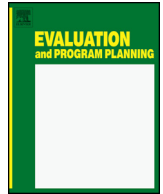




Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](#)

Evaluation and Program Planning

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/evalprogplan



Parliamentarians' strategies for policy evaluations

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 23 May 2016
Received in revised form 14 January 2017
Accepted 4 February 2017
Available online xxx

Keywords:

Policy evaluation
Parliament
Parliamentary request
Case study

ABSTRACT

This article considers the question of which strategies parliamentarians pursue when they use parliamentary requests demanding an evaluation. In order to be re-elected or to achieve desirable policies, parliamentarians can either appeal to their constituency or to their party by adopting legislative roles. The study is based on twelve case studies of parliamentary requests from the Swiss parliament between 2010 and 2014. The analysis shows that parliamentarians of legislative committees submit parliamentary requests to oppose a policy, while parliamentarians of oversight committees submit parliamentary requests to obtain information on specific policies. On the contrary, the party membership of the responsible Federal Councillor does not influence the strategy. These findings suggest that parliamentarians use evaluations as an instrument rather than using the actual findings. This conclusion might be very relevant to understand how evaluations are used in the political process.

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1. Introduction

Policy evaluations fulfill an important function within contemporary democracies. They assess a public policy in regard to its effectiveness, efficiency or fitness for purpose. This information is not only potentially interesting for the public administration, but also for other institutions. Since members of parliament (MPs) have to make many decisions about unfamiliar issues, evaluation studies may provide them with information on specific policies (Weiss, 1999). Moreover, recent studies show that MPs use evaluations for accountability (Bundi, 2016; Speer, Pattyn, & De Peuter, 2015) as well as agenda-setting (Zwaan, van Voorst, & Mastebroek, 2016) by demanding evaluations with parliamentary requests.

In general, parliamentary requests allow MPs to initiate new policies or to receive information about them, which is why they belong to the most powerful tools of parliaments (Pelizzo & Stapenhurst, 2012). On the one hand, some studies argue that parliamentary requests allow parliaments to align the government's actions with their own voters' preferences, as they enable MPs to set the agenda (Bailer, 2011; Martin, 2011a; Raunio, 1996). On the other hand, authors state that parliamentary requests are a useful tool to control the government, since they provide

information on how the government implements policies (Proksch & Slapin, 2011; Russo & Wiberg, 2010). Policy evaluations meet both needs for MPs, since they provide information for legislation and oversight. However, previous literature fails to explain which purposes MPs have when they submit a parliamentary request to demand an evaluation. Thus, this article aims to look behind the scenes of parliamentary procedures in order to understand the strategies of policy evaluations in parliaments.

This article considers the question of which strategies MPs pursue when they use parliamentary requests to demand an evaluation. The paper argues that MPs are mainly driven by the aspiration of reelection and seeking desirable policies. In order to achieve these goals, they can make use of legislative roles: Either they appeal to their constituency or they promote their party so that the party leadership rewards them. Previous studies suggest that MPs are mainly influenced by two organizational allocations: Committee and party group membership (Bowler & Farrell, 1995; McElroy & Benoit, 2007). Depending on their allocation, MPs pursue different strategies with policy evaluations.

Empirically, the analysis is based on a comparative case study approach (Yin, 2014). In doing so, the study investigates twelve parliamentary requests, which were submitted between 2010 and 2014 at the federal level in Switzerland. Evaluations are particularly well established in the Swiss political system and are highly institutionalized in the parliament compared to other democracies (Jacob, Speer, & Furubo, 2015). Furthermore, Switzerland is a least likely case for the observation of legislative roles. On the one hand, the Swiss parliament has weak oversight

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.evalprogplan.2017.02.003>
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capacities and only knows a limited opposition system due to the consensual character of the Swiss democracy (Vatter, 2014). On the other hand, parliamentary groups still tend to have a powerless position within the parliament, which can be observed by their low voting unity (Bailer & Bütikofer, 2015; Coman, 2015).

The study shows that MPs indeed pursue different strategies with evaluations. The committee membership has a considerable effect on the strategy of an evaluation. While MPs from oversight committees seek information with evaluations, MPs from legislative committees demand evaluations in order to oppose a policy. On the contrary, the party group membership does not influence the evaluation strategy. These findings provide important implications for research on evaluations. Not only does the study contribute to research on the demand of evaluation, which has rarely been investigated so far, but it also illustrates that MPs pursue different strategies with evaluations. Evaluations might be demanded for social betterment, but they are also requested for the pursuit of personal goals (e.g. reelection, policy outcomes). This conclusion indicates that we have to change our understanding of the role of evaluation in the decision-making process. MPs use evaluations as an instrument rather than the findings of evaluations.

The article is structured as follows: Section 2 introduces the theoretical framework and the hypotheses. Section 3 discusses the research design and case selection. Section 4 presents the findings of the case studies, which are discussed in Section 5. Section 6 concludes the results and discusses the implications of the findings for research on evaluation.

2. Theory

Strategic behavior is an important component for MPs, as several studies have illustrated the importance of strategic voting in parliaments (Bütikofer & Hug, 2015; Clinton & Meirowitz, 2004; Farquharson, 1969; Hug, Wegmann, & Wüest, 2015; Rasch, 2014). Moreover, MPs also express their strategic nature by the use of parliamentary requests (Bowler, 2010; Kellermann, 2013, 2016; Martin 2011b; Martin & Rozenberg, 2014). In doing so, MPs mainly have two motives for their activities. On the one hand, they may submit parliamentary requests to attract attention from the public, since they are influenced by their electoral vulnerability. This argumentation is based on the assumption that MPs have incentives to maximize their votes in order to succeed in elections (Norris, 2004, pp. 98–101). On the other hand, they might propose parliamentary requests in order to influence the political agenda. As a consequence, they do not primarily aim to get reelected, but rather focus on their desirable policy outcomes (Müller & Strøm, 1999).

Both interpretations of the motives are based on a rational choice perspective. However, rational choice institutionalism differs across the context. Shepsle (2006, pp. 28–30) highlights the importance of rational choice for structured institutions. A parliament is usually a structured institution, in which MPs are elected by their voters and thus are an agent of their constituency. By rule, MPs are authorized to act on behalf of their voters during their election. Since the voters delegate their policy preferences to the MPs, the latter are also accountable towards them (Müller, Bergman, & Strøm, 2006).¹ Therefore, MPs spend a considerable amount of time and effort to appeal to their voters, by responding to their mail or attending public events (Giger & Lanz, 2016;

¹ However, André, Depauw, and Shugart (2014, p. 234) argues that voters need to have the possibility to monitor the MPs' actions, and also to sanction or reward them for their performance.

Kellermann, 2016). Also, they focus on the topics in the parliamentary arena from which they believe that voters will reward them in the next election. In doing so, MPs can use parliamentary requests in order to propose a political project, which is favorable to their voters (André et al., 2014). Moreover, it can lead to additional publicity for the author, since media frequently reports about parliamentary requests (Van Santen, Helfer, & van Aelst, 2015).

Although electoral vulnerability is doubtless an important trigger, MPs might also be motivated by policy outcomes. This idea is based on the idea that MPs are not only accountable to their constituency, but also to their own party. Katz (2014) recently showed that a MP has multiple principals. In order to get reelected, MPs do not only have to care about their voters, but also about their party, since the party leadership is often responsible for nominating the candidates. They also have the power to obstruct a MP from the election, if the MP does not seem favorable for them. Albeit parties do also care about electoral success, they care a little less about individual MP success, but more about policy and political competition (Benoit & Laver, 2006). In order to enforce their policies' preferences, parties depend on their internal cohesion. According to Kam (2014, p. 399), party cohesion is the degree to which members of the same party work together in order to pursue the party's goal. Most prominently, MPs from the same party should coordinate their votes to pass the policy (Kam, 2009; Krehbiel, 2000). As a consequence, parliamentary questions should not request an issue, which contradicts the party's opinion or is detrimental to it. More important, parliamentary questions could lead government members of the same party to inconveniences, if the request reveals a governmental failure (Jensen, Proksch, & Slapin, 2013).

Subsequently, MPs do not only have to consider their constituency, but also their party. Since the voters and the party are the collective principal that chooses an MP to act as its agent, they are vulnerable to the usual kinds of agency problems: Adverse selection and moral hazard (Strøm, 2000, p. 270). In doing so, voters, and partly also the party both face problems of hidden information and action, since they cannot be fully informed about the politicians who plan to run for office. Hence, both relationships entail a form of delegation, thus make the MPs accountable towards their voters. Since both have a strong influence on how MPs behave in the parliament, MPs sometimes face a dilemma between what is in the interest of their own party and what is important for their voters (Carey & Shugart, 1995). The crucial point for MPs is to satisfy both interests at the same time.

Legislative roles² help MPs to satisfy both voters and party leaders. Various studies emphasize the different roles amongst MPs (Andreweg, 1997, 2014; Scully & Farrell, 2003; Wahlke, 1962). Strøm (2012) argues that MPs pursue different goals depending on their situation in the parliament. In doing so, their situation is often influenced by their organizational allocation. In most parliaments, MPs are divided into legislative and oversight committees in addition to their membership in their party groups. According to Saalfeld (2000), these memberships have a high influence on how MPs interpret their role in the parliament. While members of oversight committees tend to focus on the control of the administration, members of the legislative committees seek to promote themselves by policy advocacy. Moreover, parties delegate their members into committees urging them to represent their party's preference in the legislative committees.

In Switzerland, MPs might use parliamentary requests in order to assume such legislative roles. Parliamentary requests are

² In literature, the term *legislative roles* is often used to describe the behavioral patterns or routines that MPs adopt. However, apart from legislative aspects, these patterns can also include oversight goals (Strøm, 1997).

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