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The Impact of Political Identity Based Parties in the Gauteng, Nunavut, Quebec, and Scottish Legislatures: Exploring Causes of Stronger Committee Oversight Systems

This paper will try and establish if strong political identity-based parties can sometimes strengthen legislature committee and oversight systems. Recent research examining the causes of remarkable strengthening of provincial legislature oversight systems in South Africa points to the impact of political identity formation within the African National Congress and how that can generate the political will necessary for reform ([Youash 2019](#)). Work comparing South African provincial budget oversight systems with the United Kingdom and Canada identified the Scottish, Nunavut, and Quebec legislatures for having, or exercising, greater scrutiny powers than their federal/central government counterparts.

A Hansard Society study on budget oversight noted that “there should be a more formal role for Parliament [Westminster] in the spending review process, as is the case in Scotland” (Hansard Society 2006, 29). The same report dedicates a special focus on the greater authority and capacity of the Scottish parliament in contrast to Westminster (Hansard Society 2006). A national study of Canadian legislatures developed a table identifying the ‘resources and powers of committees’ in Canada’s fourteen legislatures. One of the columns in the table identifies whether departmental committees can set their own agenda. Six of the fourteen require approval from the legislature; three have broad authority but are not specified enough to indicate they can set their own agenda; two can try but require a majority vote in committee; one can but within a fixed budget. Only two Canadian legislatures possess the unqualified authority to set their own agendas: Quebec and Nunavut (Docherty 2005, 168).

This study considers why the Scottish, Nunavut, and Quebec legislatures stand apart from their central/federal government counterparts. Specifically, it intends to explore whether the parties who helped form those legislatures were deeply rooted in a political identity and if so, does that help explain the variation in legislature scrutiny powers and practices. The impact of parties with strong political identities cannot be dismissed as a possible source of political will for creating relatively stronger oversight systems.

Establishing whether and how specific parties may allow for greater scrutiny powers in the Quebec, Nunavut, and Scottish legislatures will serve to strengthen the findings of the research on South Africa about the impact of political parties channeling salient political identities. Findings from this study will deepen understanding about sources of political will necessary for parliamentary strengthening that remain largely invisible to the field and are undertheorized.

A negative finding will make the South African finding that much more particular to the country’s context and less generalizable as a theory. A positive finding will increase confidence about identifying an alternative source of political will to explain parliamentary strengthening.

Political will is often treated in a trite, sometimes tautological, frame to explain parliamentary reform success or failure. Norton (2013, 1998, 1983) operationalizes political will in a causal framework to theorize parliamentary reform more robustly. If a new source of political will is found that can help explain variations in parliamentary design to strengthen accountability systems, it will help advance a vital research agenda in the field.

A positive finding will also shed light on recognizing the possibility of ‘parliamentary moments’ where specific types of political parties under specific conditions can become rare sources of parliamentary innovation. This can be relevant in some post-conflict situations where institutional strengthening is key to realizing peacebuilding outcomes. It also provides an opportunity to consider whether certain institutional designs emerging from the Nunavut, Scottish, and Quebec legislatures can inspire reform initiatives in other contexts, either because similar conditions pertain or more simple demonstration effects inspire reformers in significantly different contexts.

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