



The climate of debate: How institutional factors shape legislative discourses on climate change. A comparative framing perspective



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ABSTRACT

Although political institutions and their actors are at the heart of the democratic process, we know little about the effect of institutional configurations on legislative discourses. The article conducts a comparative frame analysis of climate change debates in the legislative bodies of four countries—Switzerland, Germany, the UK and the US—that differ in the degree to which they correspond to majoritarian or consensus democracies. The study finds systematic differences with regard to salience of the issue, frame and actor diversity and the degree of polarisation. The implications are discussed and the article addresses limitations and areas for future research.

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Legislative actors and their institutional settings constitute some of the central antecedents of the media's coverage of political issues, not least since they lie at the very heart of the democratic law-making process. Yet, although theories central to the field of political communication have long documented the orientation of the media towards elite policy actors (e.g. Bennett, 1990), we know little about the contexts in which they are embedded. This is particularly the case for those stages that represent the day-to-day dealings in plenary debates, committee meetings, hearings, etc.—in other words, the *courant normal* of politics—which make up the bulk of the policymaking process but mostly lie outside the brief peaks of political contest that occur during elections and popular referenda.

This lack of scholarly attention is not specific to communication research as a discipline, as the contributions of political science have remained equally scant. Political scientists, particularly those working in one of the various fields of neo-institutionalism, have long emphasised the role of institutional configurations and their informal rules in the political process (Steinmo & Thelen, 1992; Weaver & Rockman, 1993). At the same time, even those working within one of the more recently developed sub-disciplines—labelled “discursive institutionalism” (see the overview in Schmidt, 2008), which gives precedence to the discursive moment and its explanatory power in the law-making

process—have only rarely examined one of the most immediate variables of interest, namely the structures of legislative discourses (see, e.g., Schmidt, 2002).

The present article ties in with the research interests of these two academic fields but extends them in important ways. Located at the nexus between communication research and political science, the study foregrounds parliament as the central institutional locus of deliberation in democracies and examines how institutional configurations of the political system affect the discursive structure of political debates in legislative bodies. Since their actors occupy a central position both in the policymaking process and the public sphere, shedding light on their discursive interactions allows us to establish more clearly how institutions and discourses are related and thereby gain a better understanding of one of the major pre-conditions of media coverage. As we are interested in the effects that institutions have on discourses, the study employs a comparative perspective juxtaposing legislative discourses on the issue of climate change across four countries—Switzerland, Germany, the UK and the US—during the *courant normal* of day-to-day politics.

Conceptually, the study is guided by two main assumptions. First, we posit that the configuration of political institutions in a country affects both the degree of contestation with which an issue is debated by legislative actors and the inclusion of non-political actors. Second, the degree of contestation and the actor diversity, in turn, have an effect on how salient the issue is and how broad the range of perspectives is in terms of the actors' frames.

The contributions of the article are threefold. From the perspective of both communication research and political science, it

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highlights the importance of relating legislative discourses to the institutional configurations in which they are embedded. It examines the resulting differences in the context of climate change, an issue that has received extensive scholarly attention in terms of how it is covered by the media (see, e.g., [Boykoff, 2007](#); [Grundmann & Scott, 2014](#); [Painter & Ashe, 2012](#)), but where research on how it is processed in political institutions remains scarce ([Fisher, Waggle, & Leifeld, 2012](#)). Second, and related to this, such a shift in the research focus is all the more warranted, since the media tend to “index” their political coverage to the positions, arguments and perspectives presented by political actors ([Bennett, 1990](#)). Finally, the article contributes to the current research on polarisation in political institutions ([Layman, Carsey, & Horowitz, 2006](#)), as it shows how formal configurations affect the degree of contestation in legislatures.

The article proceeds as follows: the next section introduces [Lijphart's \(2012\)](#) distinction between consensus and majoritarian democracies as the theoretical framework, which allows us to examine the differences between legislative discourses with regard to the analytical dimensions of polarisation, issue salience, and actor and frame diversity outlined above. The methodology section specifies the country and issue selection, introduces the framing approach the study employs to analyse the legislative discourses and develops the measures used to test the hypotheses. The empirical section presents the results of the analysis, the implications of which are discussed in the concluding section, which also addresses the limitations of the study and sketches areas of future research.

1. Theory

Legislative discourses are not independent of the institutional arrangements in which they are embedded ([Schmidt, 2008](#)), and this article examines how the discourses of legislative actors are affected by the institutional design.¹ One of the main distinctions we can make in terms of how political systems are organised is that between what comparative political science has termed “consociational” or “consensus” democracy on the one hand and “majoritarian” systems on the other ([Lijphart, 1977, 2012](#); [Steiner, 1974](#)). The difference between the two can be seen in the fact that consensus democracies have a more accommodating character, they integrate different interests and actor groups, seek to formally include possible veto players at early stages in the policymaking process and strive to find common ground or at least a compromise that is acceptable to all.

[Lijphart \(2012\)](#), whose comparative study of 36 countries is one of the main reference points in the literature, refers to this kind of democracy as the “gentler”, “kinder” type. Switzerland is a prime example of a democracy with such accommodating arrangements, and from the research interest of the present paper we can highlight its most important dimensions: a multi-party system coupled with an oversized cabinet, in which the largest parties share political power; an electoral system based on proportional representation (for the lower house), hence taking into consideration minority views and parties; and neo-corporatist arrangements through which leaders of peak organisations consult with each other and

with political representatives, thus integrating them early on in the policymaking process.

This form of democracy is contrasted with majoritarian systems, which in many respects embody the opposite with regard to their institutional constellation. In their purest form, these systems are constituted by two competing parties that vie for absolute majority and a corresponding minimum-winning cabinet; a single legislative chamber; they have, as their name suggests, an electoral system working according to a winner-takes-all mode, thus over-representing the majority; and they incorporate a pluralist idea of representation of interest groups, which act independently from one another, are largely excluded from formal policymaking processes, and compete for access to the political system. Although not corresponding in each and every aspect to the ideal sketched here, the United Kingdom is traditionally taken as representative of the majoritarian system.

For [Lijphart](#), these distinctions are not simply descriptive in nature, but ultimately lead to qualitative differences between the two types, and he strongly argues that consensus democracies make a difference in the sense that they perform better than majoritarian systems on many indicators. From the perspective of the present article, we are not so much interested in the normative aspect of [Lijphart's](#) analysis, but rather in assessing the differences in how the two systems shape legislative discourses. Clearly, if, on the whole, consensus and majoritarian systems differ with respect to social welfare policies, environmental protection, criminal law, etc. ([Lijphart, 2012](#), pp. 274–294), these differences should become apparent in the corresponding legislative deliberations and consultations.

In this context, two institutional mechanisms appear particularly relevant: first, the sharing of power in oversized, multi-party cabinets versus the concentration of power in minimum-winning or single-party cabinets. The effect of this dimension on legislative deliberations is that grand coalitions require the parties forming the government to cooperate and agree on policy positions. Furthermore, grand coalitions moderate the accentuation of differences between parties as they diminish the electoral competition between them (see [Steiner, Bächtiger, Spöndli, & Steenbergen, 2004](#), p. 80). As an overall effect, we should therefore see a greater degree of discursive convergence in consensus democracies than in their majoritarian counterparts. The second dimension of importance concerns the distinction between pluralistic and corporatist systems. Pluralistic systems foreground the concept of a “marketplace of ideas” and correspondingly further the contest of a diversity of perspectives and arguments by interest groups and other non-institutional actors who vie for visibility in the legislative arena. Corporatism, in turn, is marked by greater coordination between actors located outside the legislative arena—interest groups, social movement organisations, scientists, etc.—who are incorporated into the policy formation process, leading to compromise and comprehensive agreements between them. The relative lack of competition and their inclusion in the policymaking process in corporatist systems means that non-institutional actors can be expected to become less visible in the legislative arena than in pluralistic systems. The hypotheses developed below address these differences and thus allow us to test empirically the extent to which institutional configurations affect legislative discourses.

1.1. Hypotheses

The present study is generally based on the idea developed in the field of “discursive institutionalism” which suggests that institutions have an effect on the structures of legislative deliberations: “They define the [...] contexts within which repertoires of more or less acceptable (and expectable) ideas and discursive interactions develop” ([Schmidt, 2008](#), p. 314). Put differently, Schmidt

¹ Social movement scholars examining those constellations that allow civil society actors to influence the political process have proposed frameworks such as the “political opportunity structure” ([Kriesi, 2004](#)). Although their research interest is a different one, since it focuses on non-institutional actors and the circumstances under which they can have a voice in the political process, they still highlight the importance of political institutions. Indeed, [Kriesi \(2004\)](#) turns to [Lijphart's](#) classification to distinguish the degree to which political institutions are accessible to civil society actors. By putting the institutional discourses and their context at the centre of the analysis, the present study thus complements the work in the area of social movements.

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