (*Nationrat*) 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. The Austrian Committee System

In Austria, laws are created, in most cases, through government bills. The stylized legislative cycle of bills (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 organizations. 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.

Once a bill has been introduced to the parliament, it is directly referred to the competent committee[3] that deliberates the bill *in camera* and draws up a report detailing the changes made. The bill is passed back to the plenary for a second reading. At this stage the different PPGs can state their opinions before the National Council votes on the bill. Thus, much like committees of the German *Bundestag* or the Dutch *Tweede,* committees in Austria mostly alter the wording of the bill, amend the text, delete parts of it, or add to it, and far less frequently make initiatives on laws. Between the legislative period XXII and XXVII, 2,114 legal initiatives were proposed by individual MPs, 1,677 by the government, and only 189 by committees (Praprotnik 2022, 176).

The best indicator of committees´ informational power is the number of government bills that are subject to change. Statistics are currently only available for all legislative periods between 1971 and 1999. With some exceptions, the number of amended government bills hovers around 40 to 45% (Sickinger 2000). Revealingly, the vast majority of all amended government bills were modified in (sub-) committees and not in general parliamentary sessions. Recent examples are almost all COVID-19-related bills and ordinances (Stöger 2021).

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[3] In principle, the deliberative process can be shortened by the government putting a draft law directly up for a first reading in front of the National Council. However, this route is rarely taken by policy makers.

A comparative analysis of 33 committee systems in Europe reveals that only committees in Sweden, Germany, and Estonia are given more competences than in Austria, where committees can rewrite bills, summon ministers, and ask for any kind of document, and where the right to compel witnesses is unrestricted, experts can be consulted in a public sitting, and the control over the timetable rests with the committees (Mickler 2022).

The preparatory role of committees in Austria is very likely less significant than in Germany, which stems from, among other things, two idiosyncrasies: First, according to the rules of procedure, committees' reports are not only distributed to all MPs but the committees' rapporteur may also open the plenary debate and use the stage to, for example, point out selected legislative amendments to vote on.[4] However, since the introduction of an amendment of the Rules of Procedure in 1996, rapporteurs are no longer obliged to give an oral presentation of the report and often forgo their speaking time (Atzwanger/Zögernitz 1999, 266).

Second, time use research reveals that while German MPs, as members of one committee, only spend up to 7.5 hours on committee work during a week of sessions, Austrian MPs, as members of several committees, participate on average in two committee meetings that last approximately two hours per month (Pelinka/Sickinger 1996). This stark difference in time spent on committee work may imply that negotiations and the formation of consensus take places elsewhere, such as in parliamentary party meetings. To give an example: All amendments of the rules of procedures have been negotiated between parliamentary leaders with the responsible committee playing a negligible role (Konrath 2009).

If MPs are interviewed on the importance of committee work, most can recall success stories such as pushing through the interests of an MP's regional constituency or challenging fact-based debates but also argue that the work style between committees widely differs and that most committee work is rather "symbolic" and "uncreative"—*Statistenarbeit* in the words of MP Herbert Kohlmaier (Schefbeck

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[4] The rapporteur may as well highlight a committee's preference using different rhetorical strategies. For example, he or she will want to exaggerate some information to cause the floor to redraft a bill so that it ends up being very similar to the bill that the committee would write if it had the sole authority.

2022, 74). Nearly all agree that committees are crucial for information procurement even if different committees approach their tasks with varying degrees of seriousness, as MP Anneliese Albrecht recalls:

> A session of the Trade Committee tended to last for half an hour only. In the case of the Health Committee, in contrast, a session felt like an eternity. Experts were consulted. One could learn so much from them and, at least in my case, physicians provided me with an enormous amount of information (Schefbeck 2022, 76; own translation).

Since the distribution of committee seats among the parties is proportional, the government has the majority in all parliamentary committees and thus control of the output of their activities, which, in turn, implies that the opposition cannot achieve substantial control of committees´ decision making. In this regard, the *Nationalrat* is different from Israel´s *Knesset,* whose committees can act as vehicles of opposition, and is similar to Hungary´s *Országgyűlés*, which is known for committees that act as agents of the governing majority (Nikolenyi/Friedberg 2019). Qualitative research has uncovered how stuck committees are in the tight grip of government: Opposition politicians complained that the frequent practice to deliver draft bills that need to be voted on only 15 minutes before the committee session ended was "undemocratic" (Müller et al. 2001, 284).

In Austria, the task areas of all expert committees (*Fachausschüsse*) are more or less identical to the tasks of the ministries (e.g., Foreign Affairs, Finance). There are, however, committees with specific remits (*Ausschuss mit spezifischen Aufgaben*) that are dedicated to procedural purposes (e.g., Rules of Procedure Committee) or government control (e.g., Audit Committee).

While a given committee assignment may deliver different benefits to different types of MPs, there is general agreement that committees differ in the degree of prestige, oversight capacity, and policy influence they provide to MPs (Fernandes et al. 2022). Table 1 lists all committees in 2022 according to scores on the overall index of committee attractiveness as rated by 12 experts in Austrian politics (see the Method Section for details). Each item of the index ranges from 0.0 (not at all) to 4.0 (strongly). The higher the index, the more attractive the committee.

As indicated by Table 1, the Budget Committee, which has the sole responsibility for examining the federal budget, was scored the most important committee. The committee is responsible for the

budget proposal and its many subcommittees examine the budgets of individual ministries. While these subcommittees consist of members of the respective sectoral committees, each subcommittee is chaired by the chair of the main budget committee. Second ranked is the Main Committee that discusses European affairs ranging from environmental issues to Eastern Europe enlargement of the EU. Its meetings are open to the public, and written records are published. Lower ranked in the prestige hierarchy is the finance committee that deals with, among other things, all bills regarding the taxation and regulation of the finance sector. It is noteworthy that the Constitution and Justice Committee on rank four and six respectively are not entirely filled with legal experts, and that the Audit Committee deals with reports from the Austrian Court of Audits on the financial management of all public institutions, including the provinces (*Länder*). As a rule, this committee is headed by an opposition party member such as the Green politician Andreas Wabl, who managed to draw media attention to the committee´s work.

Table 1. Expert opinions on committee attractiveness (2022)

Committee type*	Committee	capacity to scrutinize government		public policy influence		prestige		general attractiveness	
		mean	sd	mean	sd	mean	sd	mean	sd
High Policy	Budget	3,09	0,94	2,91	1,22	2,82	1,33	2,94	1,14
High Policy	Main Committee	2,67	1,23	2,92	1,16	3,18	0,98	2,91	1,12
High Policy	Finance	2,91	0,94	2,64	1,12	2,55	1,13	2,70	1,05
High Policy	Constitution	2,73	0,90	2,64	1,29	2,64	1,21	2,67	1,11
Public Goods	Employment & Social Affairs	2,73	0,79	2,64	1,12	2,27	1,10	2,55	1,00
High Policy	Justice	2,64	0,81	2,55	1,04	2,45	1,04	2,55	0,94
High Policy	Audit	3,09	0,94	2,09	0,83	2,09	0,94	2,42	1,00
High Policy	Foreign Policy	2,42	0,67	2,25	0,97	2,42	1,08	2,36	0,90
---	Internal Affairs	2,27	0,65	2,55	1,04	2,09	0,94	2,30	0,88
---	Rules of Procedure	2,18	1,17	2,18	1,33	2,18	1,08	2,18	1,16
---	Immunity	2,45	1,21	2,00	1,10	2,00	1,00	2,15	1,09
Public Goods	Environment	2,09	0,54	2,36	0,92	2,00	0,77	2,15	0,76
High Policy	Economy, Industy & Energy	2,18	0,60	2,18	0,98	2,00	1,00	2,12	0,86
High Policy	Defense	2,25	0,62	2,08	1,00	2,00	1,00	2,11	0,87
Public Goods	Human Rights	2,27	0,79	2,09	0,83	1,91	0,94	2,09	0,84
Public Goods	Health	2,36	0,67	2,18	1,08	1,73	0,65	2,09	0,84
Public Goods	Family & Youth	2,27	0,65	2,18	0,98	1,64	0,67	2,03	0,81
Public Goods	Education	2,09	0,54	2,36	0,92	1,64	0,50	2,03	0,73
---	Incompatibility	2,27	1,01	1,91	1,04	1,91	0,94	2,03	0,98
Public Goods	Consumer Protection	2,18	0,60	2,18	1,17	1,64	0,92	2,00	0,94
Public Goods	Research, Innovation & Digitalization	2,25	0,62	1,92	0,90	1,64	0,67	1,94	0,76
Distributive	Building & Housing	2,18	0,75	1,91	0,94	1,73	0,65	1,94	0,79
---	Ombudsman Board	2,45	0,69	1,73	0,79	1,64	0,67	1,94	0,79
Distributive	Transport	2,00	0,63	2,18	0,87	1,55	0,52	1,91	0,72
---	Equal Opportunities	2,09	0,54	1,82	0,75	1,73	0,90	1,88	0,74
Public Goods	Science	1,92	0,67	1,92	0,90	1,73	0,65	1,86	0,73
Public Goods	Culture	2,09	0,70	2,00	1,00	1,45	0,69	1,85	0,83
Public Goods	Petitions & Citizens´ Initiatives	1,91	0,83	1,91	1,04	1,64	0,81	1,82	0,88
Public Goods	Sport	1,82	0,75	1,91	0,83	1,64	1,21	1,79	0,93
Distributive	Tourism	2,00	0,77	1,82	0,98	1,55	0,69	1,79	0,82
Distributive	Agriculture & Forestry	1,91	0,70	1,91	0,94	1,36	0,50	1,73	0,76

* Committee categories are suggested by Shugart et al. (2021). *High policy committees* are those with the most press coverage that are likely to be critical of the image of the party and its performance in parliament; *public good committees* deal with policy areas that allocate benefits to broad categories of citizens while *distributive committees* are involved with policy areas in which benefits are distributed to specific (geographic) constituencies.

2. Theorizing Committee Assignments

Committees are formed at the beginning of each legislative period (LP) of the *Nationalrat*. Leadership of the PPGs receives (informal) requests from incumbents and freshmen alike for one or multiple desired committee seats, which are considered during the ensuing internal party assignment process. Records of how MPs remember committee assignments reveal that a mixture of factors are likely to impact "who gets what," among them being committee seat availability and professional background. The MP Robert Sigl, who joined the National Council in the middle of a legislative period, has the following vivid memory:

> The speaker of our parliamentary group, Dr. Heinz Fischer, approached me and asked for my preferences. I told him that, as I was a learned railway worker, I could imagine joining the Transportation Committee. His first response: All committee seats are already taken. […] He added: A seat in the Agriculture Committee or the Defence Committee is still available. I answered: Dear Mr. Speaker, I have no idea about corn and grain [….] (Schefbeck 2022, 72; own translation)

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 that reoccur over time. The growing empirical literature on committee assignments evades "mindless empiricism" (Swedberg 2012) by postulating testable small-scale theories that assume that informational advantages, the promotion of partisan interests, external interests, or gendered practices drive assignment patterns (see Table 2).

The *informational model* postulates that PPGs aim to vote for or against bills based on as much information as possible (Krehbiel 1991). The committee system works towards this goal by allowing legislators to acquire and share specialized knowledge. PPGs leaders not only support their party members in accumulating informational advantages and tacit knowledge through specialization; they also consider in their committee assignments the long-standing policy focus and prior experiences of an MP that guarantee further specialization at a low cost, *if* MP´s expertise lies within a committee´s

jurisdiction (Gilligan/Krehbiel 1990). The informational rationale is especially significant if only PPGs and not committees have supporting staff (Hansen 2011), which applies to the *Nationalrat*.

> *Hypothesis 1a*: MPs are more likely to serve on committees covering policy areas where they have established a profile of policy interest.
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> *Hypothesis 1b*: Higher committee seniority increases the likelihood of being appointed to a committee.

Distributional model: While from the informational perspective, membership on committees provide a collective benefit to not only the PPGs but also the entire chamber, the distributional perspective views legislators as primarily motivated to secure their re-election by distributing particularistic benefits to *their* constituents. This logic would dictate that MPs 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 are of upmost 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 a 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.

Partisan model: While the distributional and informational perspectives depart from the interests and abilities of MPs, the partisan perspective argues that even if individual preferences for committees may play a role, it is, in the end, always party leaders who decide on the allocation of assignments (Cox/MacCubbins 1993). Their choice of "carrots and sticks" depends on whether they intend to use assignments to reward loyal partisans or punish those with little service to the national party organization. Prominence within the national party organization, thus, functions as *the* key predictor.

> Hypothesis 2: *MPs who have held national party leadership positions are the most likely to serve on the most attractive committees.*

As committees of the *Nationalrat* do not meet in public or attract much media attention, Austrian voters do not perceive committee work to be of high importance and MPs do not cater to regional constituencies primarily through their committee work. Organized interest groups, however, pay attention to committees, and therefore, MPs´ interest group ties need to be considered (Mickler 2018b). 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).[5] Even if social partners are, in most cases, already involved in the early stages of the preparation of a bill, committee memberships of social partner representatives can serve as an additional opportunity to bring external expertise into the legislation process. MPs, on the other hand, can signal through their committee work that they act as dedicated advocates of, for example, organized labor, which makes their renominations more likely.[6]

Hypothesis 3: Social partnership ties determine committee memberships.

Finally, the *gendered model* postulates that parliamentary committees "are patterned through and in terms of a distinction between male and female, masculine and feminine" (Acker 1990, 146). Espírito-Santo and Sanches (2020) researched the logic of committee assignments in the Portuguese *Regimento da Assembleia da República* and found that female MPs are more likely to be appointed to social issue committees regardless of expertise and seniority—a pattern that might stem from women's own preferences. Pansardi and Vercesi (2017) researched the Italian parliamentary committee system and found, in a similar vein, women to be overwhelmingly appointed to committees dealing with less prestigious issues (e.g., Culture, Science, and Education).

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[5] "Social partnership"—essentially an institutionalized 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*.

[6] 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.

Hypothesis 4: *Female MPs are more likely to be appointed to committees that are considered less powerful and prestigious.*

The following section will evaluate the validity of these four middle-range theories in a selective empirical setting hitherto neglected by research: the committee system of the Austrian *Nationalrat* between 2002 and 2019.

3. Data, Measurements, and Empirical Strategy

3.1 Data

I used a unique panel dataset on all politicians who served in the *Nationalrat* (N = 528) between legislative period XXII (starting in 2002) and legislative period XXVI (ending in 2019). Data was collected from the online *Who is Who* edited by the Parliamentary Administration,[7] 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*). In total, 39 different committees were included in the analysis. In some cases, committees were renamed and assigned new policy agendas. If this is taken into account, the number of committees is reduced to 31 (see Appendix A1). Altogether, the sample consists of 32,202 committee-MP observations.

3.2 Measurement of Variables

Table 2 presents descriptive statistics for all variables used in this study:

Committee membership. The dependent variable of this study is dichotomous: MPs assigned to 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 a legislative period (LP) and between different committee functions.

Policy focus. Even if most individual legislative activities in the *Nationalrat* are dominated by strong partisan groups, legislators are found to address issues of the parliamentary agenda in motions and amendments, parliamentary questions, and press releases that fall within their particular areas of expertise (Huber et al. 2022; Otjes/Louwerse 2018). To capture individual MP´s policy foci, I used topic-coded party press releases gathered by Müller et al. (2021) that have the MP as the conveyor of

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[7] http://www.parlament.gv.at/WWER/, latest accessed on: 22th of December 2022.

the message in the title of the press release. The share of press releases that fall into committees´ jurisdictions was calculated and log (x+1) transformed to deal with the skewed distribution arising from the fact that some MPs did not issue party press releases at all or only infrequently in some policy areas.

Committee attractiveness. Committees differ in the scope of their jurisdiction, prestige, and power. As it was difficult to collect representative information on how MPs perceive committees in terms of their attractiveness, I decided to survey experts. Twelve social scientists, most of whom have specialized in research on Austrian politics, were asked to classify all committees on a scale of 1 (not at all) to 4 (strongly) regarding its capacity to scrutinize government, to influence parliamentary debates and decisions, and to confer prestige to individual MPs. The exact wording of the three statements in the online survey was:

(1) Membership in this committee puts the MP in a particular good position to scrutinize government

(2) Membership in this committee provides MPs with significant opportunities to influence debates and decisions in the plenary

(3) Membership in this committee bestows an MP with prestige.

The mean value of the three dimensions was used to estimate a committee´s general attractiveness (see Table 1).

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

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 (Ennser-Jedenastik/Müller 2014).

Social Partnership. This dummy variable captures whether a MP is either 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 organizations of Austrian partnership.

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

The selection of *control variables* is mostly based on Fernandes et al. (2021). The impact of belonging to a *Government* party is controlled for as governing parties can offer MPs a broader range of career opportunities, which may affect the way MPs perceive the attractiveness of committee assignments. The dummy takes the value 1 for MPs whose parties are in the government and 0 for all opposition members. The logic governing committee assignment might vary as well with the number of committee vacancies at the beginning of each legislative term. Therefore, the number of *Vacant Seats*, defined as the absolute difference between the total number of seats minus the number of incumbents, is included as a second control.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for All Variables Used in This Study

Variables	Mean	SD	Min.	Max.	Missings
Committee attractiveness	2.16	0.33	1.73	2.94	0
Committee membership	0.15	0.36	0	1	0
Committee seniority	0.15	0.61	0	9	0
Government	0.66	0.47	0	1	0
National party leader	0.44	0.50	0	1	0
Policy focus	0.29	0.85	0	4.62	4,236
Social partnership tie	0.22	0.41	0	1	0
Vacant Seats	13.66	6.05	0	36	0
Woman	0.32	0.47	0	1	0

Note: Calculated based on all observations (N = 32,202 committee-MP observations). In the case of the Budget Committee, the Immunity Committee, the Main Committee, and the Procedure Committee, topics could not be assigned as the committee´s jurisdiction is either too broad or not covered at all in the APA press releases analyzed.

3.3 Method

The panel dataset captures the "committee life cycle" of each MP between the beginning of LP 22 and the end of LP 26. In most cases, MPs are assigned to multiple committees in each legislative period. The dataset thus has a hierarchical structure with MPs being clustered in committees (and parties). 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 clear advantages over the existing alternative modelling strategies, such as complete pooling of data (and the use of party-dummies and clustered standard errors) or simple regression models: It allows us to include predictors at the individual level and at the level of higher-level units.

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 only include random effects for MPs and committees. Further, I applied a random intercept model that allows the relationship between the explanatory variables and the dependent to vary for each group. The model can be formalized as follows:

$$Logit(\pi_{ic}) = \frac{p(\pi_{ic})}{1 - p(\pi_{ic})} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 * pol.focus_{ic} + \beta_2 * c.seniority_i + \beta_3 * national.leader_i \ x \ c.attractivity_c +$$

$$\beta_4 * social.partners_i + \beta_5 * female_i \ x \ c.attractivity_c + \beta_6 * government_i + \beta_7 * vacant.seats_c + C_C + I_i + \varepsilon_{ic}$$

where π_{ic} is the probability of the binary variable "committee assignment" c for MP i to be 1; *committee seniority*, *national party leader*, *female*, *social partnership tie* are MP-level explanatory variables; *committee attractiveness* and *policy focus* are committee-level explanatory variables; *government* is an MP-level; and *vacant seats* are a committee-level control variable. The fixed β components are the parameters to be estimated. The random intercepts of the model that are allowed to vary include the committee-level term C_C for committees (with c = 1, …, n_c) and I_i for individual MPs (with i = 1,..., n¡). The model was estimated in "R" using the "lme4" package (Douglas et al. 2022).

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. Besides the use of odd ratios, marginal effects at the mean of each covariate adjusted model were derived and visualized via the "ggpredict" function from the "ggeffects" package in R (Lüdecke 2018). In all visualizations I report predicted probabilities of committee assignment that are more intuitive than odd ratios.

4. Results

Five different models were estimated using a sequential procedure. A base (Model 1a) and an extended version of the informational model that adds committee seniority (Model 1b) were specified and already include intercepts from both levels. Model 2 adds a cross-level interaction that is relevant to the partisan model; Model 3 adds social partnership ties as the main predictor of the distributional model; Model 4 adds another cross-level interaction, namely that between gender and committee attractiveness. The informational model was chosen as the base model, as evidence for informational concerns being the most widely used rational in committee assignments is steadily growing in the literature.

To evaluate the predictive capacity of all models, I used here marginal R squared values, which are only associated with the fixed effects, and conditional R squared values ones, which are those of the fixed effects plus the random effects.

As indicated by Table 3, the explanatory power of Model 1a is meager. The model, however, improves substantially if the committee-specific seniority is considered. Model 1b already explains a substantial part of the variation in the dependent variable (marginal $R^2 = 34\%$). Goodness-of-fit indicators increase significantly in Model 2, which speaks for the additional explanatory power of the partisan rationale. The performance of the model does not increase with the additional inclusion of social partnership ties (Model 3) and cross-level effect between gender and committee attractiveness (Model 4).

By far, the strongest effect across all legislative periods refers to committee experience, suggesting that MPs are likely to continue to serve on the same committee once they are assigned to it. This main finding corresponds to the general observation that anyone who made it into the *Nationalrat* has, more or less, secured a safe ticket for the next election ("principle of the permanence of membership" (Fischer 1974). The predicted probability based on Model 1b, which is being assigned to the committee on which one has already served, is almost 50%.

Table 3. Determinants of Committee Assignments *(Odd Ratios)*

| Predictors	Model 1a			Model 1b			Model 2			Model 3			Model 4		
	OR	CI	p	OR	CI	p	OR	CI	p	OR	CI	p	OR	CI	p
(Intercept)	0.12	0.10 – 0.14	**<0.001**	0.07	0.06 – 0.09	**<0.001**	0.23	0.15 – 0.38	**<0.001**	0.23	0.15 – 0.38	**<0.001**	0.14	0.09 – 0.24	**<0.001**
policy focus	1.63	1.57 – 1.68	**<0.001**	1.40	1.34 – 1.46	**<0.001**	1.41	1.35 – 1.47	**<0.001**	1.41	1.35 – 1.47	**<0.001**	1.40	1.35 – 1.47	**<0.001**
government	0.97	0.88 – 1.08	0.609	0.81	0.70 – 0.94	**0.006**	0.71	0.61 – 0.82	**<0.001**	0.71	0.61 – 0.82	**<0.001**	0.70	0.60 – 0.80	**<0.001**
vacant seats	1.02	1.01 – 1.03	**<0.001**	1.04	1.03 – 1.04	**<0.001**	1.03	1.03 – 1.04	**<0.001**	1.03	1.03 – 1.04	**<0.001**	1.03	1.03 – 1.04	**<0.001**
committee seniority				8.59	7.84 – 9.42	**<0.001**	8.56	7.81 – 9.38	**<0.001**	8.56	7.81 – 9.38	**<0.001**	8.55	7.80 – 9.37	**<0.001**
national party leader							0.17	0.10 – 0.32	**<0.001**	0.17	0.10 – 0.32	**<0.001**	0.17	0.09 – 0.32	**<0.001**
comm. attractivity							0.67	0.55 – 0.83	**<0.001**	0.67	0.55 – 0.83	**<0.001**	0.82	0.65 – 1.03	0.088
national party leader × comm. attractivity							1.74	1.31 – 2.30	**<0.001**	1.74	1.31 – 2.30	**<0.001**	1.74	1.31 – 2.31	**<0.001**
social partnership tie										1.01	0.85 – 1.20	0.915	1.04	0.87 – 1.23	0.687
woman													4.28	2.28 – 8.01	**<0.001**
comm attractivity x female													0.56	0.42 – 0.76	**<0.001**
σ^2	3.29			3.29			3.29			3.29			3.29		
τ_{00}	0.13 MP_ID			0.46 MP_ID			0.39 MP_ID			0.39 MP_ID			0.37 MP_ID		
	0.02 committee_ID			0.01 committee_ID			0.01 committee_ID			0.01 committee_ID			0.01 committee_ID		
N	528 MP_ID			528 MP_ID			528 MP_ID			528 MP_ID			528 MP_ID		
	28 committee_ID			28 committee_ID			28 committee_ID			28 committee_ID			28 committee_ID		
Observations	27966			27966			27966			27966			27966		
Marginal R^2 / Conditional R^2	0.050 / 0.091			0.338 / 0.421			0.345 / 0.415			0.345 / 0.415			0.347 / 0.415		

Policy focus as the second variable associated with the informational model also functions as a powerful predictor: Those with a prior focus on the policies covered by a select committee have a significantly higher chance of being assigned to that committee. Holding all other variables constant at their means, the predicted probabilities reach a level of almost 40% in the case of a complete match between an MP´s policy focus and a committee´s jurisdiction (see Figure 1).

Hypothesis 2 on the partisan rationale is tested by interrelating the committee's attractiveness score with an MP's status within the national party organization. Figure 1 visualizes the significant interaction effect. A marked difference can only be seen regarding low-prestige committees on which high-status MPs are more unlikely to serve than low-status MPs. However, regarding high-policy committees, expectations are not confirmed.

Hypothesis 3 must be rejected as Model 3 shows no significant effect for external social partnership ties, which can partly be explained by the fact that representatives of social partners are almost evenly distributed across all committees.

Hypothesis 4 is tested by interrelating the log+1-transformed committee attractiveness score with an MP´s gender. As Model 4 indicates, gender is the second most important variable in the party decision calculus of selecting members for committees; its predictive power trumps even that of policy focus (see Table 3). Figure 1 clearly shows that women have significantly higher chances to be selected for low-prestige committees. More concretely, we can say that female MPs are more likely than male MPs to serve on the Family Committee or the Culture Committee, even if informational advantages gained through specialization or committee seniority are controlled for.

Figure 1. Model projections of committee assignments based on Model 4 (covariates are held at average values)
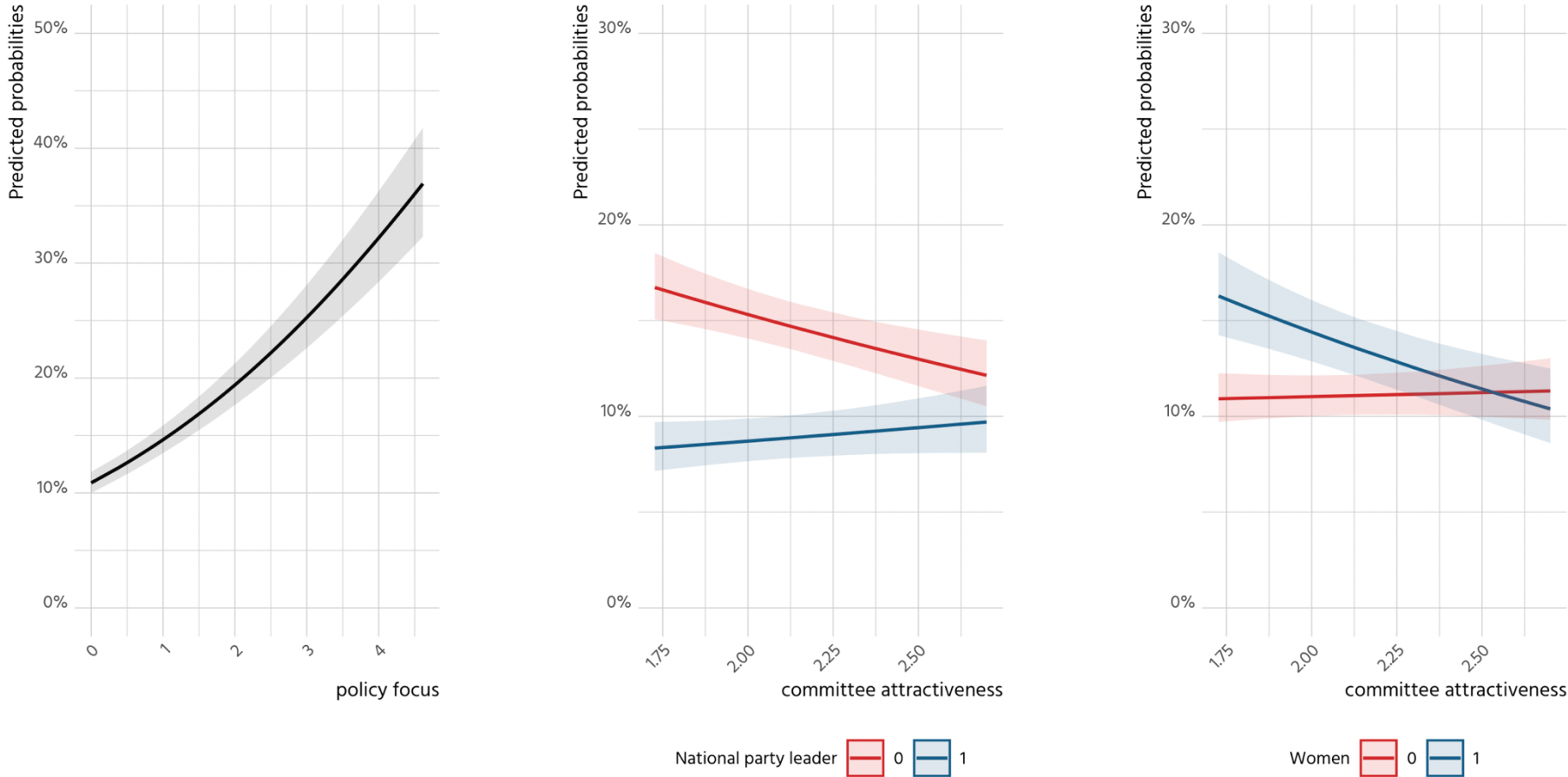
5. Concluding Remarks

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-centered context (Mickler 2022) by adding another case study to the growing body of research. Based on a unique dataset on all committee members in the Austrian *Nationalrat* between 2002 and 2019, four sets of hypotheses were examined empirically that identify different selection criteria: expertise, MPs' prominence within the national party, external interest group influence, and gender.

The data provide the most evidence by far for the importance of the informational rationale in selecting MPs for committees: As a rule, MPs serve continuously in one and the same committee across legislative periods. That is, once MPs have become specialists in a particular policy area, they appear to have a relatively strong claim to stay on the committee. Besides committee seniority, an established policy focus also helps to explain "who gets what"—that is, the match between an MP´s developed expertise in specific policy areas and the committee´s areas of responsibilities is an important determinant of committee assignments. These two findings jointly suggest that the politics of committee assignment in Austria is mainly driven by informational concerns. This confirms the literature finding on committee assignment strategies across different European countries (Mickler 2022; Fernandes et al. 2022). Thus, committees can be best conceptualized as arenas for MPs to collect information relevant to policy issues, which is disseminated to their party and the chamber as a whole. Given the fact that parliamentary committees are free to reach out for expertise, the insight that selection procedures are information-driven is *not* trivial.

However, the politics of committee assignments in the Austrian *Nationalrat* can only be fully understood if the internal prestige hierarchy of committees is given due consideration. Besides informational advantages, the decision calculus of the PPG leaders considers the standing of MPs as well: Party members who have held top-tier jobs within the national party organization are less likely to be appointed to low-prestige committees than their rank-and-file colleagues. This informal allocation

rule turns out to be independent of the established policy profile. Another study´s finding that is only in line with some of the previous research (e.g., Pansardi/Vercesi 2017) is that female MPs are more likely to be appointed to low-prestige committees regardless of expertise and committee seniority. There exists, thus, a gender bias in the assignment system. Even if the crucial question of whether the bias is the product of self-selection by female legislators or whether it stems from marginalization by party leaders can only be clarified through future in-depth investigations, this study suggests the need for further gender-sensitive theoretical frameworks that are missing in the literature so far.

This study is best understood as a first endeavor to systematically shed light on the system of committee assignment in the Austrian *Nationalrat*. 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 chairs as important "watchdogs" in parliament.

6. References

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7. Appendix

A1. Committees considered

Harmonized Committee Labels	Committee	Legislative period
Agriculture_Forestry	Agriculture and Forestry	22 LT - 26 LP
Audit	Audit	22 LT - 26 LP
Budget	Budget	22 LT - 26 LP
Building_Housing	Building	22 LT - 25 LP
Building_Housing	Building and Housing	26 LP
Constitution	Constitution	22 LT - 26 LP
Consumer_Protection	Consumer Protection	23 LT - 26 LP
Culture	Culture	22 LT - 26 LP
Defense	Defense	22 LT - 26 LP
Economy	Economy	22 LT - 26 LP
Education	Education	22 LT - 26 LP
Employment_Social_Affairs	Employment and Social Affairs	22 LT - 26 LP
Environment	Environment	22 LT - 26 LP
Equal_Opportunities	Equal Opportunities	22 LT - 26 LP
Family_Youth	Family	22 LT - 25 LP
Family_Youth	Family and Youth	26 LP
Finance	Finance	22 LT - 26 LP
Foreign_Policy	Foreign Policy	22 LT - 26 LP
Health	Health	22 LT - 26 LP
Human_Rights	Human Rights	22 LT - 26 LP
Immunity	Immunity	22 LT - 26 LP
Incompatibility	Incompatibility	22 LT - 26 LP
Economy_Industry	Industry	22 LP
Economy_Industry	Economy and Industry	23 LT - 25 LP
Economy_Industry	Economy, Industry and Energy	26 LP
Internal_Affairs	Internal Affairs	22 LT - 26 LP
Justice	Justice	22 LT - 26 LP
Main_Committee	Main Committee	22 LT - 26 LP
Petitions	Petitions and Citizens´ Initiatives	22 LT - 26 LP
Research	Research, Innovation and Technology	22 LT - 25 LP
Research	Research, Innovation und Digitalization	26 LP
Rules_Procedure	Rules of Procedure	22 LT - 26 LP
Science	Science and Research	22 LP
Science	Science	23 LT - 26 LP
Sport	Sports Affairs	22 LT - 25 LP
Sport	Sport	26 LP
Tourism	Tourism	23 LT - 26 LP
Transport	Transport	22 LT - 26 LP