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Personal Ambitions, Expertise and Parties' Control. Understanding Committee Assignment in the Italian Chamber of Deputies

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## **Personal Ambitions, Expertise and Parties' Control: Understanding Committee Assignment in the Italian Chamber of Deputies**

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# **Personal Ambitions, Expertise and Parties' Control: Understanding Committee Assignment in the Italian Chamber of Deputies**

In this study we look at committee assignment by focusing on the extent to which MPs' desires to become members of certain committees are fulfilled. Our theoretical argument is based on the assumption that legislators pursue individual goals, which interact with party leaders' ones. To test our hypotheses we use original survey data on elected candidates to the Italian Parliament that were collected immediately after the 2013 general election. Our main findings highlight that individual preferences driven by distributive interests are more likely to be accommodated in the case of legislators who are close to their party in ideological terms. On the contrary, ideological proximity to the party does not seem to affect committee assignment when MPs' preferences are driven by expertise-based motivations.

Keywords: legislative committees, committee assignment, political parties, party unity, legislative organisation, Italian parliament

## **1. Introduction**

The committee system is a crucial feature of modern legislatures. Classic approaches to legislative organization focus on committee structure to understand legislative proceedings and outcomes, generating different predictions about patterns of committee assignment. The distributive approach suggests that legislators pursuing re-election will seek to become members of those committees where they can serve the specific interests of their constituents (Shepsle, 1979; Weingast and Marshall, 1988). Alternatively, according to the informational perspective, legislators will seek to become members of those committees where they can better exploit their policy expertise, acquired through their educational and occupational background (Krehbiel, 1990; 1991; Gilligan and Krehbiel, 1987;

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1989). Finally, a party-centred approach suggests that party leaders will use committee assignments to increase party unity and thereby their control over the legislature (Kiewiet and McCubbins, 1991; Cox and McCubbins, 1993).

These competing views have been extensively debated with regard to the US Congress, and subsequently used to investigate committee structure and resources in different institutional settings (for a review see Martin, 2014 and Martin and Mickler's introduction to this special issue). Overall, empirical research does not seem to bring clear-cut evidence in favour of either the distributive, informative or partisan explanations, suggesting that all three approaches have some predictive power in explaining patterns of committee assignment in legislatures. Indeed, thinking about the compatibility of the different approaches, Shepsle and Weingast (1994, p.175) claimed that, "[...] although the various authors of this literature have sought to differentiate their respective products, a compelling case for exclusivity has not been made and perhaps should not be".

In this study we start from this assertion, and assume that committee assignment is the outcome of the interplay between individual legislators' aspirations and party control. It is widely recognized that parties play an irreplaceable role especially in parliamentary systems, where they are needed to coordinate legislative behaviour in order to ensure the survival and functioning of governments (Laver, 2006). As Damgaard (1995) pointed out two decades ago, committee assignment is certainly one of the instruments through which party leaders control their party members.

We look at committee assignment by focusing on the extent to which MPs' desires to become members of certain committees are fulfilled. Our argument is based on the assumption that legislators pursue individual goals, which interact with party leaders' ones. Legislators may want to become

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members of a specific committee for several reasons such as those highlighted within the main approaches to the study of legislative behavior. On the other hand, in parliamentary systems MPs are usually assigned to committees by party leaders. We expect that party leaders will assign party members to different committees in a way that will further parties' collective goals. This implies that legislators' individual aims will be achieved only in so far as they help to enhance party goals.

To test our hypotheses, we use an original survey of elected candidates to the Italian Parliament administered immediately after the 2013 general election. Italy was selected as a case study characterized by two features: a powerful committee system and a strong influence of party leaders' on committee assignment. Our data are unique in parliamentary research as they provide information at the individual level about Italian MPs' preferences about legislative committee assignment, expertise, past political experience, educational and occupational background, ideological preferences and evaluations of the relationships among parties' elites and members. Moreover, they allow us to assess parties' positions and preferences.

This study is organized as follows. Section one summarizes our theoretical argument and introduces the hypotheses we derive from it. Section two briefly describes the committee system in the Italian parliament. Data and methods are illustrated in section three. We present our results in section four and discuss them in the concluding section.

## **2. Theory and hypotheses**

Members of legislative assemblies have personal goals that they pursue when acting as representatives. As seminal studies of legislative behaviour have emphasized, legislators typically want to enhance their re-election prospects, as well as to influence policy-making (Fenno, 1973; Mayhew, 1974). Legislators may pursue these goals by means of a variety of activities, such as introducing bills and amendments (Mattson, 1995), delivering speeches on the floor (Proksch and Slapin, 2014; Giannetti and Pedrazzani, 2016), presenting parliamentary questions and interpellations (Russo, 2011; Wiberg, 1995), and even switching strategically to more advantageous parliamentary party groups (Heller and Mershon, 2005; Pinto, 2015). Becoming a member of a certain committee

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and carrying out committee work is also a critically important activity, especially in legislatures where committees are endowed with relevant prerogatives in the lawmaking process.

However, party leaders are commonly assumed to act in a manner that ensures party unity in committees and more generally in the legislative setting (Cox and McCubbins, 1993). Party leaders are usually very interested in coordinating party members' behaviour in order to ensure party effectiveness throughout the legislative process. This is especially true in parliamentary democracies, where governments can enact their policy goals only in so far as they control cohesive legislative majorities (Laver, 2006). Party unity is valuable also for opposition parties when attempting to effectively challenge the incumbent government (Giannetti and Laver, 2009).<sup>1</sup>

Our general argument is that parliamentary party leaders will not allow legislators to self-select themselves into committees as both the distributive and informational approaches suggest. Party leaders will allow MPs to become members of the committee they desire if such assignments will not undermine party effectiveness in the legislative process (Damgaard, 1995). When making assignment decisions, party leaders will reward party members who are closer to the ideal point of the party, as they are expected to be loyal in the legislative arena. Following this theoretical argument, we derive hypotheses about how party leaders can be expected to deal with potential tensions between what individual MPs desire, based on the motivations highlighted above, and what party leaders think is desirable for pursuing their party's collective goals.

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<sup>1</sup> Leaders' incentives for maintaining party unity do not depend just on electoral considerations. Governing party leaders cannot secure the support of a legislative majority and the enactment of the government's electoral program unless they control a disciplined bloc of legislators. In turn, opposition party leaders can hardly pose a credible threat to the stability of the government coalition if they do not rely on the loyalty of parliamentary party members.

As implied by the distributive approach to legislative organization, legislators have personal goals that can be different from the policy programme of the party they belong to. This is because individual legislators often have various attachments to constituents, interest groups, private firms, professional associations, public institutions, and so on. In other words, the electoral constituency of representatives can be defined in geographical or functional terms. Legislators would then like to be assigned to the committee that has jurisdiction over the policies they (and their respective voters) care most about, as this will allow them to distribute benefits to their constituents and increase their re-election prospects (Shepsle, 1979; Weingast, Shepsle and Johnsen, 1981; Weingast and Marshall, 1988). If individual legislators' desires were fulfilled, committees would consist of policy "outliers", or more specifically, "high demanders" for whatever benefits each committee provides. As a result, the legislation produced by the parliament would be biased toward particularistic interests, overproducing bills with a regional or narrowly sectional specific-benefits nature.<sup>2</sup> In light of Cox and McCubbins' (1993) party-centred approach, self-selection by interested legislators could damage the unity of the party. For this reason, we expect that the "distributive" desires of individual legislators will be satisfied by their party leaders only in so far as a legislator is not a "preference outlier", i.e. an extreme member of the party. Consequently, we hypothesise the following:

*H1: Individual legislators' desires to join a particular committee where they can serve their constituents' interests are more likely to be fulfilled by party leaders if a legislator is closer in ideological terms to his/her party's ideal point.*

The informational approach to legislative organization implies that those representatives who

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<sup>2</sup> Another consequence, which is not the focus of this paper, is that in aggregate the legislature would spend more in each policy area than that preferred by the median legislator.

can specialize at lower costs – thanks to their professional training or other prior experience – in a committee are more likely to become members of that committee (Gilligan and Krehbiel, 1987; 1989; Krehbiel, 1991). For instance, a politician whose (previous) profession is working as a lawyer, magistrate or judge, will probably aim to join the justice committee; medical personnel are more likely to prefer becoming a member of the health committee, and so on. However, legislators with prior expertise in a given area are also very likely to generate huge information asymmetries between committee members and party leaders (as well as between committee members and their colleagues who are not member of the same committee). On the one hand, committee members acting behind closed doors are supposed to act as agents of their party. On the other hand, if a legislator is a policy expert or a “natural specialist” (Mattson and Strøm, 1995) in a certain committee, their principal can find it difficult to detect deviations from the party line. When working on legislation in a committee, a natural specialist is expected to pursue a technically feasible policy that is closer to their party’s ideal point. However, if thanks to their expertise committee members can move policy at their discretion, then party leaders may be unable to understand if they are toeing the party line. The strategic advantage enjoyed by policy experts is enhanced when committee membership provides easy access to information through formal committee hearings, and facilitates developing relationships with outside interest groups and executive agencies in issue networks (Damgaard, 1995).

Such informational asymmetry would not be a serious problem for parties if the ideological preferences of natural specialists sitting in committees were aligned to the policy positions of their party. On the contrary, intra-party tensions can emerge if a natural specialist is an extreme member of his or her party because their committee work has the potential to undermine party effectiveness. As highlighted in the literature on delegation, information asymmetries are a major source of agency

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loss if combined with policy divergence between principals and agents (Strøm, Müller and Bergman, 2003). From this perspective, an instrument that party leaders' may use is their authority to choose agents before the delegation takes place: that is their power to decide, among the possible candidates for a committee seat, who is going to become a member of that committee. We expect that party leaders will minimize adverse selection problems by fulfilling the desires of natural specialists only when their ideal points are not far from the party's ideal point. Therefore, our second hypothesis may be expressed in the following way:

*H2: Legislators' individual desires to join a particular committee where they are policy experts are more likely to be fulfilled by party leaders if a legislator is closer in ideological terms to his/her party's ideal point.*

The two hypotheses we have put forward rely on the idea that individual desires concerning committee assignment can often be at odds with a party's collective goals, which are safeguarded by party leaders. Needless to say, not all committees are equally important for party leaders. Consequently, we would expect party leaders to put greater effort into protecting party goals if the policy domain dealt with by a committee is especially important for the party. However, coordination problems within parties tend to increase for more salient committees simply because more legislators ask to become members of them. To put it in more general terms, the demand for assignment to the most valuable committees often exceeds the supply, which creates "queues" of legislators asking to become members of those committees.<sup>3</sup> This implies that party members' preferences, regardless of

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<sup>3</sup> Where the size of committees is not fixed, as is the case in the US Congress, party leaders may expand the number of seats available on the most salient committees as a rationing device (Munger, 1988). However, this is not the case in Italy and in most West European countries where the number of members for parliamentary committees is usually fixed (Mattson and Strøm, 1995).

their proximity to the party leadership's ones, are less likely to be fulfilled. The other side of the coin is that all committees in the legislature have to be filled, including those that are not very attractive for the party. The obligation to assign party members to less important committees also implies leverage for party leaders. Taking into account this pragmatic feature leads us to include in our analysis the importance of a committee as a factor affecting patterns of committee assignment.

### **3. The organization of the committee system in Italy**

Before illustrating how we empirically evaluate the two hypotheses put forward in the previous section, we will first briefly describe the organization of parliamentary committees and the assignment process in the Italian parliament. Legislative business is organized through a system of specialized standing committees, with prerogatives guaranteed both in the Italian Constitution and in the Rules of Procedures of the two parliamentary houses (the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate). Italian committees are considered among the strongest in contemporary legislatures (Della Sala, 1993; Lees and Shaw, 1979; Martin, 2011; Mattson and Strøm, 1995; Mickler, 2017; Strøm, 1990; Zucchini, 2001). As in many parliamentary democracies, committees in both branches of the Italian parliament have jurisdictions that closely correspond to ministerial portfolios (Carroll and Cox, 2012), and have the authority to convene hearings and summon witnesses (Mattson and Strøm, 1995). In addition, Italy's standing committees retain extensive lawmaking powers: they can amend all types of legislation including government-sponsored bills, and according to the "decentralized procedure" which can be invoked in case of wide consensus in the assembly can even pass bills into law without sending them to the floor for examination. These institutional arrangements imply that becoming a member of a preferred committee can be crucial for enhancement of an MP's personal goals.

The number of standing committees in both the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate is

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currently 14 (see the Appendix for the committees' list). Each committee is responsible for scrutinising bills dealing with its area of competence. There are, however, a few committees which have additional competences that go beyond their specific policy area. These are known as “filter” committees, whose advice on the first draft of a bill is required before starting an examination of the proposed legislation. According to the Rules of Procedures of the Chamber of Deputies (Articles 74 and 75), the filter committees are the following: I – Constitutional, Presidency of the Council of Ministers and Interior Affairs; V – Budget, Treasury and Planning; XI – Public and Private Sector Employment. In what follows, we focus on committees' organization in the Chamber of Deputies. However, similar rules apply in the Senate.

With regard to committees' composition, Italy follows a general pattern observed in much of Western Europe where a proportional representation rule for parliamentary party groups is almost always used. In particular, Article 19 of the Rules of Procedure of the Chamber states that in each committee the share of committee posts for each parliamentary party should reflect its share of legislative seats, and that no legislator can be a member of more than one committee.

The assignment of Italian legislators to committees seems to be heavily influenced by parliamentary party leaders (Manzella, 2003, pp.134-137; Traversa, 2007, pp.230-235). According to Article 19 of the Rules of Procedure of the Chamber, upon being established each parliamentary group has to appoint a number of members to each committee, immediately informing the directing authority (or “Bureau”) of the Chamber. The President of the Chamber is in charge of adjusting committee assignment according to the proportionality rule, taking into account minor parties and the

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Mixed Group.<sup>4</sup> Within each party group assignment decisions are likely to be strongly influenced by party leaders.

Other institutional details indicate a prominent role for party leaders vis-à-vis ordinary party members in the committee assignment process. First, party groups can ask the directing authority of the Chamber to revise the composition of committees (Article 12). Second, every party group may, for a specific bill, substitute a member of a committee with one from another committee, provided the committee chair has been notified (Article 19). Finally, committees have to be renewed every two years from the date of their establishment and their members may (not) be confirmed by party groups (Article 20). In sum, Italian parliamentary party leaders exert considerable control on committee assignment and can sanction “rebel” committee members by removing them. Similar rules and procedures can be found in other West European democracies, where real decisions on committee appointments are, in fact, made by parliamentary parties (Damgaard, 1995).

#### **4. Research design, data and methods**

To assess the explanatory value of legislative organization theories, empirical research on committee assignment in the US Congress has played a crucial role (Adler and Lapinski, 1997; Cox and McCubbins, 1993; Groseclose, 1994; Krehbiel, 1990; 1991; Shepsle, 1979). Outside the US, the appointment of committee members has been extensively investigated in the European Parliament

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<sup>4</sup> The Mixed Group is a parliamentary group composed of legislators of those parties that failed to reach the minimum threshold required to form a parliamentary group in the Chamber (20 members). According to a new regulation approved by the Chamber of Deputies in 1997, ten legislators can form a subgroup in the Mixed Group. However, even smaller subgroups are usually allowed to form by the President of the Chamber. The President is in charge of distributing among the committees the deputies belonging to these minor parties in the Mixed Group which have fewer members than the number of committees. Similar rules apply in the Senate.

(Bowler and Farrell, 1995; McElroy, 2006; Whitaker, 2001; Yordanova, 2009). Other scholars have explored patterns of committee assignment in national legislatures such as Brazil, Argentina, Costa Rica and Venezuela (Pereira and Mueller, 2004; Crisp *et al*, 2009), the Turkish National Grand Assembly (Çiftçi, Forrest and Tekin, 2008), the Danish Folketing (Hansen, 2010), the Irish Dáil (Hansen, 2011; Mickler, 2018b), the Portuguese Assembleia da República (Fernandes, 2016), and the German Bundestag (Mickler, 2018a).

Unlike most previous works dealing with committee assignment, our analysis does not focus directly on testing the “classic theories” of legislative organization. As stated in the previous section, we assume that different individual motivations play a role. We are interested in exploring the interplay between legislators’ individual preferences over committees and party leaders’ concerns for the promotion of party goals throughout the legislative process. For this reason, we base our research on the self-evaluations of MPs when asked to indicate which committee they would most prefer to be members of. Then we compare such preferences with their actual assignment.

Such a research strategy has been made possible thanks to data gathered through the 2013 Italian Candidate Survey (ICS, Di Virgilio *et al.*, 2015b), which included a series of relevant questions targeting prospective and elected legislators. The ICS collected the original survey data with the aim of gaining new insights about the role of political elites, and specifically candidates for the Chamber of Deputies in the last Italian general election held in February 2013. Focusing on the relationships between candidates, parties, and voters, the ICS questionnaire covers several topics such as campaigning, recruitment, career patterns, and opinions about a number of issues, including a series of questions about committee preferences submitted only to elected candidates. Overall, 141 MPs (out of 630) representing the eight main political groups in the Chamber of Deputies participated in

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the survey, yielding a response rate of 22.4%.<sup>5</sup>

We constructed our dependent variables as follows. Legislators were asked to answer two separate questions: (a) “In which committee do you think you can best serve your constituents’ interests?” and (b) “Taking into account your professional and political experience, in which committee do you think you could best perform as a member of parliament?”<sup>6</sup> The first question captures the rationale behind the distributive logic, where legislators should opt for those committees which allow them to distribute particularistic benefits to their constituents. The second one is consistent with the informational rationale, according to which committee selection should be driven by MPs’ personal expertise and knowledge. Then, we compared MP’s answers to the previous questions with their actual committee assignments. For data about MPs’ committee assignments we used the following question: “Which standing committee are you currently member of?”<sup>7</sup> If a legislator is a member of the same committee indicated in answering question (a), our first dependent variable takes a value of “1”, otherwise zero (*Match D*). If a legislator is a member of the same committee indicated in answering question (b), our second dependent variable takes the value of “1”, otherwise zero (*Match I*). We counted 59.0% and 61.6% of positive matches according to the

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<sup>5</sup> The fieldwork for this survey took place in the aftermath of the Italian general election of February 2013. As the set of respondents closely represents the population of Italian candidates in terms of several key aspects, our analyses are unlikely to suffer from problems of selection bias. For more information about the survey see Di Virgilio *et al.* (2015b) and Di Virgilio and Segatti (2016). See the Appendix for the distribution of responses across parties.

<sup>6</sup> More than a half of respondents indicated the same committee when answering questions (a) and questions (b). The data show that respondents indicating two different committees are better educated, have a longer tenure, and have followed a consistent political career.

<sup>7</sup> We cross-checked legislators’ answers using information available on the website of the Chamber of Deputies (<http://www.camera.it/leg17/28>).

distributive and expertise-based responses, respectively.

Due to the dichotomous nature of our dependent variables, we use a logistic regression model to assess the relationship between ideological proximity to the party to which a legislator belongs with the likelihood of observing a positive match between self-selection into preferred committees and real assignments. To test our hypotheses, we performed two separate analyses. In both models, according to the latent-variable formulation of the logistic regression models, the dependent variable(s) (*Match D\** or *Match I\**) measures the propensity to observe a positive match for legislators included in our data set.<sup>8</sup> Based on the hypotheses put forward in the theoretical section, this propensity is then modelled as a function of MP-party ideological distance plus a series of control variables.

Our key independent variable is the ideological distance between MPs and the parties to which they belong. As discussed earlier, legislators who are closer to their party are presumed to be more loyal party members. This variable, that we call *Ideological distance*, is measured as the absolute difference between a legislator's self-reported left-right position on a 0 (left) to 10 (right) scale and the mean score of left-right self-placements of all the MPs belonging to the same party.<sup>9</sup> In comparison to other indicators based on ex-post voting behaviour used in the literature (see for example McElroy, 2006 and Yordanova, 2009), our measure does not suffer from potential endogeneity problems. This is because our measure is derived from survey data and these are

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<sup>8</sup> When logistic regression is formulated as a latent-variable model, the dependent variable is assumed to be a continuous latent variable which takes on values less than 0 when the event does not occur, and greater than 0 when it does, while the error term is distributed according to a standard logistic distribution.

<sup>9</sup> Our results do not change substantially by employing the median instead of the mean of left-right self-placements as a proxy of parties' positions. Both the mean and the median correlate very highly with experts' estimates of left-right parties' placements (see Di Virgilio *et al.*, 2015a; 2015b).

completely exogenous to the process of committee assignment. Moreover, scaled ideological scores based on individual voting records do not guarantee measurement of true policy preferences as in most national parliaments legislative voting is driven by government-opposition dynamics rather than by left-right ideological positions (Hix and Noury, 2016). In our sample, *Ideological distance* has a mean (M) of 0.86 and a standard deviation (SD) of 0.73.

To single out the effects of our main covariates, we take into account a number of control variables that are assumed to affect the process of committee assignment. First, we include a measure of committee importance for parliamentary parties. For this purpose, we rely on an item included in the ICS questionnaire asking: “Could you assign a score on a 1 (not important) to 10 (very important) scale to the standing committees indicated below based on their importance for the political goals of your parliamentary group?”. We then aggregated individual scores for each party and each committee to build a measure of importance that, as far as we know, has never been employed in empirical research on committee assignment. This variable measures how valuable the committee preferred by an MP is for the party to which he or she belongs. Because each legislator included in the analysis could indicate a different committee in answering question (a) which explores distributive committee preferences, and question (b) which examines expertise-based committee preferences, the covariate has different values for the mean and standard deviation in the two statistical models (for distributive preferences M = 8.42, SD = 0.84; and for expertise-based preferences: M = 8.37, SD = 0.79).

Table 1 reports the most important and the least important committees for the four main parties represented in the Chamber of Deputies. Committee I – Constitutional, Presidency of the Council of Ministers and Interior Affairs – is among the three most important committees for each parliamentary party. There is variation across parties in the ranking of committees. For example, left wing parties such as PD and SEL attached more importance to the committee dealing with employment, while

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centre-right political parties like SC and PDL valued more committees having jurisdiction over budget and justice policies. Conversely, M5S, a party which greatly emphasizes environmental issues in its electoral manifesto (Pedrazzani and Pinto, 2015) considered the environment, territory and public works committees to be very important.

[Table 1 about here]

The remaining control variables deal with other features affecting the process of committee assignment. First, in most European democracies committees are appointed in a way that reflects the proportional strength of the parties represented in the parliament, which allocate their members among the different committees accordingly. As stated above, in Italy this feature is reflected in Article 19 of the Rules of Procedures. Consequently, we include a covariate measuring parties' seat share in the Chamber of Deputies ( $M = 0.32$ ,  $SD = 0.18$ ). Second, all other things being equal, senior MPs may be able to secure a better position than their colleagues. However, as highlighted in previous research (Bowler and Farrell, 1995; Hausemer, 2006; Yordanova, 2009), seniority should matter only in terms of committee incumbency, since it reveals a kind of "property right" of certain MPs over their committee membership. As a consequence, we include two dichotomous control variables identifying incumbents with and without past experience in the committee they indicated when answering questions (a) and (b). Regarding MPs with past experience in their preferred committee, 12% of the legislators included in our survey data set were incumbents (when interviewed in 2013) who indicated the same committee in which they sat in the past when answering question (a). We found the same percentage of incumbents (12%) who indicated the same committee in which they sat in the past when answering question (b). We identified about 14% of incumbent legislators who – when asked which committee best serves their distributive interests – indicated a different committee from the one they sat in the past (these are incumbents without past experience in their preferred

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committee). We found the same percentage of incumbents without past experience in their preferred committee (14%) for those legislators who indicated their preferred committee on the basis of their expertise and knowledge.<sup>10</sup> Third, we add a continuous variable measuring the age of the legislators included in our data set (the median age is 47 years). Finally, we took into account education and gender of legislators, incorporating in our model two dummies, identifying female MPs (27%) and MPs with a graduate or post-graduate education (72%).

## 5. Results

The logistic regression results are plotted in Figure 1, which displays the log odds (the grey dots) estimated by our models based on the distributive (M1) and expertise-based (M2) motivations of legislators (see the Appendix for the regression table). A positive (negative) coefficient indicates that the variable increases (decreases) the likelihood of observing a positive match between self-selection into preferred committees and real assignments. When the confidence intervals are both above or below the zero line, the covariates' effect is statistically significant either at the 95% or 90% confidence level, depending on whether the segment is bounded by the outer dashes (90%) or not (95%). Consistent with our first hypothesis (H1), MPs who are ideologically closer to their own party have a higher likelihood of joining a committee that they judge best for distributing particular benefits to their constituents. Contrary to our second hypothesis (H2), the ideological distance between MPs and their party does not have any significant impact on the probability of observing a positive match

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<sup>10</sup> For example, if an incumbent legislator who previously served in Committee XIII (Agriculture) indicates Committee XIII (Agriculture) when answering questions (a) or (b), then they were coded as an incumbent with past experience in their preferred committee. In contrast, if the same legislator indicated a different committee such as Committee XII (Social Affairs) when answering questions (a) or (b), then they were coded as an incumbent without past experience in her preferred committee.

between the committee legislators chose according to their personal expertise and knowledge and their actual committee appointments.

[Figure 1 about here]

Figure 2 shows, for different values of the ideological distance variable, the predicted probability (with 95% confidence intervals) of observing a positive match between individual committee preferences and real appointments when distributive motivations are taken into account. All other covariates in the model are held constant. Consistent with our first hypothesis (H1), a non-extreme legislator driven by distributive motivations has a higher probability to see their desire of joining a particular committee fulfilled by the leader of the party to which they belong. When legislators' ideal points almost coincide with the party leader's one (i.e. when the left-right distance between MPs and the party mean is close to zero) the probability that individual preferences match with actual committee assignments is 62% [50%-75%]. As the ideological distance between MPs and the party mean increases, this probability drops. Moving one step on the right or on the left of the party line reduces the predicted probability to 48% [39%-57%]. When the distance is equal to the maximum value observed in our data (3.24), the likelihood of observing a positive match falls to 20% [.6%-39%]. In other words, when the value of ideological distance moves from one standard deviation below the mean to one standard deviation above the mean, the probability that MPs' self-selection into preferred committees coincides with real assignments decreases by 56%. Contrary to our expectations expressed in H2, the same does not happen when expertise-based motivations are taken into account. According to our results there is no difference in actual assignment between more and less ideologically extreme legislators when policy expertise is driving committee self-selection. This implies that, when allocating committee posts, party leaders are more concerned with the distributive motivations of party members rather than with the potential problems arising from informational

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asymmetries related to policy expertise.<sup>11</sup>

[Figure 2 about here]

Among the control variables, committee importance deserves special attention in our analysis. Figure 3 plots the predicted probability of observing a match between MPs' preferred committees and real appointments against all the values of the committee importance variable, while holding the other covariates in the model constant. The two graphs show that individual legislators' desires to enter a particular committee are less likely to be fulfilled as the committee's importance for the party increases. Preferred committee importance exerts a negative effect on both our dependent variables. However, it has a stronger impact on the propensity of a positive match between distributive motivations and current appointments, while it is barely significant on the propensity of a positive match between expertise-motivations and current appointments (at the 90% confidence level). As far as expertise-based motivations are concerned, the likelihood for a legislator to enter a committee to which a party attaches an importance score just above 6 is about 71% [with a 95% confidence interval where the range is 57%-86%]. This figure is higher, *i.e.* 82% [65%-99%], when distributive interests are taken into account. When committee importance for the party approaches its maximum value (10) the probability to observe a positive match between self-selection and real assignment falls by 51% when expertise drives the choice of the preferred committee, reaching a predicted value of 35% [14%-56%]. Similarly, for the maximum value of committee importance (10) the probability of a positive match between self-selection and real assignment declines by 70% when distributive interests are

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<sup>11</sup> Previous studies about the composition of parliamentary committees found that in Italy committee posts are mostly allocated to policy experts (Zucchini 2001; Russo 2013).

prominent, reaching a predicted value of 25% [0.7%-42%]. These results suggest that committee importance affects the process committee assignment by increasing parties' control vis-a-vis individual legislators' preferences.

[Figure 3 about here]

Regarding the remaining control variables, the covariates associated with past committee membership exert a significant impact in both model specifications. As stated in the previous section, we included two dummies identifying incumbents with and without past experience in their preferred committee in our models. However, incumbent legislators with past experience in their preferred committee are dropped from the analysis because of a perfect (collinearity) prediction.<sup>12</sup> In other words, incumbent MPs who indicate as their preferred committee the one in which they sat in the past are *always* pleased by their party leaders, either they are driven by distributive interests or by policy expertise. The fact that incumbent MPs – if they request it – are assigned to the same committee repeatedly over time is consistent with re-assignment patterns observed in other legislatures (see for example Mickler 2018a,b). On the contrary, parties tend to “punish” those incumbent legislators who indicate a committee different from the one in which they served in the past. When they are driven by distributive goals, incumbents without past experience in their preferred committee (i.e. with experience in a different one) have a 65% lower probability to see their desires fulfilled by their parties' leaders. When driven by their expertise, incumbents without past experience in their preferred committee have a 94% lower probability to see their desires fulfilled. Taken together these results

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<sup>12</sup> Together with several missing values in the variable measuring left-right ideological distance, this is the reason why the number of legislators included in our models is lower in comparison to the figures reported earlier in the text.

indicate that parties appreciate greater committee specialization, especially when information-based motivations drive legislators' choice. Regarding age, Figure 1 shows that older MPs have a higher chance to become members of their preferred committees. Finally, the likelihood of observing a positive match between self-selection and real assignment is higher for legislators who are university graduates only when information driven motivations are taken into account (at the 90% confidence level).

## 6. Conclusions

In this study we examined patterns of committee assignment in the Italian Chamber of Deputies in light of the main approaches to legislative organization developed in the literature. Assuming that observed assignments do not provide enough information on which committee a legislator would choose if his or her decision were unconstrained, we adopted a novel research design to investigate legislators' preferences. We collected survey data on elected representatives in the 2013 Italian general elections that allowed us to compare individual legislators' expressed preferences over committee membership with their actual assignment. Our main findings highlight that individual preferences driven by distributive interests are more likely to be accommodated in the case of party members who are ideologically close to the party line, and hence more likely to be loyal to the party in the parliamentary arena. However, MPs' distance from their party does not seem to affect committee assignment when MPs are driven by expertise-based motivations.

The fact that party control is more important when distributive interests are at stake is not surprising, as individual legislators' aims may conflict with party leaders' goals. Becoming members of those committees where MPs can serve the specific interests of their voters can be conceived as a kind of constituency service. Providing particularistic benefits and services to specific groups can

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increase legislators' likelihood to be re-elected through a personal vote. Thus, allowing legislators who are ideologically close to their party to build a personal reputation by distributing targeted benefits may be helpful for parties as legislators' constituency activism can advantage their overall electoral fortunes. At the same time, MPs' ideological proximity safeguards the party against any problem that may arise from a strong personal reputation. In contrast, MPs who are far from their party's ideological position can become a serious problem for party leaders when they engage in distributive activities within committees. This is because personal reputation can make politicians more autonomous in legislative activities such as voting behaviour. In systems where parties have considerable control over the entire process of political representation, leaders can eventually prevent such independent legislators from running in their own party list. However, such legislators may still cause trouble by switching to other parties or building personal lists to compete against the party in the next elections.

Conversely, in delegating policy responsibility to members driven by expertise-based motivations, parties seem to give most weight to indicators of experience and knowledge, i.e. age, education, and having served on the same committee in the past. Our results suggest that party leaders value ideological proximity when legislators are inclined to use committee-based resources to gain distributive advantages; however, this does not happen when legislators may use their knowledge to effectively pursue their own policy goals even if these differ from those of their parties. Party leaders seem to consider the consequences of potential "policy drift" that may derive from expertise less problematic. Why is this so? One possible reason is that party leaders can use a wider array of *ex post* control mechanisms to mitigate delegation problems, ensuring members toe the party line even if they have different policy preferences. Another reason may be related to the process of candidate selection. Although some candidates with intense distributive interests may be ideologically extreme, national

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party leaders may decide to include them in party lists if they are crucial for maximizing votes in some specific territory (and hence increasing the overall share of votes for that party). As our results show, after the election party leaders can then reduce the possibility of policy drift driven by distributive interests through committee assignment. In contrast, when recruiting candidates party leaders can exclude ideologically extreme politicians with strong expertise at lower costs as they are probably less decisive for achieving electoral support at the local level. This might explain why we observe less *ex post* control by party leaders.

Finally, we found that party control is stronger when a committee is more important for the party. Legislators' committee preferences are less likely to be pleased as the committee importance for the party increases, regardless of distributive or expertise-based motivations of legislators. This simply derives from the fact that important committees attract the interest of a large number of legislators and, all other things being equal, not everyone can access them. Thus, our results are coherent with the realistic view that party leaders have to accommodate MPs' requests for membership of the most important committees as well as filling positions in less attractive ones.

Despite data limitations, our work contributes to current research on committee composition and intra-party relationships. Our research strategy shows that survey data can be a valuable instrument to explore patterns of committee assignment. Collecting cross-country data would allow us to overcome the weaknesses of a single case study and examine the interplay among individual legislators' goals and partisan effect in different institutional settings. Moreover, future comparative studies would offer the opportunity of exploring further avenues of research such as the relationship between committee assignment and individual legislators' voting behaviour in parliaments and the role of parties in distributing rewards and sanctions among committee members.

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## Tables and Figures

**Table 1.** Committee importance for political parties.

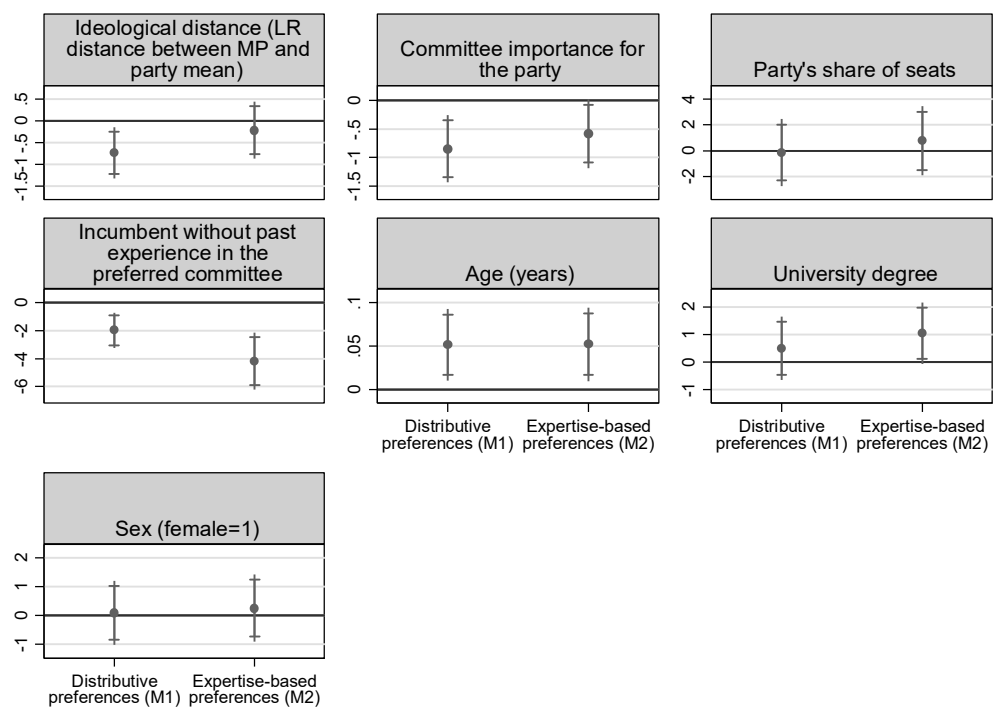
	Left, Ecology, and Freedom (SEL)	Democratic Party (PD)	Five Star Movement (M5S)	Civic Choice (SC)	People of Freedom (PDL)
Three most important committees	I – Constitutional, Presidency of the Council of Ministers and Interior Affairs	I – Constitutional, Presidency of the Council of Ministers and Interior Affairs	I – Constitutional, Presidency of the Council of Ministers and Interior Affairs	V – Budget, Treasury and Planning	V – Budget, Treasury and Planning
	XI – Public and Private Sector Employment	V – Budget, Treasury and Planning	VIII – Environment, Territory and Public Works	I – Constitutional, Presidency of the Council of Ministers and Interior Affairs	II – Justice
	II – Justice	XI – Public and Private Sector Employment	II – Justice	XI – Public and Private Sector Employment	I – Constitutional, Presidency of the Council of Ministers and Interior Affairs
Least important committee	XIV – European Union Policies	IV – Defence	IV – Defence	IV – Defence	IV – Defence

Note: Parties are ordered according to their left-right positions.

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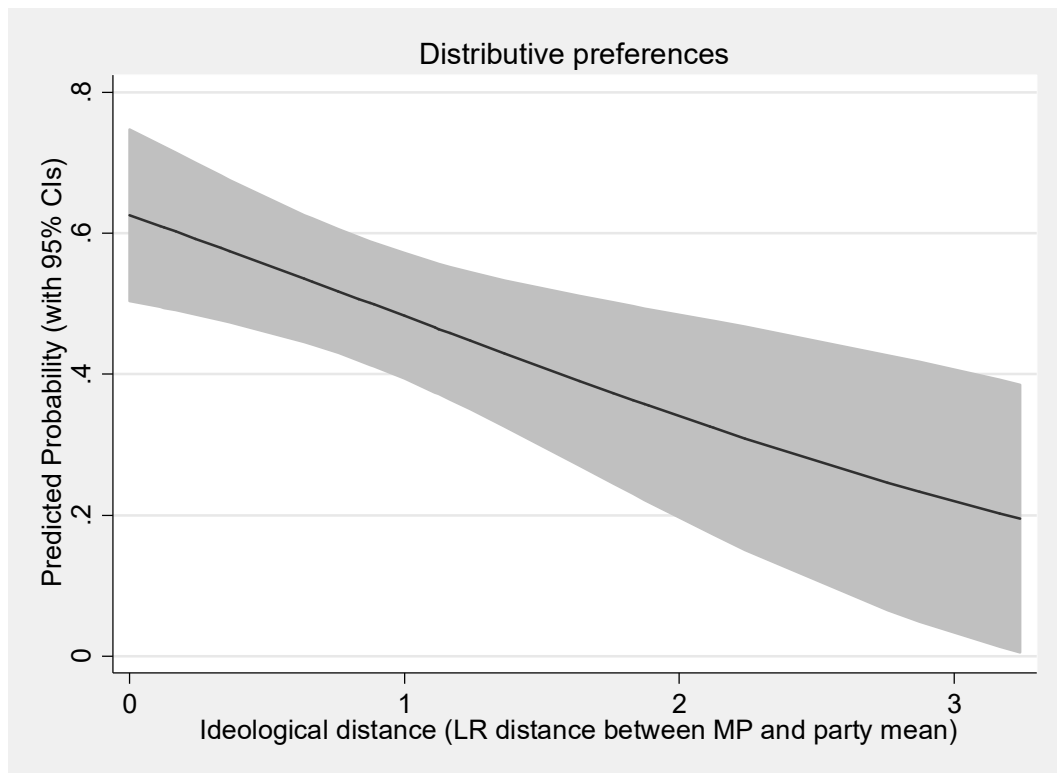
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**Figure 1.** Logistic regressions of observing a positive match between MPs’ self-selection into preferred committees and real assignments.



Note: Logistic regression with robust standard errors. Log odds for constant term are not reported. M1: N=106; M2: N=111. The portion of the segment bounded by the two dashes corresponds to 90% confidence intervals. The entire segment represents 95% confidence intervals.

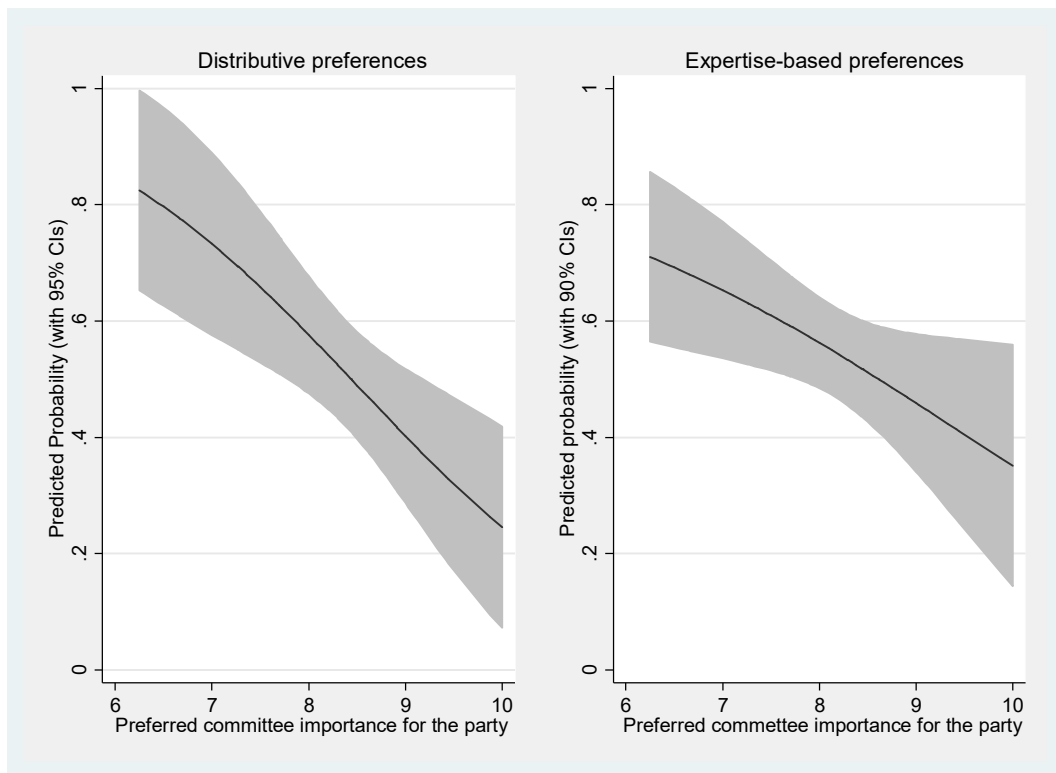
**Figure 2.** The impact of ideological distance.



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**Figure 3.** The impact of preferred committee importance for the party.



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## Appendix

**Table A1.** Standing committees in the Chamber of Deputies.

Standing committee	Members
I – Constitutional, Presidency of the Council of Ministers and Interior Affairs	49
II – Justice	45
III – Foreign and European Community Affairs	46
IV – Defence	45
V – Budget, Treasury and Planning	47
VI – Finance	42
VII – Culture, Science and Education	46
VIII – Environment, Territory and Public Works	46
IX – Transport, Post and Telecommunications	45
X – Economic Activities, Trade and Tourism	45
XI – Public and Private Sector Employment	43
XII – Social Affairs	44
XIII – Agriculture	42
XIV – European Union Policies	44
	629

Note: The President of the Chamber of Deputies does not join any committee.

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**Table A2.** Distribution of observations across parties.

Party	Party name in English	N. of MPs	% of MPs
Partito Democratico (PD)	Democratic Party	77	54.61
Movimento 5 stelle (M5S)	Five Star Movement	26	18.44
Scelta Civica (SC)	Civic Choice	12	8.51
Sinistra Ecologia Libertà (SEL)	Left Ecology Freedom	11	7.80
Popolo della Libertà (PdL)	People of Freedom	9	6.38
Unione di Centro (UdC)	Centrist Union	3	2.13
Lega Nord (LN)	Northern League	2	1.42
Fratelli d'Italia (FdI)	Brothers of Italy	1	0.71
Total		141	100.00

Source: Italian Candidate Survey 2013 (Di Virgilio *et al.*, 2015b).

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**Table A3.** Logistic regression table.

	(1)	(2)
	Distributive	Expert-based
Ideological distance (Left-right distance between MP and party mean)	-0.737* (0.299)	-0.215 (0.337)
Committee importance for the party	-0.846** (0.301)	-0.581* (0.308)
Party's share of seats	-0.138 (1.317)	0.768 (1.361)
Incumbent without past experience in the preferred committee	-1.977** (0.650)	-4.191** (1.042)
Age (years)	0.052* (0.021)	0.052* (0.021)
University degree	0.490 (0.584)	1.039* (0.566)
Sex (female=1)	0.085 (0.563)	0.244 (0.597)
Constant	5.242+ (2.753)	1.958 (2.779)
Observations	106	111
AIC	135.853	129.265
BIC	157.161	150.941

Standard errors in parentheses. \* $p < 0.1$ , \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ .

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