



Legislative policy-making authority, party system size, and party system nationalization



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ABSTRACT

How does the internal organization of legislatures shape the legislative party system? We argue that the size and nationalization of the national legislative party system is related to the size of the legislative prize—namely, to how the legislature's internal rules and structures concentrate policy-making authority in the hands of the largest party. To test this argument, we draw on studies of legislative organization to develop a measure of the concentration of legislative policy-making authority. Using two time series cross sectional data sets of post-war elections, one of advanced industrial democracies with pure parliamentary systems and one of all advanced industrial democracies, we find support for our argument and note that the effect of internal legislative structures is larger than that of the electoral system. We also show that the incentives to aggregate and consolidate the legislative party system are generally stronger where there are few external constraints on the legislature.

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Which factors shape the size and nationalization of the legislative party system in democracies? In this paper, we focus on the ways in which the internal organization of the legislature affects these two key dimensions of the party system. We build on a rich tradition that links political institutions to the number of parties and the degree of party system nationalization. The most studied institution in this regard has been the electoral system. A number of scholars have investigated the link between electoral systems and the number of parties (e.g. Duverger, 1963; Cox, 1997).¹ However, in recent years, a number of studies have turned their lenses on political institutions outside of the electoral system, exploring the ways in which these additional institutions shape the party system (e.g., Shugart and Carey, 1992; Chhibber and Kollman, 1998, 2004; Golder, 2006; Hicken and Stoll, 2008, 2011; Hicken, 2009; Samuels and Shugart, 2010; Elgie et al., 2013; Stoll, 2013, 2015).

A focus shared by many of these studies is an interest in the

degree to which power is concentrated within the political system. For example, one substantial portion of the literature considers the distribution of authority between national and subnational governments—vertical centralization. Another set of scholars is interested in the degree to which political power is concentrated in the hands of a popularly elected chief executive (i.e., president) vis-à-vis other national level institutional actors—horizontal centralization. The general conclusion of this work is that the higher the concentration of power, the stronger the incentives of voters and candidates to coordinate under a shared party banner in a bid to capture that prize. We concur with (and have contributed to) much of this literature. However, we acknowledge one shortcoming in the existing literature: namely, that national level political institutions besides the executive have largely been overlooked—obscuring interesting variation in other national government institutions that might also shape the electoral incentives that actors face, and thereby the party system.

In this paper, we turn our lens upon a political institutional variable that has thus far received little attention: the internal organization of the national legislature itself. The question this paper asks is: how does the way in which power is concentrated or dispersed *within the legislature* affect the size and nationalization of the legislative party system? Specifically, we explore the ways in which the legislature's internal rules and structures affect the distribution of policy-making authority and the perks of office. Even

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¹ A smaller number of studies have examined the ways in which electoral systems shape nationalization—see, for example, Simón (2013), Morgenstern and Potthoff (2004), Lublin (2017), and de Miguel (2017).

more specifically, we ask: to what extent is this authority concentrated in the hands of the largest (governing or majority) party, versus being shared between this party and smaller opposition parties? In other words, this paper asks how the size of the legislative prize shapes the party system.

Our answer to this question is that, holding constant the distribution of power between the legislative and executive branches, the incentives for aggregating across districts in a bid to create large, national parties are strongest where the size of the legislative prize is large. Specifically, where the legislature's internal rules and structure concentrate policy-making authority and perks in the hands of the largest party, we should see higher levels of aggregation and less fragmentation in legislative party systems. We also argue that the incentives to aggregate and consolidate the legislative party system are stronger where there are few external constraints on the legislature.

To test this argument, we draw on a recent study of legislative organization to develop an original measure of our key independent variable, the internal distribution of legislative policy-making authority. Using two time series cross sectional data sets of postwar elections, one of advanced industrial democracies with pure parliamentary systems and one of all advanced industrial democracies, we find support for our argument that both the nationalization and fragmentation of the national legislative party system are related to the concentration of policy-making authority within the legislature, as well as to some external constraints on the legislature's authority. Of particular importance, we also find that our internal legislative centralization variable has a larger substantive impact than the electoral system does.

1. Literature and theory

In the last two decades, political scientists have begun studying the relationship between the national level party system and political institutions besides the electoral system. Of particular note, a growing literature focuses upon how the system of government either concentrates or disperses policy-making authority. This literature has two branches.

The first branch studies the vertical relationship between different levels of government. The classic work is by Chhibber and Kollman (1998, 2004), who found that the vertical centralization of policy-making authority in the national level of government vis-à-vis sub-national levels induces greater electoral coordination across electoral districts (better aggregation or linkage). This in turn leads to fewer, more nationalized political parties, resulting in more nationalized and less fragmented legislative party systems.²

The second branch studies the relationship between political institutional actors within the national level of government. A number of scholars ranging from Shugart and Carey (1992) to Hicken and Stoll (2013) have found that how policy-making authority is distributed *within* the national level of government—what Hicken and Stoll (2008) label horizontal centralization—also shapes electoral coordination. Focusing upon the regime type, and specifically upon the existence of a popularly elected chief executive (i.e., a president), these studies generally argue that presidential systems should have more nationalized and fewer parties competing in legislative elections, and that the larger the size of the

presidential prize, the more nationalized and fewer parties we should see.³

One position these studies have in common, and which we adopt here, is that nationalization or its converse, regionalization, is the product of strategic decisions on the part of party leaders. An assumption that underlies all of this work is that party leaders respond strategically to the incentives and opportunities within the political environment. There is abundant evidence that, within certain constraints, parties/party leaders (as well as voters) do indeed exercise agency. One historical example of such a strategic decision is how the Labor party in the UK (and social democratic parties in Europe in general) worked to expand from an initially very limited set of industrial/working class/urban districts to nationwide competition (Przeworski and Sprague, 1986). Another is the decision by the Republic Party to expand its base into the American South during Reconstruction (Abbott, 1986). More contemporary examples include a shift to regional strategies by voters and parties in India after decentralization (Chhibber and Kollman, 2004), and the adoption of nationally focused campaign strategies by Thai parties after constitutional reforms in 1997 (Hicken, 2009).

Another position much of the extant work has in common is a focus on the office of the presidency. This is understandable. A popularly elected chief executive is often the most valuable prize in a political system, so it should naturally influence voters', candidates', and parties' incentives for electoral coordination. It seems odd, however, that there has been comparatively little attention paid to the other major focus of party competition in non-parliamentary systems (and the only focus in pure parliamentary systems): the legislature. Control of the legislature is not just a prize parties seek as a means to an end—e.g. to get access to executive power in a parliamentary system. It is valuable in its own right.

In this paper, we directly consider the size of the *legislative* prize and how it shapes the incentives to form large, national parties. That is, we study how much policy-making authority the largest party in the legislature wields. In so doing, we widen the scope of the literature's lens to national-level institutions beyond the regime type. Our argument is that the size of the legislative prize is a function of two distinct variables: first, the internal organization of the legislature; and second, the external constraints on the legislature, such as those imposed by a president or upper chamber.

1.1. Internal legislative organization

Our primary interest is in how the distribution of policy-making authority *within* the legislature shapes the legislative party system. While there is a rich literature that is concerned with the structure of power within the legislature,⁴ we are not aware of any work that links this structure to party system nationalization and the number of parties. Here, we argue that the greater the concentration of authority within the legislature, the greater the size of the legislative prize and the fewer and more nationalized parties there will be.

The logic of our argument is similar to that developed elsewhere in the literature to explain the effects of vertical and horizontal centralization on nationalization. Here we extend that logic into the legislative realm, but the underlying dynamics are similar. Imagine, for example, that you are the leader of a party weighing the costs and benefits of trying to coordinate across electoral districts to create a nationally competitive party that will capture at least a

² There is some debate in the literature about the robustness and direction of the relationship between decentralization and nationalization. See, for example, Brancati (2008), Harbers (2009), Lago-Penás and Lago-Penás (2011), and Simón (2013).

³ See also relatively recent work by Cox (1997), Cox and Knoll (2003), Elgie et al. (2013), Golder (2006), Hicken (2009), Lijphart (2012), Stoll (2013, 2015), and Tzelgov (2008).

⁴ See, for example, Strom 1984, 1990; Doring 1996; Powell 2000; and Siaroff 2003, all of whom have dependent variables other than the size and nationalization of the party system.

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