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The conditions of committee importance – drawing lessons from a qualitative case study of Finland

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ABSTRACT

Theories of parliamentary committees are often contradictory and recent studies have emphasised the need for theoretically-informed qualitative analyses of committee practices. In this paper we draw from 81 interviews with Finnish politicians, party employees, and parliamentary officials to analyse seven theoretical propositions. We show that contradictory theories to hold true under different conditions, allowing individual theories to both underestimate and overestimate committee importance if the interactions between factors are not considered. Based on the findings, we argue that theories have so far overlooked variation in the level of partisanship associated with individual bills. We identify factors that influence levels of partisanship and techniques to actively manage it. Finnish committees are controlled by political parties and the government coalition, but our analysis reveals that MPs have more freedom of maneuver than previously assumed. Overall, bargaining takes places during the committee stage but not so much within formal committee meetings.

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Introduction

How important are parliamentary committees in the policy-making process? The question may appear strange given the large amount of research on legislatures, but scholars have provided conflicting answers to it. Particularly the recent more quantitative approaches have examined the weight of committees through single indicators such as their ability to amend government draft bills. Perhaps the unfortunate side effect of the ‘quantitative turn’ is the

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neglect of more in-depth analyses based on the views of the members of parliament (MP) themselves. Indeed, how parties and MPs form their preferences and how they project them onto bill proposals is often treated as a black box in legislative research (Saalfeld & Strøm, 2014).

The state of competing theories of parliamentary committees paints a paradoxical picture. Early comparative scholarship noted that there is significant variance in their structure and operation, making committees in some countries institutionally more powerful than in others (Lees & Shaw, 1979; Longley & Davidson, 1998; Mattson & Strøm, 1995; Strøm, 1998). Researchers have argued that committee strength correlates with the overall significance of parliaments, because committees form a key outlet of parliamentary scrutiny by opposition parties and by coalition partners (André et al., 2016; Martin & Vanberg, 2011; Mattson & Strøm, 1995). However, comparative institutional scholarship has struggled to isolate the exact variables that explain legislative influence of committees (e.g. Mickler, 2022). Other recent work, particularly the volume edited by Siefken and Rommetvedt (2022; see also Gaines et al., 2019), suggests that the emphasis on formal institutional powers conceals the more nuanced ways that committees interact with other parts of the political system. Qualitative studies have, therefore, revealed weaknesses in countries with supposedly strong committees, and strength in countries whose committees were determined to be weak. Researchers have also engaged critically with the influential US congressional theories of committees, arguing that their insights need to be re-evaluated in the context of strong parties and coalition governments prevalent in Europe (Mickler, 2022; see also Shugart et al., 2021). Interview-based studies of committees (e.g. Fenno, 1973; Geddes, 2020) and in-depth studies of parliaments (e.g. Crewe, 2015; Ringe, 2010; Searing, 1994) have long existed in parallel to the game theory-inspired congressional theories, often painting a more complex picture of committees. To offer ways forward amidst such incongruence, this paper analyses the contradictions of committee importance through a theory-driven in-depth analysis of a single country: Finland. In comparative literature the committees of the *Eduskunta*, the unicameral national legislature of Finland, have been portrayed as relatively *strong*, having both formal powers to challenge government proposals and a track-record of amending bills. On the other hand, domestic studies taking a more holistic approach emphasise the *weakness* of the parliament in relation governmental powers and coalition dominance (Raunio & Wiberg, 2014; Wiberg, 2000). Qualitative studies of Finnish MPs recognise the dominance of government coalitions, but MPs themselves emphasise the importance of committees in parliamentary work (Pekonen, 2011; Raunio, 2022; Rinne, 2020). Finland thus exhibits the paradox that is typical to the committee literature more broadly. We use it as a case-study

to answer two research questions that elevate the findings to a broader theoretical relevance:

- (1) How can we explain contradictory findings on the importance of committees in Finland?
- (2) What theoretical insights for comparative committee literature can be derived from the Finnish case?

In empirical terms, the paper draws on 81 interviews with a diverse range of actors from ministers and party leaders to backbench MPs, parliamentary aides, party officials, and parliamentary clerks. This large set of interviews enables us to analyse the position of committees in the broader political system, and to explore aspects of committee work that are difficult to capture through quantitative or institutional studies. However, the obvious challenge for more in-depth case studies is their lack of generalisability, at least when the findings are not anchored in a solid theoretical framework. We do not claim to solve this problem indefinitely but try to move the debate forward by suggesting a framework that considers the interests of the government, the political parties, and individual MPs as well as the social practices of the committees.

The paper is structured as follows. The paper opens with a short description of the Finnish committee system. We then discuss our theoretical framework and assess past empirical evidence from Finland. We consolidate the theoretical and empirical literature into seven propositions that guide our empirical analysis. The empirical section starts by presenting the data, with the analysis structured in line with the propositions. The concluding section reflects on the results and suggests avenues for future research.

Parliamentary committees in Finland

Like the other Nordic legislatures, the *Eduskunta* is a ‘working parliament’ that emphasises committees as a primary vehicle of parliamentary work. According to Arter (1999, pp. 211–217) the three criteria of a working parliament are standing orders that lift committee work above plenary sessions, consensual working practices, and a work culture where MPs concentrate on legislative work instead of grand debates on the floor. *Eduskunta* decision-making is based on interaction between parliamentary groups and committees, with the latter also providing a key forum for deliberations and bargaining between political parties. The *Eduskunta* is undoubtedly an institutionalised legislature, and institutionalisation also applies to committees, regarding both their jurisdictions and internal procedures (Helander & Pekonen, 2007).

The formal powers of *Eduskunta* committees have been ranked on the strong side of parliamentary committees globally (André et al., 2016; Mattson & Strøm, 1995). As of 2022, there are 17 standing committees, with MPs typically holding seats in one or two committees and being alternate members in another committee(s). Constitution mandates only the minimum number of committee members, which is 11 for regular committees, but in 2022 regular committees had 17 members each. Procedurally, *Eduskunta* committees are vested with significant policy-influencing powers but cannot kill bills. Committee deliberations are a compulsory part of the legislative process, they precede the plenary stage, and committees must report to the plenary on all matters under consideration except private members' bills and motions. The parliament processes on average 250 government legislative proposals and 200 European Union (EU)-related items per year (Parliament of Finland). Up to half of the government proposals are passed with at least one amendment. Individual committees arrange regular meetings up to four times a week and the sessions are held behind closed doors. Assignments to committees and committee chairs are distributed between the parliamentary groups according to their respective seat shares. *Eduskunta* committees do not utilise rapporteurs. Committees reach decisions either by unanimity or by voting. Finnish parliamentary committees can thus be a powerful instrument of legislative influence.

Theoretical framework

In line with our research question, our theoretical framework considers both the strategies of rational political actors – the political parties and the individual MPs – and the social practices found in the parliament. Committees operate in differentiated policy and administrative contexts that influence their political position (Fenno, 1973), but our framework is designed to incorporate such national specificities. We assign primary importance to the goals of the parties and MPs but also argue that social norms affect the policy-making element of committee work. We formulate a series of propositions from committee literature and reflect their arguments against earlier evidence from Finland. Some propositions correspond to theories of committees, namely partisan theory, keeping-tabs theory, informational theory, and distributive theory.¹ Others are salient themes in committee literature, such as majority government dominance over committees, committees facilitating consensual negotiation, and diverging priorities of government and opposition MPs. We do not claim this list to be exhaustive, but it comprehensively addresses the major theoretical themes that inform comparative literature on committees. While an interview-based study is not suited for rejecting or confirming hypotheses, the propositions allow

us to organise empirical evidence so that our findings are more relevant for comparative analysis.

The incentives of political parties

Committees should be understood as one part in a network of political institutions and actors. Since the 1990s political parties have become a key theme in research on committees in both US and Europe, with special focus on committee assignments and the level of hierarchy between parliamentary party groups and committee members (Mickler, 2022). The importance of parties has long been emphasised in the Nordic parliaments (Arter, 1984), and in the US their importance has been argued in the partisan theory of congress (Cox & McCubbins, 2007). The relationship between parties, governmental positions, and backbench MPs allows a range of possible dynamics, which directly influence the effective opportunities of committees to influence policy beyond party-political channels (King, 1976).

In parliamentary regimes the government rules with the support of the majority of the parliament and parties represented it, but parties also shape government policies through parliamentary committees. Overall, the more the legislature's standing orders assign agenda-setting and amendment powers to the committees, the higher the incentives for political parties to control them. In cases of single-party or coalition majority governments, the independent effect of committees depends primarily on the level of unity within the parliamentary group(s) of the ruling party or parties. If it is low, the more likely it is that the committees shape government's initiatives. However, even then the key factor is lack of party unity, which results in committee amending the draft bills. The ability of opposition parties to influence committee work in turn depends on their seat share, internal cohesion, and on the unity of the government.

However, in some cases parties are incentivised to strengthen committees. A strand of literature has emerged on how in multi-party coalitions the individual parties in the cabinet use the committees for 'keeping tabs' on one another (André et al., 2016; Martin & Vanberg, 2011). In coalition settings committees can be used by cabinet parties to monitor legislation proposed by their coalition partners.

Past research on Finland has found that parties exercise tight control over parliamentary agenda and amendments to bills (Raunio & Wiberg, 2008). Furthermore, Finnish parliamentary party groups are cohesive and disciplined, making MPs primarily agents of their respective parties rather than independent actors. Researchers have, therefore, proposed a 'wholesale party-politicization' of Finnish committees (Arter, 1984, p. 201). Although the discretionary powers of committee chairs are limited, recent evidence suggests that government ministers do consider the policy preferences of

the committee chairs before submitting bill proposals (Lin & Yordanova, 2022). Furthermore, government programmes have become considerably longer and more detailed since the late 1990s and it is expected that the cabinet parties and their parliamentary groups respect them. However, Finnish cabinets tend to be ideologically diverse broad coalitions that control safe majorities in the *Eduskunta*. Political parties and membership in the majority governing coalition, therefore, place direct constraints on committee work.

Based on the above discussion, we formulate three propositions on party control in *Eduskunta*:

- (1) Committees matter less because MP behaviour is controlled by political parties.
- (2) The importance of the government programme reduces the influence of committees.
- (3) Through committees cabinet parties keep tabs on their coalition partners.

Having discussed the role of parties and coalition dynamics, we will next turn to the behaviour of MPs.

Behaviour of individual MPs

As argued in the introductory section, the institutional context of the *Eduskunta* only gets us so far. In addition to institutions, the perspective of the MPs themselves must also be considered. Our framework sees MPs driven by both calculative and social rationalities. Past research has shown that parliamentarians adopt different roles in their work, with the causes of this divergence attributed to pursuit of different rational strategies (Strøm, 1997) and varying motivations and goals (Searing, 1994). The goals of individual MPs may not always be in line with those of their parliamentary groups or party more generally, but particularly MPs of governing parties are constrained by the ‘whip’ and the norm of party discipline as discussed above. They should thus support government’s bills, especially when the initiatives are related to the key policy document (programme) of the cabinet. On the other hand, opposition MPs have a freer hand to pursue their own policy agendas.

Committees offer parliamentarians venues for specialisation, and MPs thus seek place in their favoured committees. Professional and educational background, parliamentary experience (seniority), and constituency characteristics primarily explain committee assignments. Specialisation is related to the classic argument that committees can be important regardless of their impact on policy and legislation due to their role in nurturing MPs into

political leaders (Fenno, 1973; Searing, 1994). But specialisation is not just about MPs' own agendas, it also facilitates stronger legislative scrutiny as the plenary floor is not suited for detailed discussion (Mattson & Strøm, 1995, pp. 250–251). Specialisation of individual politicians within legislative organisation has been emphasised in the informational theory of US Congressional committees (e.g. Gilligan & Krehbiel, 1990), but comparative evidence suggests that the electoral system has direct influence on whether political parties let MPs specialise according to district-based or collective needs of the party (Shugart et al., 2021).

Previous empirical research in Finland supports the specialisation thesis both on the level of individual MPs and political parties. Finnish MPs must prioritise their focus areas to succeed in their work (Aula & Konttinen, 2020; Mannevu, 2020). They aspire to be experts in their areas of specialisation (Rinne, 2020), and membership and coordination responsibilities in committees grants MPs influence within their own parliamentary group over that issue area (Mykkänen, 2010). The social arrangements of committees have been proposed to support political negotiation and consensual practices among MPs, which would increase committee importance (Sartori, 1987; Strøm, 1998). The closed Finnish committee meetings and the fragmented party system, with no party winning more than 20–25 per cent of the votes in recent elections, should, therefore, facilitate consensual governance and ideological convergence between political parties. Nevertheless, recent comparative evidence has challenged whether the argument about confidential negotiations is as prevalent as was thought in the early comparative scholarship (Siefken & Rommetvedt, 2022, p. 41).

The mixed view of consensual committees also applies to Finland: MPs emphasise that negotiations in committees strive to be *apolitical* rather than *partisan* (Pekonen, 2011; Raunio, 2022; Rinne, 2020), despite overwhelming scholarly evidence on parties playing the dominant role in the *Eduskunta* (Arter, 1984; Raunio & Wiberg, 2014). Evidence on partisan control and personal views of the MPs constitute both a theoretical and an empirical paradox for committee literature.

Committees have been proposed to have a distributive function, serving as venues for MPs to negotiate benefits for their constituents (for an overview, see Mickler, 2022, pp. 7–10). We conceptualise the distributional theory along the lines of Golden and Min (2013, pp. 76–77), who distinguish between programmatic distribution typical to political systems with proportional representation and district-based pork-barrelling typical to countries with single-member electoral districts. The distributional theory of committees has received lasting attention especially in the US, where it has been conceptualised as part of congressional behaviour and electoral campaigning (Shepsle & Weingast, 1994), but recent European studies (Mickler, 2022; Shugart et al., 2021) have proposed that a more party-

centred understanding of distributional interests is needed in the European context of parliamentarism and proportional representation.

In Finland the opportunities for committee pork-barrelling are limited. Earlier evidence suggests that MPs pursue programmatic party goals rather than district-based clientelist distributive interests in committees (e.g. Raunio & Wiberg, 2014). Furthermore, the formally strong budgetary power of the parliament is curtailed by government dominance (Mutanen et al., 2016) and MPs themselves do not believe that the parliament wields much budgetary power (Aula & Konttinen, 2020). We, therefore, do not expect committees to offer opportunities for distributive bargaining, the opportunities for district-based pork-barrelling being particularly weak, but we expect parties and individual MPs to still police their distributive interests in committees.

Based on the above evidence, we formulate four propositions on how individual MPs navigate committees in *Eduskunta*:

- (4) Committees are valued as venues for non-partisan negotiation.
- (5) Committees are important because they allow MPs to specialise.
- (6) Opposition MPs assign greater importance to committee work.
- (7) Committees do not offer opportunities for pork-barrelling but MPs still police party-based and personal distributive interests

Given that the propositions formulated from theories of party control are expected to restrict the behaviour of MPs, we are especially interested in how these four propositions interact with the constraints.

Data and methodology

Siefken and Rommetvedt (2022, p. 10) argue that researchers should ‘study the microcosm of political actors in committees’ due to the shortcomings of predicting committee significance through institutional comparisons. This perspective, which dates to Fenno (1973), has recently been taken up by the proponents of interpretative study of parliaments (Crewe, 2015; Geddes, 2020). Our methodological strategy parallels that of Rommetvedt’s (2022) in evaluating theoretical conundrums of committee work by using the experiences of MPs and analysing them as part of the wider institutional setting of parliamentary committees.

The primary data consists of two waves of semi-structured interviews with a total of 81 individuals taking part in the study. The data was originally collected and administered by the Finnish Innovation Fund SITRA as part of a research partnership with the Parliament of Finland, and access to data was granted to the researchers by Finnish Innovation Fund SITRA. Written consent to participate in the research project was received from all

participants. The first wave of 40 interviews was conducted in 2017 and focused on party leaders, ministers, leaders of parliamentary party groups, and party officials. The interviews concentrated on the broader dynamics of Finnish politics, especially the relationships between government, political parties, and the *Eduskunta*. The second wave of 41 interviews was conducted in 2019 and included a mixed set of backbench MPs, party employees, political aides, parliamentary officials, government officials, and experts frequently used in committee hearings. Total number of interviewees from different groups is reported in [Appendix 1](#). Questions in this second wave focused exclusively on the use of evidence and information in the parliament, with special emphasis on how committees and parliamentary party groups work with evidence.

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed using qualitative coding strategies appropriate for semi-structured elite interview data (Saldaña, 2021). Data was first coded according to parallel structural coding that assigned passages of text with thematic labels, focusing on different actors, arenas, and institutions of the Finnish political system. In the second stage a theoretically-informed coding strategy was used to focus on how MPs work in committees and how committees relate to other parts of the political system. Coding was done by a single author and intercoder reliability was, therefore, not tested. To protect the identity of the interviewees, it was agreed not to use any direct quotes from the interviews.

The data set offers several benefits. First, interviews are really the only way to examine the internal practices of committees in *Eduskunta* due their doors being closed to the public. Second, the diverse range of interviewees allows us to understand different perspectives to committee work and its context. Third, several interview-based studies of *Eduskunta* have been conducted in the past years, and hence we can triangulate our findings with other sources (e.g. Pekonen, 2011; Rinne, 2020).

Empirical findings

The empirical findings are organised according to the seven propositions discussed above. The interviews provided support for the propositions, but these confirmatory findings come into different light when considered as a whole. Specifically, our findings emphasise how proposition 4 (non-partisan negotiation) has theoretical implications for other propositions. We suggest that some of the paradoxes in our propositions and in the past literature can be explained with attention to how differences in partisanship associated with specific bills influence the behaviour of MPs, and how MPs use a variety of strategies to manage the level of partisanship. While such variance is not unknown in the past literature, the issue has received little systematic attention.

Party control and governmental control

As expected, the interviews provided strong support for proposition 1 (party control) and proposition 2 (governmental control). This tendency is embodied in a tacit principle that MPs, party employees, and civil servants alike refer to as ‘go by the book’ rule: the default option for all bills is that they will not be amended without a consensus between all coalition partners and the responsible ministers. The default position of government proposals is well-known in the Finnish context (Pekonen, 2011; Raunio & Wiberg, 2014). The evidence for governmental control was taken as a fact by interviewees from governing and opposition parties alike, and by current and past ministers. The immediate consequence of the ‘go by the book’ principle is that the government coalition indeed holds the reins over committees. Interviewees from opposition parties exhibited frustration over how little their work matters if the government is not ready to meet their arguments. Interviewees from governing parties also voiced similar views about their time in the opposition. Nevertheless, the interviews also suggest that the will of the cabinet and the will of the government coalition MPs are not always identical.

Based on the interviews, the opinion of the responsible minister appears to be imperative for amendments. Current and former ministers, and party employees with background from the government explained that once a bill has been approved by the cabinet and submitted to the parliament, the case is considered closed. It is the prerogative of the responsible minister to decide whether any possibility of amendments is opened. Several interviewees referred to situations where coalition MPs in the committee might be willing to amend a bill, but the minister vetoes them. In such cases the ensuing negotiation does not happen within the committee, but informally between the coalition members of the committee and the responsible minister. Moreover, support from other coalition partners must be secured before any successful negotiation with ministers can happen, because ministers have few incentives to consider amendments only supported by individual parties. Coalition MPs can, therefore, try overriding the will of the minister, but the success of such operations is not related to the formal powers of the committee as much to the power dynamic within and between governmental parties. The fate of the amendments is thus largely determined *outside* committees. Anecdotal evidence from the interviews suggests it is possible for coalition MPs to first propose amendments and later vote against their own proposals if they have been vetoed in informal negotiations.

These results echo evidence from Norwegian *Storting*, where committees were supposed to be important venues of negotiation due to frequent minority governments, but in practice negotiations happen rarely if ever in committee meetings themselves (Rommetvedt, 2022). Similarly, in Germany the

parliamentary groups rather than committee meetings have been described as the final hurdle of position formation in the parliament (Mickler, 2017). The findings, therefore, confirm for Finland the broader trend identified in Siefken and Rommetvedt (2022) that bargaining takes places during the committee stage but not so much within formal committee meetings. The details of such informal negotiation, however, were not further clarified in the interviews beyond committee members holding informal meetings between themselves and exchanging messages.

In the interviews MPs recognised that bills vary in how partisan they are. The interviewees would use the Finnish expression that there is variance in how ‘political’ issues were. Similar variance has been identified in past studies in Finland as well (Pekonen, 2011; Rinne, 2020) but has not been given theoretical attention. In international literature this notion of ‘political’ best responds to partisanship or party-politicisation. The interviewees of our study conceptualised bills on a continuum from highly partisan, thus subject to heightened debate and close policing of government programme, to politically trivial, thus subject to more discretion by committees. Furthermore, variance appears not to be uniform across time, policy fields, or political parties. Because the level of partisanship varies, it follows that there is also variance in how much leeway individual MPs have vis-à-vis the government programme. However, the interviews also suggest that membership in the government coalition can place MPs in a superior position to leverage this leeway. While some issues can be less partisan, government MPs still form the majority voting bloc within committees, which, acts as the primary unit of bargaining for government coalition parties and can veto amendments. The evidence suggests that siding with opposition against the will of coalition partners is always considered a breach of coalition norms and evokes a party-political response. A non-partisan dynamic can, therefore, occur only when government parties together allow it.

In sum, party and government control is the default option that can always be imposed on committees, but this control is not always exercised, especially if the party does not have clear goals regarding the issue. When partisanship is less pronounced or altogether absent, a different and more complex dynamic unfolds. Each of the following subsection will discuss how the propositions derived from theory interact with varying partisanship.

Keeping tabs on coalition partners

Regarding proposition 3 (keeping tabs on coalition partners), the interviews provided clear support. In line with the propositions 1 and 2, the interviewees explained that the task of committee members from government coalition parties is to ensure the smooth passage of government proposals, which includes the duty to police coalition partners. Interviews with

parliamentary party group leaders and aides suggested that monitoring partisan interests is a key responsibility of committee members. If problems are detected, coalition parties prepare their response and confront their counterparts. If partisan interests within the coalition are evoked as a veto, amendments would require a costly escalation into coalition bargaining between party leaders.

The variability in levels of partisanship influences how tabs are kept. If partisan interests were not policed in the cabinet, the task is delegated to committee members. If a bill is not of partisan interest, there is little need for keeping tabs. The keeping tabs element thus also means that committee members must constantly *determine* what are their partisan interests in any given case, which forces MPs to allocate their resources in the service of the wider partisan goals of their party. Less partisan issues offer MPs more leeway to pursue their own goals rather than party interests. Interviewees from political staff and parliamentary group leaders suggested that it is a sign of a skilled committee member to know when the rest of the parliamentary group needs to be informed, and most such decisions are expected to be made independently. According to the interviews, skilled MPs at times vigorously defend the party line, but at other times create opportunities for non-partisanship by knowing and managing the red lines of their party.

As suggested by earlier evidence from Finland (Arter, 1984; Mykkänen, 2010) and Germany (Mickler, 2017), committee members can thus have direct influence within their parliamentary group over their respective policy areas by managing the level of disclosure and leading position formation. This happens especially when a party does not yet have a clear position on an issue when a bill arrives to a committee, which is more common for opposition than government parties. Regarding what Ringe (2010) has proposed about preference formation in European Parliament being endogenous to committees, parliamentary group positions appear to be endogenous to Finnish committees only under special circumstances. For opposition MPs, if partisan interests are clear and perhaps formulated in party programmes, their role of the party is greater, but in other cases the goals are too vague to give direct guidance on a bill, leading to the committee member formulating the position. For governmental parties the government bill appears to be the default option unless MPs specifically perceive or facilitate the issue to be non-partisan.

In theoretical terms, the findings suggest that keeping tabs is a more complex process than was initially proposed by Martin and Vanberg as a response to imperfect information between coalition partners. In the light of our results, keeping tabs is a negotiation between the coalition agreement, will of the ministers, and goals of individual MPs, which all play out against the variance in partisanship associated with the proposed bills. The study was unable to find either supporting or dissenting evidence on Lin and

Yordanova's (2022) findings of strategic bill referral based on committee chair policy preferences. However, the interviewees noted the frequent practice of referring bills to *several* committees if they touch on their remits, which we interpret as a factor that could significantly lower the benefits gained from possible strategic bill referral.

Committees as venues of nonpartisan negotiation

Findings related to proposition 4 (non-partisan negotiation) elaborate on the above discussion on variation in partisanship, confirming that MPs value non-partisanship but disagree on what non-partisanship means in committees. Interviews exhibited several ways of framing non-partisanship, but only some of them offer active opportunities for MPs to manage partisanship.

Some interviewees would identify structural factors that facilitate non-partisanship. For example, closed doors of Finnish committees could be juxtaposed with open plenaries, arguing that confidential meetings prevent partisan altercations that are performed for the media. In this framing partisanship is understood in terms of rhetoric and decorum. On the other hand, specific areas of policy were perceived to have less partisan interests, such as military and foreign policy, or the deliberations in the Committee for the Future (see also Raunio, 2022).

More interesting for our argument is that interviewees identified expertise and evidence as facilitators of non-partisanship. Interviewees took time to reflect on how Finnish policymaking was first and foremost a process driven by expertise, and partisanship was involved in making sense and comparing different sources of expertise. Moreover, all interviewees regardless of their background underscored that government proposals and expert hearings form the backbone of committee work. Some interviewees even suggested that hearings alone determine the impact of committees, because evidence can reveal shortcomings that force government bills to be amended, whereas partisanship alone rarely achieves this. All interviewees, including ministers and governmental sources, considered it important that committees gather their own evidence that can improve bills, but in practice government parties have the power to decide whether evidence will 'improve' the bill that the government has already accepted. In the end, evidence in committees is presented only at the end of the policymaking process, and the government proposal already includes a negotiated balance of evidence and partisanship. The lower the partisan importance of the issue at hand, the higher the chances are for opposition and backbench MPs to leverage the evidence against the evidence already presented by the government. On the other hand, similar opportunities can emerge when a particular bill is divisive within the government coalition, but in such cases the mechanisms are partisan rather than non-partisan. The conditions of when

evidence can be successfully leveraged is, therefore, dependent on the contingent relationships between parties, ministers, and backbenchers (King, 1976), which set the stage for work within committees.

The non-partisan objectivity associated with committee hearings was contradicted by MPs and party employees explaining their own close involvement in choosing who committees should hear. Some interviewees directly confronted the idea that committee hearings were even remotely impartial, pointing out that many experts used in committees were from interest groups or experts close to specific parties. Most interviewees held that expertise was the most important point in hearings, although expertise cannot be fully divorced from partisan interest. Making sense of the different sources of expertise was described as a basic skill for MPs. Evidence in committees was, therefore, perceived strategically and with a contingent relationship with partisanship.

The interviews also suggest a non-partisan committee dynamic that is driven by the *origin* of a bill: in some cases interviewees felt that committees are not pushing back against the will of the government coalition, but the will of the bureaucratic machinery and government stakeholders. Ministers were eager to point out that they often had difficulty controlling the bureaucracy and could only concentrate their partisan efforts on a small number of bills. This leaves many bills to be products of the civil service together with key stakeholders, although all government bills are formally endorsed by the cabinet. The interviewees from different backgrounds suggested that civil servants and stakeholders have pet projects and agendas that surface regardless of which parties form the government coalition. In some cases, committees, therefore, push back against bureaucratic and stakeholder interests that have been adopted by the coalition rather than bills reflecting the partisan interests of the coalition. We interpret that in these cases, the party-political element of partisanship fades to the background, facilitating committee practices that grant more leeway for non-partisan negotiation between committee members.

Our findings underscore the idea of expertise-driven committee work where partisanship is ever-present but partially suspended with the focus on evidence. Perceived partisanship of individual issues can be influenced with strategic use of evidence, but structural factors such as field of policy, intra- and inter-party relationships, and the basic juxtaposition of closed committees to open plenaries all influence how partisanship is perceived in committees. Empirically the findings elaborate on Seo's (2017) argument that Finnish committees are inward-focused arenas for MPs, government experts, and interest groups, with citizen perspective playing little role in them. Theoretically they elaborate on Geddes (2020) arguments on the constructed and managed nature of evidence and consensus in the UK parliamentary committees.

Specialisation of MPs

Proposition 5 was found to have moderate support with mixed views on how specialisation matters. Interviewed MPs would stress the importance of choosing what to concentrate on, given the chaotic nature of parliamentary life and the difficulty of achieving results. Often the priorities are determined by committee assignments, which are not necessarily determined by personal interests of the MPs. It is important to note that Finnish MPs can be members in up to three committees with multiple weekly meetings and follow yet more committees as alternate members. It is simply impossible for MPs to specialise in all committees they are assigned to. MPs can use their personal networks and expertise to acquire a position in specific committees, but in many cases the networks and expertise is built *through* the work in committees. Nevertheless, the interviewees stated that professionalism and expertise were valuable currency in committees because they help MPs sway each other's opinions and reduce the overt partisanship of political work. Appearing as an expert in a chosen policy area is thus related to the idea of committees as non-partisan spaces driven by expertise.

On the other hand, more experienced MPs interviewed for the study would underscore that while expertise is important, political careers cannot be built on specialised knowledge alone. These experienced MPs pointed out how parties routinely circulate MPs between committees, forcing them to adapt to new policy environments, a dynamic that has been formally confirmed in statistical analyses (Seo, 2017). Politicians in leadership positions would also stress how their time is so scarce that they can only concentrate on the immediate priorities of the party and public debate.

The perspective of specialisation was put into a different light in the interviews with party employees and aides. Parliamentary group aides stressed that parties and MPs operated on a strict division of labour related to committee assignments. Each committee has designated MPs responsible for coordinating the positions of their parties and keeping the parliamentary group informed about committee affairs (for similar cases in the Nordics, see Arter, 1984). In this view, specialisation was not framed as a question of knowledge, but as division of labour dictated by parties and committee remits. With 17 committees in the *Eduskunta* and many MPs having multiple memberships, MPs do not always become committee members or coordinators or members out of desire but out of duty.

Specialisation seems, therefore, to be both a short-term strategy of prioritising scarce resources within political parties and a long-term strategy of MPs becoming recognised experts. While specialisation helps MPs to play down partisanship of their work, it also serves the needs of the parliamentary group. On the other hand, the findings elaborate on earlier findings on legislative roles (Crewe, 2015; Geddes, 2020; Searing, 1994; Strøm, 1997):

personal benefits of specialisation can be limited even when committees are a central organising force in the parliament. Political parties can also *impose* specialisation on MPs in ways that do not align with their personal goals. The findings, therefore, offer nuance to the expertise model of party committee assignments (Shugart et al., 2021), suggesting that specialisation is not solely determined by prior expertise but can also develop during legislative careers as part of the collective needs of a party.

Opposition MPs assign greater importance to committee work

Proposition 6 (importance of committees to opposition MPs) gained direct support: interviewees frequently pointed out that committees form one of the few ways that opposition parties can scrutinise and challenge government policy. However, this finding should be understood primarily in relative rather than absolute terms. In absolute terms, government coalition MPs have more power in committees due to their default majority status, but they have even more power via their direct access to governmental policy formation. Committees are thus more important to opposition MPs, for whom it offers a channel to scrutinise government policies, but who have less power in them.

Interviewees suggested that committees served an organisational purpose for opposition parties: while opposition parties have party programmes and past positions to draw on, a detailed understanding of the bills was only made possible through committee work. Opposition parties have little knowledge of when bills will be submitted to the parliament and what they might contain. The high volume of domestic and EU bills puts pressure on committees, and especially the EU bills are often submitted to the *Eduskunta* without prior public debate or wider knowledge in the parties. Committee-based scrutiny and hearings are, therefore, one of the only ways of determining what the interests of the opposition parties are in any specific case. Opposition parties are thus incentivised to organise their work around committees and to empower committee members to craft alternatives to government bills. This scenario was already discussed regarding the keeping-tabs proposition.

Distributional interests

The findings confirmed proposition 7: interviews offered no evidence that parliamentary committees would be important for district-based pork-barrelling. Party-based distributive goals played a more important role, but the interviews did not suggest that actual financial gain could be negotiated in committees. Distributional interests were discussed in more abstract ways of championing specific socioeconomic causes and siding with

corporatist interest groups. Because partisan interests alone rarely succeed in amending bills in committees, the government coalition bargaining seems to be a far more important arena for distributional politics than committees.

Based on the interviews, district-based pork-barrelling was restricted to the so called ‘Christmas Gift Money’: every year government reserves part of state budget for solely parliamentary discretion. According to the interviewees, only 40 million euros was reserved for such discretion at the time of the interviews, a fraction of a percent of the total state budget. Furthermore, interviewees discussed the ‘Christmas Gift Money’ mostly as a negative example of how parliament wastes time haggling over trifles with no real impact on financial policy.

The findings challenge the idea that distributional theory of committees developed to study the US Congress applies to *Eduskunta*. Although committees are arenas where parties and MPs *voice* distributional interests, their role in distributive bargaining is marginal in comparison to bargaining within the government coalition. Furthermore, district-based financial interests seemed to play little role in the committees. The findings corroborate the lack of evidence for the congressional distributive theory in multi-party systems like Germany and the Netherlands (Mickler, 2022). Distributional theory that emphasises pork-barrelling, therefore, seems to be a poor starting point in countries with proportional representation. On the other hand, if the distributional theory is diluted to mean just any kind of distributive interests, we suggest that it is better interpreted as a special case of partisan theory in the context of strong programmatic parties.

Concluding discussion

The goal of the paper was to explore the contradictory evidence on parliamentary committees in Finland and to derive theoretical insights for comparative literature. The findings offer steps towards more theoretically-informed analysis of internal committee practices as has been called, for example, by Saalfeld and Strøm (2014) and Siefken and Rommetvedt (2022).

Based on the analysis we propose that contradictions can be explained when researchers study the interaction between theories of committee work rather than treating them as exclusive and alternative explanations. The importance of committees is not determined solely by institutional factors or the role of political parties, but neither is it appropriate to only frame committees as arenas for specialisation and self-serving social practices. What our integrative study of committees in Finland shows is that individual theories can be mutually contradictory when they are understood as competing explanations but come to different light when their conditions

of applicability are analysed in relation to each other. The study, therefore, offers new evidence on the conditions of when and how specific theories of committee work apply to multi-party parliamentary systems like Finland. Rich qualitative data collected in this study offers ways forward into identifying these conditions, and, therefore, explaining why committees do not always behave the way we expect them to do in the light of theories. From a theoretical perspective, Finnish committees are controlled by political parties and the government coalition, but their dominance is far from complete. The apparent paradoxes of why Finnish MPs simultaneously lament and celebrate committee work, or why committees are viewed as both partisan and *nonpartisan*, can be explained by all the perspectives being true but under different conditions.

Our findings confirmed that information and expertise play an important role in committees, but their role goes beyond what has been proposed in the informational theory of committee organisation. Information has many purposes: it is a strategy of managing partisanship, a resource structuring committee scrutiny, an organising principle in parliamentary party groups, and a strategy of specialisation among MPs. While the informational theory of US congressional committees touches on several of these aspects, our study shows that the conceptual mechanism of each of these aspects is fundamentally different. The findings, therefore, suggest that there is not just one, but several possible aspects of information in committees. Similar findings have been reported by Geddes (2020) and researchers should further elaborate on different theoretical mechanisms that information can have in parliamentary committees.

Our findings also indicate that variance in the party-politicisation of individual policies deserves more attention in committee literature, because such variance seems to explain at least some of the contradictions regarding party and government dominance. Variance in intra- inter-, and cross-party dynamics in committees was already identified by King (1976) but remains under-theorised. It is an essential skill of Finnish MPs to at times pursue partisan interests, but at other times facilitate and exploit their absence. Hedging partisanship allows MPs to transcend the institutional and party-political restrictions of committee work. Furthermore, expertise and evidence are key instruments of managing the variance in partisanship. Interviewees were keenly aware of the political aspects of expertise, but also saw expertise as a primary way of transcending party-political interests which they see as a key requirement of making committees into a productive arena of parliamentary decision making. The level of partisanship is also actively managed for a variety of political goals. In comparison to the two-party dominance of the US Congress or Westminster parliaments, Finnish multi-party governments are diverse coalitions, making it important for parties and individual committee members to exploit opportunities not mandated in the

government programme or party programmes. As we have discussed, committees often process bills and items that do not originate from partisan interests within the government coalition, but rather from other sources such as bureaucracy or the EU. All these factors play down partisanship, warranting the paradoxical position of committees as both partisan and nonpartisan institutions.

It was beyond the scope of this paper to assess how bills fall into the continuum from partisan to non-partisan issues and how this might correlate with other variables. Developing a conceptual framework for understanding non-partisanship and obtaining empirical data should be a priority in future research. Our findings suggest a number of key considerations for this work. First, future studies should assess *how common* it is for parties to not have or not enforce partisan preferences. Robust empirical evidence suggests that party dominance is the default option in committee work, and yet our findings also suggest that exceptions might be more common than has earlier been thought (see also Ringe, 2010). Second, analysis of partisan variation should concentrate on *how committees operate when party-politicisation is low or altogether absent*. Party control of committees is already well-understood in legislative research, and it is, therefore, the lower end of partisanship that requires further elaboration. Third, future research should explore both *intra-party and external factors* that influence variation in party-politicisation. Intra-party factors might include party policy platform, MPs' preferences, parliamentary group size and cohesion, and membership in government or opposition. On the other hand, variables external to parties like field of policy, origins of a bill, issue salience in public debate, expert opinion, and interest group preferences are also likely to be factors. Fourth, future studies should elaborate on *how committees and MPs can themselves facilitate absence of partisanship*. Our findings show that MPs can have multiple reasons and strategies to play down partisanship, but further work is required to understand the extent and effect of such practices.

Note

1. The paper does not address bicameral conflict theory, which is identified by Mickler (2022) as a key theory, but is inapplicable to the unicameral *Eduskunta*.

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Appendix. Composition of the interviews

All interviewee categories were assigned at the time of the interview. Positions held prior to current position are not reported. In case of multiple categories being relevant, the most distinguishing group membership was assigned.

Category	Notes	Quantity
Chairperson of the Party	All members of the category were also MPs. Some interviewees in the category were simultaneously acting as ministers.	5
Minister	Interviewees serving as government ministers at the time of the interviews. All members of the category were also MPs.	6
Chairperson of the Parliamentary Party Group	All members of the category were also MPs.	8
Member of the Parliament	Interviewees who were MPs but did not hold higher offices within party or government	7
Secretary General of the Party	The role is managerial and no members of the category were current MPs.	4
Parliamentary Party Group employee	Includes both managerial personnel and policy specialists.	13
Parliamentary aide	All parliamentary aides are appointed politically by MPs but funded by the parliament.	8

(Continued)

Continued.

Category	Notes	Quantity
Parliamentary clerk	Primarily committee clerks	15
Government civil servant		10
Other	Category includes people of special interest who at the time of interviews had retired from active politics, but had earlier held high offices.	5
		81