

Understanding parliaments as self-organizing systems. Theoretical challenges and empirical clues

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Krzysztof Kasianiuk, Ph.D.
Collegium Civitas
Pl. Defilad 1, 00-901 Warsaw, Poland
krzysztof.kasianiuk@civitas.edu.pl

Abstract

The paper discusses “self-organization” as a reference concept for the analysis of parliamentarism. Thus, it is aimed at supporting an agency-oriented perspective in the studies of MPs’ behavior in parliaments. In particular, it reconsiders the conceptual framework by W. Ross Ashby, and discusses the results of an empirical study of Polish parliamentary teams.

“Self-organization” seems to be a useful concept for parliamentary studies, as it requires the researcher to reflect on the extent to which rules and procedures facilitate the behavior of representatives in contemporary parliaments. The usefulness of this concept is confirmed by a micro-scale study of the Polish two-chamber parliament covering the period between 2007 and 2011. The study’s results show that there is a space for the cross-party activity of parliamentarians, which is unconstrained by the formal rules of the chambers.

Introduction

What would happen if parties and committees did not exist in parliaments? Would the parliamentarians be doomed to struggle for power or would they find ways to cooperate on public matters? How would parliamentarians organize their activity? On what basis would it eventually happen and what could be the effect of such a process? In short, would self-organization processes have a chance to take place in parliament and what could be their driving conditions? In other terms, would the members of parliament (MPs) *organize* themselves, or would they *be organized* by external forces?

Although these questions seem unnecessary in contemporary democratic regimes, the paper attempts to discuss the problems they point to, as the answers could be of practical value. Anyone who is thinking about reforming any contemporary democratic parliament should take into account not only the design of the parliamentary system with regard to party-committee relations (Whitaker 2010), or the nature of the MP's mandate and the roles they actually play (Strøm 1997), but the patterns of parliamentary behavior and as well (Fritzsche 2011) and their sources in the first place.

The dominant paradigm in parliamentary studies presupposes that parliaments are to a large extent institutions which emerge as a result of social, political and economic processes of various types and dynamics. Furthermore, one of the most important elements that constituted contemporary parliaments was the emergence of political parties. Although parties are most often perceived as the key elements of the system, this is not the only rationale that could be applied to parliamentary studies, since MPs possess their own interests, goals and frames of reference.

At the same time, the parliamentary scholars describe democratic parliaments as complex spaces of continuous communication between political actors (e.g. individual MPs, parties and stakeholders). This communication in majority results in politically legitimized decisions, but it is also quite acknowledged fact that complexity of parliamentary systems makes MPs constrained by many factors.

Although there would be no parliament without parliamentarians, which by definition makes the parliamentarians important elements of the policy process and politics, this is an often unconsciously neglected fact especially in Poland. In Poland MPs are perceived by the general

public as subjects to party domination, exerted by party leaders. Contrary to public views, however, a number of processes are now taking place in the Polish two-chamber parliament, which suggests that many backbenchers are seeking a space for unconstrained political activity, which is the fundamental prerequisite of self-organization processes.

A number of works support the notion that parliaments are worth reconsidering in other than party-driven logic. Different scholars provide alternative perspectives on what is actually happening in parliaments. For instance, some of the scholars suggest that parliaments could be considered as systems that function and acquire specific forms as a result of endogenous and exogenous mechanisms, and parties do not need to play fundamental roles in these processes (Fuchs 2004; Patzelt 2011). Additionally, a growing attention has been paid to the actions the MPs may actually take, e.g. in the context of their parliamentary experience (Bale and Kopecky 1998; Mykkänen 2001). On the other hand, the results of experimental computer simulation studies suggest that the actions of individual, randomly chosen parliamentarians, and not primarily parties, could improve the overall parliamentary efficacy (Pluchino et al. 2011).

However, “self-organization” of MPs in parliaments is not a widely studied problem, and the reason for this could be the assumption that once politicians become involved in the public sphere and play formally prescribed functions, this concept no longer seems adequate and applicable. This paper discusses the issue from a different standpoint.

Self-organization and parliamentarism – the cybernetic view

The issue of self-organization in parliament actually involves more than one question: who, with whom is organizing in parliament, what is the source of the process dynamics, and what are the consequences of their organizational relations? One of the first scholars to approach the problem of self-organization was W. Ross Ashby, who analyzed the issue from the perspective of cybernetics.

When Ashby presented the “Principles of the self-organizing system” in 1962, he did not restrict his argument to any particular type of system; neither did he say anything about parliaments (Ashby 1957). He reflected on all types of systems, which – according to his view – should function in the same way. Unfortunately, Ashby’s views have been quite easily discarded by

many social scientists for being “non-humanistic”. Until today, the cybernetic approach has been criticized primarily on the grounds of the conviction that social processes are essentially different types of system, different from others, e.g. biological ones (Bailey 1994; Haken 1983).

Nevertheless, it seems that an important aspect of the cybernetic approach has been misunderstood by its opponents. Cybernetics is the science that analyzes systems, recognized primarily as *abstract* objects. The “type of the system” does not point to the type of matter it is built of, but to the essential characteristics it shows in the context of other systems. In consequence, although it is generally accepted that human society consists of intentionally driven actors (individuals, groups and organizations) possessing exceptional features (such as culture, expressed in values and norms), it is also quite clear that analysis of the actors’ dynamics could follow the same rules as in the case of other types of systems. In effect, it is quite possible that the logic of political processes in the democratic parliament, including the policy debates and power struggle, could follow the same mechanisms as those described by cybernetics. This has been noted by political scientists, such as David Easton and Karl Deutsch (Easton 1979; Deutsch and Deutsch 1963). But what particularly valuable insights can cybernetics contribute to parliamentary studies? Is “self-organization” really applicable in this field?

Ashby discusses “self-organization” by utilizing other abstract concepts, including “conditionality” and “independence” between “parts” of a system („machine”). On the basis of these concepts, Ashby presented two approaches to “self-organization”.

In the first approach, the “parts” of the system are simply self-connecting in a particular time and space. The self-organizing system is thus one in which the parts that used to be separated are acting towards the formation of connections of a new type. Such a system changes its state from “parts separated” to “parts joined” (Ashby: 266), which in essence also means “a change from independence between parts to conditionality” (Ashby: 267). This type of self-organization is characterized by spontaneity, and could be regarded as “unregulated” by external forces.

If translated to parliamentary studies, this approach presupposes the emergence of connections – including political and legislative ones – between parliamentarians (“parts”) in the parliament. In other words, the parliamentarians who have been independent, become dependent, because they form a group on the basis of their common goal (e.g. in UK’s All-Party Parliamentary Groups

with regard to the substantial issue of their interest. In this view, it is the parliament consisting of individual MPs that should be primarily perceived as the self-organizing system, and not the parliament which primarily consists of political parties.

However, according to Ashby, an additional perspective on “self-organization” should be considered. In the alternative view, the self-organizing system is one capable of reacting to disturbances caused by the external environment. In this sense, the organization of the system could be a “good” or a “bad” one, as it is always seen in relation to its capability to adapt to the conditions of the environment. This capability is enhanced when the system finds the goal that orders its activity. Ashby emphasized that the change in the level of organization (from “independence” to “conditionality”) could be in fact described as a process aimed at better adaptation of the system, through the mechanism of a feedback loop with the environment.

It seems that on this level, the parliament could also be a subject of analysis within Ashby’s framework. The apparent example is the one of MPs who work in the parliament and campaign for votes in the electoral districts. If they do not manage to fulfill the constituency’s expectations, they would as well not receive a sufficient number of votes in the following election. The point here is that the very mechanism of representative accountability would not be possible at all without a feedback loop mechanism.

This approach also shows that neither the organization nor the functioning of the parliament is absolutely “good” or “bad”. The parliament can only be regarded as “better” or “worse” depending on its relation to the social, political, and economic environment of the particular space and time, since one of the major functions of the parliament is to legitimize decisions made in the public sphere and – in effect – helps stabilize the political system (Easton, 1979). The system’s stability, which essentially means the capability to persist despite changing environmental conditions, is based on the feedback loop mechanism between the system and the environment. However, Ashby points out a problem here. According to him, the very fact of interaction between the system and the environment precludes defining such a system as a fully self-organizing one. If the external forces change the way the system works, the system is “being organized” and not “self-organizing”. This logic seems applicable both to the political system as a whole and to the parliament in particular.

In sum, according to Ashby, there are two fundamental ways to describe the system (here: the parliament). In the first one, the system (parliament) is self-organizing because it creates new connections between the “parts” (MPs). In the second, the connections emerge as a result of the impact exerted by external forces.

Based on Ashby’s dichotomy, a peculiar view on self-organization in parliament could also be conceptualized, forming a basis for subsequent empirical studies. In particular, if one assumes that parties and committees, along with the rules and procedures in parliament, form a specific space of organizational and institutional internal conditions, all actions of MPs in different forms could be perceived as self-organizing processes. In this view, the most important form of “self-organization” in the parliament is the partisan one. This stems from the very fact that each of the formally equal members of parliament decides whether or not he or she will be the member of a party. It does not matter when this choice is made – before the electoral campaign or in the parliament itself (West and Lee 2014). From this perspective, standing committees could be considered as forms of parliamentary self-organization as well, although they are a part of a formally prescribed procedure of decision-making and the mechanisms of selection could vary, depending on the system under study (Baekgaard 2010).

However, the same approach applies to other forms of parliamentary activity that are directly or indirectly connected with the partisan one, namely – parliamentary groups. Parliamentary groups in some political systems could be viewed as the effect of self-organizing processes, since they form, because MPs coming from different political parties and committees gather in a spontaneous way to discuss the problems they are most interested in. In effect, the very existence of parliamentary parties and committees contributes to MPs’ “self-organization”, e.g. if they perceive party leadership as too restrictive, consider the proceedings on public issues (e.g. during the committee sittings) to be inadequately conducted, or – even more generally – the representation mandate is recognized as burdened with serious formal defects.

A more radical view would consider even less formal sets of MPs as forms of parliamentary “self-organization”. They would include e.g. the cross-partisan set of MPs aiming at legislative initiative (in Poland – 15 MPs); sets that submit questions to the government to clarify issues important to all members of the given group; and the sets of MPs who vote together, regardless of

the decision of party leaders. The approach stemming from Ashby's framework has been applied to the study of the Polish parliament.

Methodology of the empirical study

The goal of the empirical study was to answer the following general question: is it possible to describe the activity of MPs in terms of their "self-organization"? To achieve this, parliamentary teams in Poland have been studied with regard to both dimensions of self-organization presented by W. Ross Ashby.

For the purposes of this study, "self-organization" has been defined as the process of creating new connections between entities. In this sense, the parliament is a self-organizing system, as it allows parliamentarians to create new connections. These connections could result in the emergence of common goals and be temporary or long-term.

Parliamentary self-organization has been regarded as a process that takes place within the framework of existing parliamentary rules, but these rules do not fully describe the mode of operation of MPs. In effect, self-organization is the function of individual perception by MPs of the spaces of unconstrained activity (Battista 2014).

Polish parliamentary teams are similar to UK's all-party parliamentary groups (APPGs). Their composition is cross-party, their goals and internal organization vary and the mechanisms of differentiation do not seem to be party-driven. However, most of them emerge at the beginning of the term and resolve on its final day. Moreover, the parliamentary teams usually focus on internal affairs, while other forms of self-organization – bilateral groups – focus on activity in international context. Parliamentary teams may include Sejm deputies and Senators.

In the study, the teams have been qualitatively considered as:

1. The form of self-connection of previously unlinked MPs.
2. The form of common activity aimed at adaptation of MPs within the parliamentary environment.

The goal of the empirical part of the study was purely exploratory. The teams have been studied in order to obtain preliminary knowledge about their basic characteristics, with special attention

paid to their internal structure and common goal. This excluded questions regarding the sources of the self-organization processes.

The study was based on data for the Polish parliament covering the period between November 2007 and November 2011. During that period, 66 parliamentary teams emerged. The choice was based primarily on the availability of data sources. The study took into account both chambers – Sejm and Senate – whose terms are concurrent. In Sejm there are 460 deputies and in Senate there are 100 senators. Note that the numbers denoting the chambers' terms are different. For instance, the number of the Tenth Term Sejm (in Poland: "X"), goes along with the number of the First Term Senate ("I"). For the purpose of data presentation, only the numbering regarding the Sejm terms is followed.

The informal character of the teams results in a major lack of data. The teams have no formal significance within parliamentary procedural framework – neither legislative nor supervisory. They are only mentioned in the Sejm Statute as organizations of MPs formed on a "different basis than a political one". The MPs are not obliged to submit any internal regulations of their activity, nor the first list of members. MPs should only inform the Marshal of the Sejm (the Speaker) about the team's creation. At the same time, the costs of functioning of parliamentary teams must be covered mostly by the MPs themselves – the Chancellery of the Sejm provides only the rooms for the team meetings. It also receives and keeps the schedule of the meetings and the list of members if submitted.

For these reasons, the data gathered by the Chancellery of the Sejm is very limited, and consists of the documents provided by the MPs themselves. Until the Fifth Term Sejm, there was no register of the teams' statutes, nor information on the number and names of the teams during particular terms.

As a result, at the moment almost no information is available as regards the activity of MPs within the teams, records of meetings, topics covered during the meetings or activity other than meetings. Only the dates and titles of the meetings could be found.

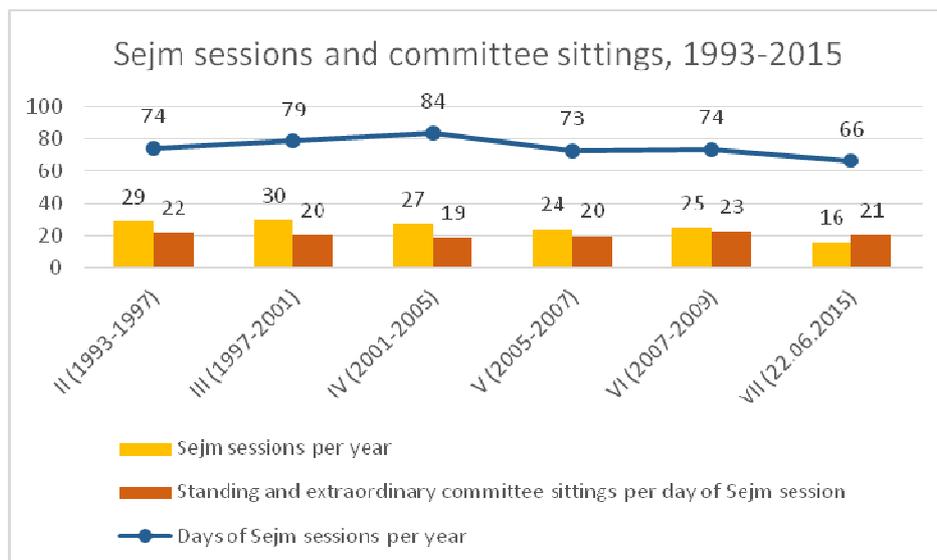
However, in most cases MPs have submitted the documents describing internal regulations and the lists of team members. Thus, exploratory and comparative analysis is possible, although at a

rudimentary level. In the presented study, teams were analyzed and compared with regard to their goals, internal organization and membership.

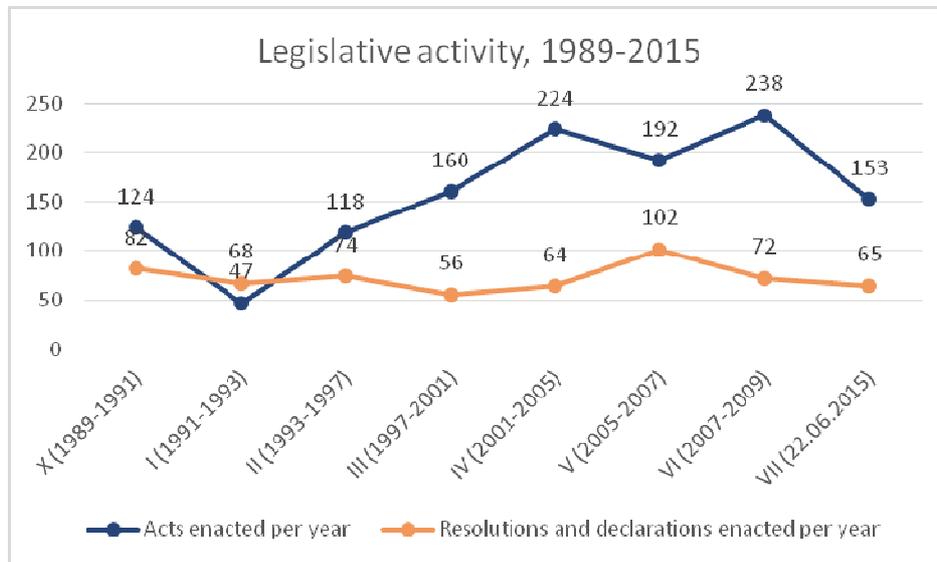
General context of Polish politics

Self-organization is a process that takes place within a particular space and time. If MPs are to self-organize, they should have an time for it. It seems that in Poland more time is available as compared with the past years. Moreover, a number of processes show that MPs could aim at more autonomous activity, although some analyses might have suggested that the parties could be still the dominant actors on their own (Olson et al. 1998; Nalewajko and Wesółowski 2007).

Firstly, there has been quite a steady decrease in the number of overall Sejm sessions, and the number of days a Sejm session takes has become gradually smaller. Simultaneously, a relatively similar number of committee sittings has been taking place.

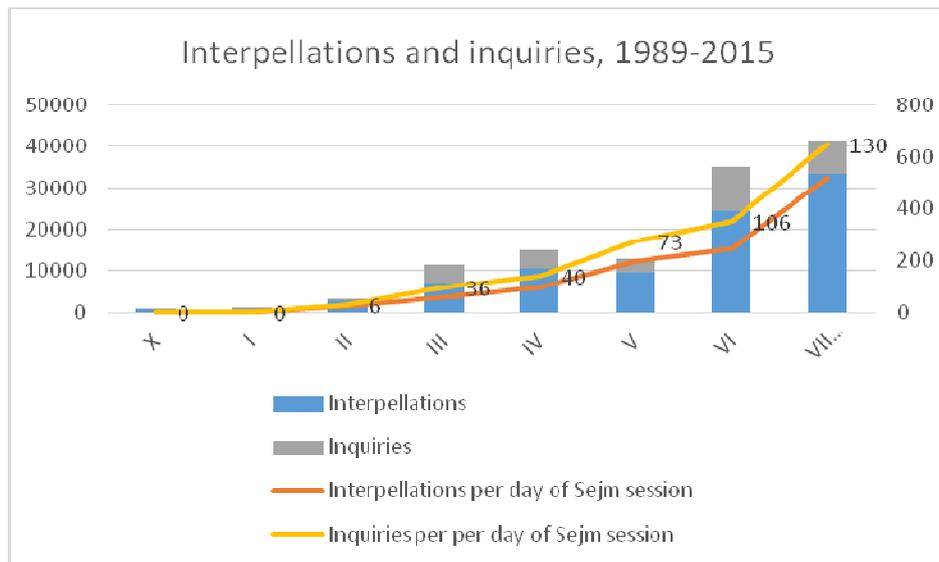


Secondly, analysis of legislative activity shows that this activity varied within the period described, and at the moment is significantly lesser than 10 years ago. Although Polish accession to EU in 2004 forced the process of law synchronization, which greatly increased the legislative workload, the number of acts implemented recently has decreased and reached the level of the third term (in 2001), which preceded the major process of synchronization.



At the same time, the total number of interpellations and inquiries (two types of Polish formal questions towards government members) has grown by more than 5000%. It ranged from 769 in the tenth term (which is in Poland regarded as the first term and as the starting point of political and economic transformation) to 41467 (as of June 2015).

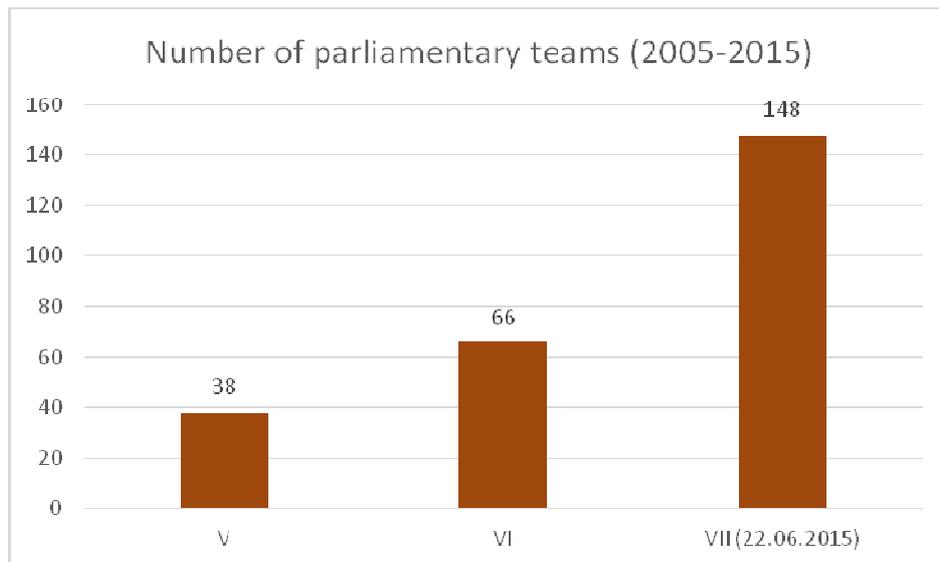
It should be noted that the theoretical difference between interpellation and inquiry in Poland is twofold. Firstly, an interpellation should pertain to basic problems of state policy, whereas inquiries are supposed to concern single issues of internal and foreign affairs. Secondly, inquiries are primarily a means of receiving information from the government on particular issues, which in its essence should have no formal consequences. On the other hand, interpellations have been designed to influence the government, as government members can be dismissed as a result of the process initiated with the interpellation. In practice, the difference between inquiries and interpellations has been gradually disappearing (Kupis 2012), and at present interpellation has lost its formal significance.



Results of the analysis of time available to MPs for activity, as well as the general trends of legislative work in parliament show that MPs have gradually gained more time for activity. At the same time, the individual activity (especially control of government actions) suggests that parliamentarians are more and more interested in autonomous action, regardless of the political situation, defined either by the party composition of the parliament or by historical context. This in turn suggests there is a time and space of unconstrained activity which is the preliminary condition for self-organization.

Parliamentary teams as a form of self-organization

In recent years an unprecedented growth in the number of parliamentary teams in Poland has also been observed. The number of parliamentary teams has grown significantly from an estimated 15-20 at the beginning of transformation (the exact number is unknown, as no statistics are available), to 148 in 2015.



One of the most important facts in this regard was that parliamentarians were provided by the Chancellery of the Sejm with a document was called a *Framework for the regulation statute of the parliamentary team*. According to Chancellery employees, since 1989 there could have been several different documents of similar functions (the actual number is unknown), but in the period between 2007-2011 only one of them was available. This is especially important when one considers the options the MPs could take after receiving the suggested document. The *Framework* consisted of sections (“paragraphs” divided into more concrete “points”) that suggested several fields, including: the legal basis, goals and tasks, authorities of the team, forms of work (e.g. meetings and conferences), rules and decision-making process, and the mode of changing the statute.

The analysis revealed that the MPs have approached the task of regulating their common activity in a creative way. Based on the in-depth qualitative analysis, 6 categories and three types of changes toward the *Framework* could be distinguished (see Table 1).

Almost half of the teams have decided to implement modest/limited or significant changes in their statutes when compared to the framework one.

Table 1. Types of changes as compared with the framework statute

	Minimal	Modest/limited	Significant
CONTENT	Same content of the paragraph and essentially similar content of the points (1T)	The title of the paragraph and the content of some points changed (2T)	Major changes in the substance of points in the paragraphs (3T)
STRUCTURE	Same structure of the sections as in the framework document (1S)	The order of paragraphs changed, some paragraphs added, others removed (2S)	Alternative form of ordering of content of the paragraphs (3S)
Number of teams	36	14	16

The team as a form of self-connection of previously unlinked MPs

All teams included the information that membership was voluntary. At the same time, about half of them maintained the entry regarding the non-partisan character of the team. Most often, a parliamentarian could become a member of the team if he or she “declared an interest in issues” important to the team (42 cases) or “expressed a will of accession” (29 cases). In many statutes it was also written that a parliamentarian could even become a member of the particular team if he or she revealed a certain “attitude” towards the issues (e.g. “advocating” or “desire”). However, none of the statutes defined in what way such an attitude should be revealed by a parliamentarian or evaluated by the team members. It is worth mentioning that in 18 cases, all conditions of voluntary membership have been included (non-partisan character, an interest in the issues, expressing the will of accession). At the same time, 9 teams have included additional membership criteria that could be defined as “organizational” (e.g. being a member of a trade union), and “functional” (e.g. being a professor in an academic institution).

The non-partisan character of the teams is confirmed when the party affiliation of members is considered. In most teams, the members came from both sides of the power division in parliament. Only in 9 cases the members came from the side of the government coalition and in 4 from the opposition side. However, in 45 teams the politicians from the largest governing parties

(Civic Platform) had the majority, whereas in 15 the major opposition party dominated (Law and Justice).

The teams were also of different sizes. If divided on the basis of the number 15 (in Poland 15 Sejm deputies may form a parliamentary club and 15 may submit a legal project), small and very small teams predominated (52 cases). 8 teams were large or very large and consisted of more than 10% of the total number of deputies in the Sejm (at least 46 out of 460).

Table 2. Teams of different sizes in the Polish parliament (2007-2011)

Size of the team	Number of members	Number of teams
Very small	1 - 15	26
Small	16 - 30	26
Medium	31 - 45	12
Large	46 - 60	2
Very large	more than 60	6

The team as a form of common activity aimed at adaptation of MPs within the parliamentary environment

The teams have defined their goals within the parliamentary environment. The tasks they presented in the internal regulations had the aim of achieving goals which could be categorized "knowledge-oriented" and "policy-oriented", although almost all of them presented miscellaneous goals and tasks. Very often, the teams presented only a general direction or the predicted character of their activity within the public domain. At the same time, one of the most apparent characteristics of the statutes was their high level of generality.

The "knowledge-oriented" goals of a team were all the activities undertaken with the aim of supporting communication processes within the public domain. The "policy-oriented" goals were all the activities aimed at influencing public policy or a specific decision within the policy process.

There were also teams which described their goals in a manner suggesting that they assume the possibility of influencing public processes, after achieving a certain level of cognitive coherence between the members. Furthermore, a number of teams formulated their goals in a way that was difficult to classify in one of the three categories presented (e.g. due to the high level of generality of the statements in the statutes).

The analysis shows that parliamentarians were almost as often interested in gaining new knowledge and popularizing it (41 cases) as influencing public policy in certain domains (42 cases). In 52 statutes the teams included records showing the mixed goals, and 18 of them were sometimes difficult to classify.

One of the most frequently mentioned goals was the “promotion” of certain ideas, attitudes, culture and values, issues, norms and good practices. The least popular goal was education aimed at “media”, “society” and “public opinion” (11) or other parliamentarians (8).

The will to influence policy decisions and regulations (e.g. by preparing a legislative initiative) was mentioned in 28 cases. In 26 cases the goal of the teams was to influence public officers. Almost as many teams (24) expressed a will to exert influence on public institutions (especially on the parliament and less often on the government).

The majority of the teams (55) decided to get involved in the activity of other public institutions as representatives of certain viewpoints throughout the discussions not directly aimed at the decision-making process. These were described as ongoing discussions with NGOs, local government officials, as well as with the most important state institutions (parliamentary committees, ministries and public agencies). Contacts with international organizations seemed almost equally important to the teams.

Summary

Despite a limited amount of data, the description of parliament teams as a self-organizing system could be justified. Firstly, Ashby’s conceptual framework could be employed to describe parliamentary system itself. Secondly, the categories exposed in Ashby’s framework are adequate to describe parliamentary phenomena. There are certain “elements” or “parts” of the system

(MPs) that act in order to organize themselves into new forms. Secondly, the Polish case shows that the new forms can be very different. In their statutes, the analyzed teams declared a vast variety of fields of interests and defined common goals sometimes in a contrasting manner. The goals could be categorized from purely cognitive to decisive ones. Thirdly, a practical lack of other than political criteria of membership is the basic prerequisite that made it possible to analyze the teams as forms of self-organization and as the spaces where new connections can be actualized. One may speculate that MPs could treat teams as a mode of their discretionary power, but this function could be described only if new types of additional data were available.

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