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Parliamentary Strengthening in South Africa: Budget Oversight Efficacy Reform Beyond Popular Congressional Models

This paper problematizes the popular focus on establishing a Parliamentary Budget Office ([PBO](#)) to develop the efficacy of parliamentary oversight by contrasting it with an alternative approach developed in South Africa. Parliamentary oversight strengthening programs currently place a premium on the adoption and empowerment of PBOs. [World Bank](#) programming focused on PBOs is extensive and growing in the field of legislature development. Researchers looking for parliamentary strengthening options can be forgiven for thinking that institutionalizing a PBO constitutes the definitive step towards a stronger parliament.

Leaders at South Africa's Gauteng Provincial Legislature (GPL) adopted a package of rules reforms in 2004 to increase the efficacy of the GPL's budget oversight function far beyond the aspirations and achievements of parliamentary reformers in countries like Canada and the United Kingdom. The GPL system is called 'Programme Evaluation and Budget Analysis' (PEBA). It was then adopted in every legislature across the country as the '[Sector Oversight Model](#)' (SOM). In sharp contrast with the PBO model, SOM institutionalizes in-depth budget scrutiny within each committee overseeing a spending department/agency across all government spending programs and conducts budget oversight at each stage of the budget cycle throughout the year ([South African Legislative Sector](#) 2014). This mirrors the cyclical, non-linear budget process of the executive branch.

Parliamentary reformers in South Africa were seeking to enhance government delivery through improved oversight work by the legislature to meet the tremendous demands of social transformation in the post-apartheid era. While SOM represents an unprecedented reform of parliamentary budget oversight systems, it also remains wholly true to the foundations and fundamentals of a parliamentary system. Systemically, it greatly expands the scope and scale of parliamentary budget scrutiny and executive obligations to account to parliament without adopting reform measures that confuse the authority of the executive and legislative branches respectively. In short, it increases the efficacy of legislature oversight by empowering the legislative branch but stops short of measures that are indicative of 'congressionalization.'

PBOs are slightly modified institutional variants of congressional budget offices (CBOs), the latter being the original template from which the PBO evolved. CBOs originated in the U.S. as a means for the legislative branch to regain some of its diminished constitutional authority to draft and pass budgets (Stapenhurst et al. 2008). Its congressional origins remain firmly ingrained in its design wherever it is applied. PBOs are geared primarily to reviewing macro-economic fiscal policy and spending at the aggregate level. Reports and findings are largely geared to audiences in one or two parliamentary committees most responsible for overseeing government departments that set or affect fiscal policy (Wehner 2010). This institutional tendency of PBOs derives directly from the CBO design where a single appropriations committee is responsible for

ensuring fiscal management and discipline (Anderson 2009). In this way, it appears to provide a great service to the legislature by deepening expertise and focus on one dimension of the budget within one or two committees. Establishing and empowering PBOs can then deflect attention from the need to improve budget oversight within every committee overseeing a department or agency.

Legislatures in parliamentary systems generally do not possess the same authority to initiate and pass the government's budget as congresses in the U.S. system. The conflation of PBO design with robust parliamentary budget oversight may create blind spots for parliamentary reformers. PBO outputs can become substitutes for more meaningful legislature oversight engagement with the executive for each departmental budget.

Exploration of these issues will require a short but focused discussion of what distinguishes parliaments and congresses as well as providing clarity on concepts such as efficacy reforms versus efficiency reforms in the legislative sector. This is necessary to try and reconnect core theories and conceptualizations in parliamentary studies that are now seemingly out of step with legislature development in practice. It is not the intention of this study to suggest that PBOs are a problem. In fact, they can and do greatly enhance the knowledge of legislators conducting oversight within a specific context. The aim of the study is to suggest that PBOs alone fall far short of increasing the efficacy of legislature budget oversight but can become useful if the focus remains on enhancing legislature budget oversight capacity across all committees, for all departments and spending agencies.

REFERENCES

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