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The Journal of Legislative Studies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/fjls20>

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Published online: 22 May 2015.

To cite this article: Helene Helboe Pedersen, Darren Halpin & Anne Rasmussen (2015) Who Gives Evidence to Parliamentary Committees? A Comparative Investigation of Parliamentary Committees and their Constituencies, *The Journal of Legislative Studies*, 21:3, 408-427, DOI: [10.1080/13572334.2015.1042292](https://doi.org/10.1080/13572334.2015.1042292)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13572334.2015.1042292>

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Who Gives Evidence to Parliamentary Committees? A Comparative Investigation of Parliamentary Committees and their Constituencies

HELENE HELBOE PEDERSEN*, DARREN HALPIN
and ANNE RASMUSSEN

This article focuses on the interaction between parliamentary committees and external actors. How is the interaction organised, and how does it influence which interests are voiced? The authors show that institutional variation in procedures for calling witnesses and variation in committee agendas influence both the composition of actors and the concentration of evidence. By composition of actors, they refer to the set of different actor types involved. By evidence concentration, they refer to the extent to which evidence is provided by a relatively small share of active actors. The study is based on a new data set of all contacts between parliamentary committees and external actors in one year across three countries: the United Kingdom, Denmark and the Netherlands. Interestingly, the findings show that procedures of invitation rather than open calls increase the diversity of actor composition and decrease the concentration of actor evidence. This, however, comes at a cost, since the overall volume of contacts is reduced.

Keywords: *interest groups; institutions; parliamentary committees; representation; comparative study.*

Introduction

Representation is crucial for democracy to work (Pitkin, 1967). The link between the represented and their representatives is established most directly through elections. Yet representation is no less important between elections, and most political systems have established institutions to facilitate interaction between civil society and the state. While it is generally deemed to be normatively preferable that these institutions be as accessible to the public as possible, in this article we show that when designing institutions we face a trade-off. Inclusive institutions do indeed increase the amount of evidence given, but in contrast to general assumptions more exclusive institutions may actually pave the way for interaction between society and state that is less dominated by strong societal players and mobilises less politically minded actors. We use parliamentary committees as an example of an institution meant to facilitate representation.

Parliamentary committees serve many functions. They improve legislative efficiency through a division of labour, they create opportunity for log-rolling

and agreement formation, and they contribute to building up expertise by allowing members of parliament (MPs) to specialise and by taking evidence from external actors. For some, parliamentary committees are seen as the major innovative institutional change in parliaments since the 1960s, and today it is difficult to find a parliament without committees as a focal point of policymaking and parliamentary activity in general (Aldons, 1985; Arter, 2006; Hindmoor, Larkin, & Kennon, 2009; Krehbiel, 1992; Lijphart, 1999; Longley & Davidson, 1998; Mattson & Strøm, 2004; Shepsle & Weingast, 1987). Although powers vary, committees have the potential not only to ease the legislative process but also to function as an important linkage between state and civil society (Hough, 2012). This helps to secure representation and conduct oversight of the executive. As a transmission belt, parliament provides legitimacy for government actions in parliamentary systems (Norton, 2001, pp. 17–18).

As one might expect, many have examined the influence of parliamentary committees (see, for example, Cairney, 2006; Damgaard & Jensen, 2006; Mattson & Strøm, 2004; Monk, 2009). In this way, most studies focus on the direct legislative impact of these committees whereas other aspects of their work are given less attention (but see Benton & Russell, 2013; Halpin, Baxter, & MacLeod, 2012; Norton, 2002). In particular, little scholarly attention has been given to the way committees engage with external actors and obtain information (for important exceptions, see Halpin, MacLeod, & McLaverty, 2012; Norton, 1999; Rommetvedt, 1998): ‘The relationship between parliament and citizens is one of the least studied areas in legislative studies yet this is a crucial dimension in understanding parliaments and the role they play in our political systems’ (Leston-Bandeira, 2012, p. 265).

In this article we work towards establishing firmer theoretical expectations for explaining patterns of contact between committees and civil society. We examine how differences in committee procedures for taking evidence influence actor composition and evidence concentration. Actor composition refers to the set of different actor types involved in parliamentary committee work: we distinguish among institutions, interest groups, experts and individuals. Evidence concentration refers to the relationship between groups and the volume of evidence they submit. Evidence is concentrated if a high share of evidence is provided by a small share of actors (for example, if only 3 per cent of the actors provide 25 per cent of the evidence). We argue that different instruments of access for involving external stakeholders and different types of committee agenda affect the composition as well as the concentration of the evidence provided to parliamentary committees. In this way, we lay the ground for further explanatory and comparative research in the area.

To test the causal effects of the different institutional procedures on actor composition and evidence concentration we include data on external actor involvement in committee work in Denmark, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom¹ using a new unique data set with more than 20,000 external actor contacts. We test the impact of institutional variation within each national parliament

keeping constant other factors, such as party system, overall state–society relations such as corporatism and pluralism, and the political agenda, because all these factors may also potentially influence contact patterns. We further compare the institutional effects across national parliaments to increase the generalisability of the results.

Our findings indicate that different instruments of access for involving an external stakeholder as well as different types of committee agenda do in fact influence both the composition and concentration of external actor evidence to parliamentary committees. Most importantly, we show how exclusive procedures for external actor involvement where evidence is invited lead to engagement of traditionally less politically active actors and to a situation with less chance of evidence being concentrated in the hands of only a few actors.

How Procedures Influence Interaction between Committees and External Actors

The literature offers little guidance of what to expect when it comes to explaining variation in the composition and concentration of external actor evidence to parliamentary committees. Most country comparative studies have been based on the common knowledge that overall state–society relations may explain differences in the inclusion of external actors (for a discussion of these differences see, for example, Eising, 2007; Rasmussen, 2015). However, political reformists would also emphasise that variation in institutions within a given political system (such as parliamentary institutions) matters. Greater attention has been devoted to institutions since the 1990s (Norton, 2001, p. 16) and most scholars agree that the institutional design has consequences for the policy process as well as the policy outcomes (see, for example, Shepsle & Weingast, 1987). The new committees of the Scottish parliament, for instance, were designed to enhance the role of civil society in the legislative process and to engage the Scottish people actively – and especially traditionally excluded groups – in the democratic process. The results of these efforts are not clear, however, since the same ‘usual suspects’ are still the dominant players giving evidence to the committees (Cairney, Halpin, & Jordan, 2009; Halpin, MacLeod, & McLaverty, 2012). Also, the British select committees have been evaluated based on their ability to make the political process less remote and more accessible to citizens (Hindmoor et al., 2009, p. 73).

Preferences of the Actors

Before we identify institutional factors that might explain variation in the composition and concentration of evidence from external actors we need to lay out our assumptions regarding all the actors involved in evidence giving. On the one side of the interaction we find the committee members. We assume that MPs consider *representation* and *information quality* (Jensen, 2012) when selecting external actors from whom to take evidence.

Representation is of obvious importance when committees decide whether and who to involve in their work. Committee documents are most often made public and it would reflect badly on the committees, committee members, as well as the parliament if committees refrained from taking evidence from the main stakeholders closely related to the topic being discussed.

Information quality is likely to be another concern (see Bouwen, 2004). Even though committee members may favour information supporting their policy position they have an interest in being as fully informed as possible when developing arguments or making a final decision about their position. Hence, we assume that committees prefer to engage with external stakeholders who are knowledgeable about the issue and with those who can contribute new knowledge or new perspectives.

On the other side of the interaction we find a set of very different actors, including individuals, companies, interest groups and public institutions. All of these actors are interested in influencing public policy, yet for some this is a main focus whereas for others it is a passing distraction from other 'core business'. Therefore, they may not be equally eager to spend their resources – time and/or money – on providing information to parliamentary committees.

This distinction is critical to Salisbury's (1984) classification of lobbying actors into 'institutions', that is, individual corporations, state and local governments, universities, and so on, and 'interest groups', defined as membership organisations.² His point is that interest groups and institutions are fundamentally different because all interest groups face the problem of establishing legitimacy of their representational claims (Salisbury, 1984, p. 67). Group legitimacy is based on its members and therefore groups always need to justify their claims by reference to the members and are constantly aware of the importance of recruiting new members and maintaining old ones. By contrast, institutions have interests of their own and can make claims independently of their staff, workers or affiliates. Of course institutions are vulnerable: employees may quit their job in a company, students may flee from a university and citizens may leave a town. However, institutions will only very seldom legitimise their claims by reference to the interests of the employees or students (Salisbury, 1984).

Based on Salisbury's distinction, we assume that the lobbying motivations of leaders in institutions versus groups vary. Leaders of institutions lobby to change (or avoid changes in) public policy to the (dis)advantage of their interests. Group leaders engage for the same reason but *also* because this is what they are assigned to do. Members support a group because they expect it to lobby and express the policy position of the group. Therefore, groups may lobby not only if they believe they will have some success in terms of policy but also to represent their members in the public debate. It is important for groups to be visible advocates in order to attract and maintain members. Hence, interest groups have a double motivation for approaching parliamentary committees in order both to seek influence and to ensure representation.

Institutional Variation: Access and Agenda

An important aspect of the institutionalisation of parliamentary committees is their ability to attract organised interests (Norton, 1998, p. 151). However, it is not only the amount but also the type of evidence that is important. We are interested in whether variation in two types of institutional factor within a system can explain variation in the composition and concentration of external actor contacts to committees. The institutions we consider are: (1) different instruments of *access* for involving an external stakeholder; and (2) different types of committee *agenda*. We use the mix of actor types involved (institutions versus interest groups) to study actor composition. To examine actor concentration, we compare the relationship between groups and the amount of evidence they submit to examine whether there is a non-proportional relationship between groups and evidence giving. More specifically, we examine whether a small number of actors account for a disproportionate share of the evidence provided.

The term access instrument refers to the procedures for involving external actors in committee work. Access may be closed or open. When access is closed external actors need to be invited by the committee to be able to voice their interests and provide information directly to the committee. When access is open evidence is taken by an open call where everyone can reply or evidence giving is initiated by the external actors themselves.

Open access is therefore determined solely by the lobbying preferences of the actors themselves. Based on our assumption that interest groups have multiple incentives for being active, they are likely to dominate contacts to committees when the procedure of access is open. By contrast, when the procedure of access is closed committees also influence the composition of actors. Even though it is difficult to imagine that committees would prefer to hear evidence from one type of actor over another, procedures of invitation may lead to a list of actors in which institutions constitute a larger share than those where no invitation is required. Listening to external actors takes time, and time is a scarce resource in parliamentary work. In order to save time committees will therefore invite only the major stakeholders in the population of interest groups. In addition, they will try to broaden the range of stakeholders involved by actively seeking unbiased and high-quality information from experts and government officials as well. Both experts and government officials can also be expected to be more likely to get involved if they are invited. Hence, owing to the assumed preferences of committees to obtain representative and high-quality information, our first expectation is:

E1: Interest groups will constitute a relatively larger share of involved actors when access is open than when it is closed.

Further, when access is open resourceful professional lobbyists can take full advantage of their knowledge about the political agenda and the political state of play and dominate contacts with parliamentary committees. By contrast,

when access is closed committees may seek out actors with specialised knowledge or whose position is likely to play a crucial role in the implementation phase no matter what their level of resources. In this way, closed access can make room for less professional actors. This will result in a situation where evidence is less likely to be concentrated in the hands of a low number of professional actors and as a consequence we expect:

E2: Evidence will be less concentrated when access is closed than when it is open.

Another key element in the institutional set-up of parliamentary committees is the procedure for setting the committee agenda (Mattson & Strøm, 2004; Norton, 1998, p. 149). Again we contrast an open agenda with a closed agenda. A closed agenda is one where the committee itself cannot set the agenda. Such an agenda could be a specific bill, which would typically be proposed by the government. In this case the committee will only take evidence on this specific bill. By contrast, an open agenda refers to a situation where external actors participate in points on the agenda chosen by the committee or by the external actors themselves. In this way, open agendas refer to situations where the committee is free to discuss any topic of interest within its jurisdiction and external actors may try to influence this agenda by giving evidence. We expect differences between closed and open committee agendas to influence the composition of actors and concentration of actor evidence.

In parliamentary systems, governments typically dominate the legislative process (Döring, 1995; Norton, 1999). Majority governments are able to propose and vote bills through parliament, and even minority governments are typically able to enact bills they propose to parliament owing to inter-party negotiations with parties in opposition prior to parliamentary debates in committees (Christiansen & Pedersen, 2014; Strøm, 1990). Hence, in the case of closed agendas, parliamentary committees serve primarily as arenas for the opposition to scrutinise and criticise the bills proposed by the government. Usually the bills are adopted and not changed substantially during the parliamentary readings. Institutions are assumed to lobby primarily to influence public policy, and they may participate in committee work on bills to defend or improve gains won in the administrative negotiations (Baumgartner, Berry, Hojnacki, Kimball, & Leech, 2009, p. 164; Richardson & Jordan, 1979). However, new institutions are not likely to engage at this point because of the relatively high cost and small potential gain. Interest groups, however, also lobby to show their members that they are active and represent their interests. They may therefore be willing to invest resources in committee lobbying even in situations where they know that policy gains are unlikely or can be expected to be minor. Consequently, we expect:

E3: Interest groups are more likely to dominate the composition of actors on closed agendas related to bills than on open agendas.

Turning to evidence concentration, when the agenda is closed fewer actors may be strongly affected by the specific bill being scrutinised. However, all of the affected actors are likely to participate in committee discussions of the relevant bill because it will have concrete consequences for them and this is the last opportunity to influence it. By contrast, when the agenda is open more actors will engage to try to influence the agenda. However, as the consequences of a potential change of the political agenda are unclear, it is likely that participation is not divided equally between them, but that only professional lobbyists will keep regular and close contacts with parliamentary committees during such relatively open discussions. Hence, even though more actors may engage when the agenda is open, we expect relatively few of them to dominate the contacts. Thus, our final expectation is:

E4: There will be lower evidence concentration on closed agendas related to bills than on open agendas.

Research Design and Empirical Background

We test our expectations in three national parliaments (Denmark, the Netherlands and the UK). Our goal is to test how different procedures for establishing access and setting the agenda influence the composition of actors and concentration of evidence within a given country: in so doing we also consider the specific population of external actors, tradition of interaction between civil society and state, and balance of power between government and parliament of each national case. We include multiple countries to see how robust our findings are across different national settings. Our countries are selected based on two considerations: (1) they should provide us with variation in the type of institutions (committee procedures) we expect to affect actor composition and evidence concentration; and (2) they should be as different as possible on factors (besides these committee procedures) that may influence our dependent variables. We selected three countries. To meet our first criterion we included Denmark as well as the Netherlands to have the relevant variation in the institutional procedures. The work of Danish committees varies on the agenda dimension with the distinction between legislative, closed agendas and non-legislative, open agendas, but not on the access dimension, since all access is open. By contrast, the Dutch data vary in relation to the access dimension where both closed and open procedures for evidence submission exist, but not on the agenda dimension. To meet our second criterion we include the UK, which is different from Denmark as well as the Netherlands in many relevant ways. The UK represents a pluralist tradition whereas the Netherlands and Denmark are typically seen as examples of a corporatist one (see, for example, Lijphart, 1999; Siaroff, 1999). The UK is considered to be a two-party system whereas the Danish and Dutch cases are considered to be multi-party systems. The formal powers of British committees are weak compared with the Dutch and especially the Danish committees

(Mattson & Strøm, 2004). Taken together, the three countries share important differences and similarities in how external actors participate in the work of parliamentary committees. These are described in more detail below, with a particular focus on describing the types of contact used by external actors on the key dimensions of agenda and access.

The British Case

The British case is represented by Westminster. A large part of the work of the House of Commons and the House of Lords takes place in committees made up of MPs or Lords. These committees consider policy issues, scrutinise the work and expenditure of the government, and examine proposals for primary and secondary legislation (Norton, 1998).

There are basically two forms of committee in the UK: select and bill committees. Bill committees are appointed to consider proposed legislation in detail (Hindmoor et al., 2009). Hence for these committees the agenda is closed. Bill committees reflect the political make-up of the House, which also means that the government always has a majority, allowing faster processing of bills. Select committees resemble the departmental structure of government and examine the spending, policies and administration of a given department. Members of a select committee (minimum of 11) have the power to decide upon the topic of an inquiry, and the results they obtain from taking and debating written and oral evidence are published on the parliamentary website. The government is obliged to respond within 60 days to committee recommendations. Thus, select committees operate by what we have called an open agenda.

In addition, we can distinguish between two types of evidence: oral and written. Bill and select committees both have the power to take written and oral evidence even though not all bill committees in fact do so. Oral evidence is always invited. In select committees, members most often choose the witnesses themselves, whereas witnesses for bill committees are essentially selected by the whips, with the committee members ratifying this selection. Written evidence is obtained by an open call, where all interested actors can respond. The procedure for taking oral evidence is an example of closed access because you need to be invited as a witness to give evidence. Written evidence is an example of open access, as external actors may choose whether or not to respond to the open call.

The Danish Case

In Denmark the procedures for taking evidence are very different and much less formalised. The standing committees align closely with government departments and their members are appointed by the parliamentary party groups in such a way that the committee composition resembles the balance of power between the parties in parliament. The work of the committees is divided into two parts called *general* and *specific*. In the specific part committees scrutinise parliamentary decisions – primarily bills – while in the general part they engage in a range of other business (for instance, asking questions not related to bills to the minister

and debating issues decided by the committee). In this sense Danish committees perform the task of both the British select and bill committees. This means that the type of agenda of the Danish committees varies depending on the task. On the so-called 'specific part' of the committee work the agenda is closed, whereas in relation to the so-called 'general part' the agenda is open.

While British select committees typically call for evidence on specific issues, the contact with external actors in the Danish committees is primarily driven by external actors calling attention to specific problems or issues they care about. Evidence during both the general and specific parts can be oral as well as written. In both cases the procedures are very informal. *Deputations* are a variant of oral evidence, where external actors appear on their own initiative. Here, you need to be accepted before you can show up – but almost everybody is – and you will have 15 minutes, unless the committee decides otherwise, to make your claim. Anyone can write to or visit the committees on whatever they find important. In the Danish case all procedures for involving external actors are therefore examples of open access.³

The Dutch Case

Dutch standing committees also generally resemble the departmental structure of the government and have their members appointed by the party groups. Similar to the Danish committees, Dutch committees combine the tasks of British select and bill committees. In preparation for processing a proposed new bill, the committee may start an investigation, consisting of rounds of written/oral questions to the individual proposing the bill. If the committee deems additional investigation necessary it may also organise meetings with stakeholders, although this is rare. The committee can decide to invite external actors to hearings, roundtables, or conversations (*gesprekken*). The meeting agenda and the list of invitees are both set by the committee. In hearings, external actors are 'heard' consecutively, without much interaction between them. Though almost similar in terms of procedure, a roundtable is more deliberative in nature, even though the committee generally takes the lead in asking questions. Finally, the committee can also decide to invite an actor for a *gesprek*; these are usually more informal one-on-one conversations (no other actors), with often only a few members of the committee attending. These meetings are all examples of closed access since participation relies on prior invitation.

External actors may, however, also take the initiative to provide oral/written evidence to the parliamentary committee. Any citizen can write a letter to the committee, for instance to comment on a bill or to complain or call attention to certain problems or issues in society. On their own initiative actors can also submit a petition to the parliamentary committee. After the submission is allowed by the committee president, the actor is given the opportunity to submit the petition formally to the committee in a brief meeting. During this brief meeting with parliament, the external actor has some time to emphasise

specific points. The procedure works in a similar manner as *deputations* in Denmark and constitutes an example of open agenda and open access.

Comparative Matrix

From the description of the procedures in these three countries there is evidence of contacts that relate to the key dimensions of agenda and access. Looking at the first dimension, the select committees in the UK set their agenda themselves whereas bill committees have a closed agenda. In this way, evidence from different committees constitutes examples of open and closed agendas, respectively. In Denmark the agenda is open on issues related to the ‘general part’, whereas the agenda is closed on activities discussed in the ‘specific part’ of committee activities. In this system, all evidence is filed according to these different parts, which enables us to separate evidence on open and closed agendas. Unfortunately, it is difficult to do the same in the Netherlands. Evidence is not separated according to the type of task the committee performs, meaning external actor evidence during meetings may relate to open or closed agenda items. Turning to access, no evidence is taken by invitation in Denmark (at least not as a formal procedure), whereas in the Netherlands as well as in the UK oral evidence is mostly taken by invitation (the only exception is petitions in the Netherlands). Hence, in both the Dutch and British cases we can distinguish between evidence that did and did not require a pre-invitation. The two dimensions and the ordering of the different procedures on these dimensions are illustrated in [Table 1](#).

Table 1: Matrix of Procedural Dimensions in Taking Evidence in Parliamentary Committees

		Committee Agendas	
		Agenda Set for Committee	Agenda Open
Instruments of access for involving external stakeholders	Open access (no or very inclusive invitations)	DK: Letters and deputations on specific part NL: Letters related to bills UK: Written evidence to bill committees	DK: Letters and deputations on general part NL: Petitions and letters not related to bills UK: Written evidence to select committees
	Closed access (exclusive invitations)	DK: Not existent NL: Hearings/ roundtables and <i>gesprekken</i> related to bills UK: Oral evidence to bill committees	DK: Expert meetings (no data available) NL: Hearings/ roundtables and <i>gesprekken</i> related to bills UK: Oral evidence to select committees

Notes: *Gesprekken* = conversations.

*For illustrative purpose we show how the Dutch contacts could be divided according to both dimensions even though we are not able to do this separation based on the data available.

Data Set

To explore the composition and concentration of evidence to parliamentary committees by external actors we have compiled a data set consisting of all evidence given to parliamentary committees in one year in the three countries. Years were selected in each country to be the most recent – the project from which these data emerge commenced in 2011 – and not to include an election.

In Denmark, data were collected from the parliamentary website (www.ft.dk), which stores and publishes⁴ all documents sent to committees. We have registered all evidence from 1 July 2009 to 30 June 2010. A printed version of the letters was coded. Deputations were coded based on the meeting agendas of the committees. In total, our data set consists of 3181 pieces of evidence from external actors in Denmark (2686 letters and 495 deputations).

In the UK we also obtained data from the parliamentary website (www.parliament.uk). Written and oral evidence are published electronically and are easily accessible. We collected data from 1 August 2010 to 31 July 2011. In total, we registered 8447 pieces of evidence (6393 written, 2054 oral).

For the Netherlands we compiled a list of all letters discussed by parliamentary committees in the year 2011 (from 1 January to 31 December 2011). Although such lists are generally not published by the parliament, these are not confidential and are available on request. For the entire year, we collected a total number of 6952 letters, sent to all different parliamentary committees. In addition to written evidence, we collected data regarding meetings by consulting the parliament's agenda in 2011. In total, we have data on 183 hearings/roundtables (with 1615 external actors participating), 267 *gesprekken* (with 351 actors) and 146 petitions (183 actors).

The unit of analysis in most of the following analyses is a given activity per actor (for example, letter X sent by actor Y). If more than one actor participated in a given activity, each actor is counted as a separate unit in the analysis (letter X sent by actor Y and Z counts as two units in the analysis).

To describe the composition of different actor types, we coded actor types according to the scheme developed in the INTERARENA project (www.interarena.dk) and distinguished between 12 actor types (see Table 2). Moreover, to examine how concentrated the supply of evidence is, we present graphic illustrations of the relationship between the share of actors and their share of evidence.

The Impact of Access Procedures

We argued above that interest groups would be less prominent when access to committees is closed. The argument was that in order to save time committees would: (1) only take evidence from main stakeholders among the population of interest groups; and (2) prioritise obtaining information from a varied set of actors representing a broad range of societal interests, including those of civil

Table 2: Within-Case Analyses: The Impact of Different Access Instruments on Actor Composition in British and Dutch Committees

	United Kingdom		The Netherlands	
	Uninvited	Invited	Uninvited	Invited
	Open Access (written evidence)	Closed Access (oral evidence)	Open Access (letters and petitions)	Closed Access (<i>gesprekken</i> , hearings, and roundtables)
Institutions	2178 (4.1)	994 (48.4)	1798 (25.2)	823 (41.9)
Governmental stakeholders	456 (7.1)	468 (22.8)	132 (1.9)	49 (2.5)
Municipal stakeholders	307 (4.8)	49 (2.4)	439 (6.2)	113 (5.7)
Public stakeholders	577 (9.0)	187 (9.1)	521 (7.3)	338 (17.2)
Private companies	742 (11.6)	241 (11.7)	492 (6.9)	222 (11.3)
Public committees	96 (1.5)	49 (2.4)	214 (7.3)	101 (5.1)
Interest groups	2260 (35.4)	674 (32.8)	3228 (45.2)	610 (31.0)
National interest groups	1837 (28.7)	593 (28.9)	2841 (39.9)	568 (28.9)
Local interest groups	359 (5.6)	60 (2.9)	302 (4.2)	18 (0.9)
International interest groups	64 (1.0)	21 (1.0)	85 (1.2)	24 (1.2)
Other actors	1955 (30.6)	386 (18.8)	2109 (29.6)	533 (27.01)
Experts	318 (5.0)	174 (8.5)	213 (3.0)	253 (12.9)
Individuals	1185 (18.5)	41 (2.0)	1720 (24.1)	116 (8.3)
Parties and politicians	83 (1.3)	41 (2.0)	80 (1.1)	51 (5.9)
Various other actors (e.g. think tanks and foundations)*	343 (5.4)	121 (5.9)	70 (1.0)	41 (2.1)
<i>Unable to determine</i>	26 (0.4)	9 (0.4)	26 (0.4)	72 (3.7)
Total:	6393 (100.1)	2054 (100.1)	7135 (100.0)	1966 (100.0)

Notes: Units are contributions from external actors.

servants implementing and administrating the policy, politicians responsible for the policy, and institutions affected by it. As mentioned already, no evidence is invited in Denmark and therefore Denmark is excluded from this analysis. We compare oral (invited) and written (not invited) evidence in the UK and letters and petitions to invited evidence in *gesprekken* and hearings/roundtables in the Netherlands. Table 2 shows the distribution of actor types across invited versus not invited evidence.

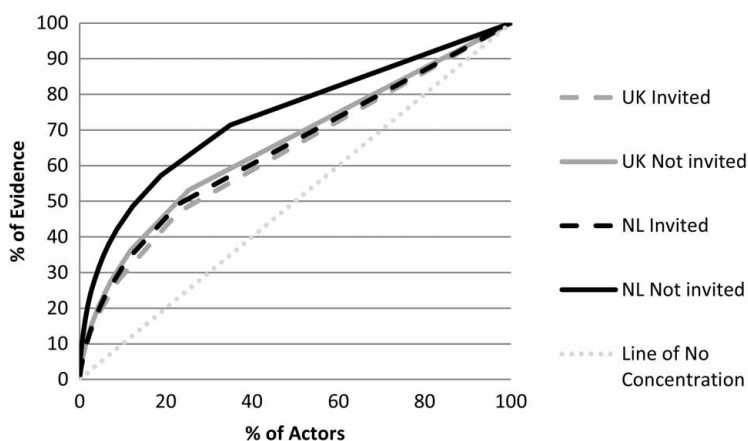
We find a similar pattern across the two countries. In the UK, institutions, interest groups and other actors constitute approximately one-third each when access is open. When actors are invited to give evidence, institutions constitute 48 per cent of the actors ($\text{Chi}^2 = 165.77$, $p < 0.000$).⁵ In the Netherlands the expected reduction in the dominance of interest groups is even stronger. Here the share of institutions changes from 25.2 to 41.9 per cent when the second chamber moves from open to closed invitation processes ($\text{Chi}^2 = 208.68$, $p < 0.000$).

Within these overall actor categories we also notice interesting changes. Most importantly, the inclusion of experts seems to depend on procedures of invitations. Experts constitute a far larger share of the actors when they are specifically invited by the committee rather than when access is open. By contrast, individuals tend to be excluded from the invited process. In the UK the increase in the share of institutions is down to governmental stakeholders whereas private companies as well as public stakeholder also seem to benefit from procedures of invitation in the Netherlands. In the UK, the tradition of inviting those responsible for developing a bill (for example, public servants) to present it to the committee in oral evidence might be one factor in explaining this finding.

It is remarkable that these differences in the composition of uninvited and invited actors that participate are stable across the two countries despite their different state–society structures. Consistent with our expectation, committees do try to involve a broad range of actors less active in open processes, such as different types of institution and expert, when they control who participates.

We also expected closed access to result in reduced evidence concentration. Figure 1 shows how the concentration of evidence varies depending on the procedures of access. The figure includes five lines, two for each country separating written from oral evidence and a baseline illustrating a situation with no concentration. The horizontal axis shows the percentages of all active actors sorted according to their activity so that the most active actor appears as the first percentage. The vertical axis shows the share of evidence. To give an example, 20 per

Figure 1: The Impact of Access Procedures on Evidence Concentration in the United Kingdom and The Netherlands. Comparing Invited versus Not Invited Evidence.



Note: The figure only includes evidence given by organisations and institutions, as it would bias the picture if we included different other actors such as individuals or experts who are unlikely to participate in the political process several times during the same year.

cent of the uninvited actors account for approximately 60 per cent of the uninvited evidence in the Dutch parliament.

For our expectation to be met, the lines for the invited evidence should be placed closer to the baseline than the lines for uninvited evidence. The figure supports our expectation. For the Netherlands in particular it is clear that the invited evidence is much less concentrated than the uninvited evidence. Here 24 per cent of all invited actors account for 50 per cent of the invited evidence whereas only 13 per cent of all actors without prior invitation account for 50 per cent of this type of evidence.

The three most invited Dutch actors are the Confederation of Netherlands Industry and Employers (VNO-NCW), Utrecht University, and the Local Government Association (VNG). VNO-NCW and VNG are also among the three most active actors together with the trade union confederation (FNV) when access is open. Hence, the main professional political players organising workers, industry, and local administration get involved independently of the access procedure. Still, seven out of the 10 most invited actors are institutions, whereas only one of the 10 most active non-invited actors is an institution.

The tendency for concentration is the same in the UK though much less clear. Here 27 per cent of all invited actors account for 50 per cent of the oral evidence whereas 23 per cent of all non-invited actors account for 50 per cent of the written evidence. The most invited actors are the Local Government Association, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, and four other governmental departments who share third place. The actors that provide most written evidence are an association for the elderly, Age UK, the Public and Commercial Services Union, while the Local Government Association and the Department for Education share third place. Similar to the Dutch case, nine out of the 12 most active non-invited actors are organisations while only five of the 13 most often invited actors are organisations.

In both countries, the total number of active groups is larger when access is open, but the evidence provided is distributed more equally among the actors when access is closed. Overall, the impact of access on evidence concentration is thus similar across very different national settings, which supports our argument. The significance of the impact is, however, different across the two countries. This may suggest an interaction effect, according to which the impact of access procedures is conditioned by overall state–society relations. Especially in a corporatist country such as the Netherlands, where larger well-institutionalised actors enjoy a privileged position, committee invitations may function as a venue for involving actors who are not part of the corporatist structure. Such findings ought to be the scope of further analysis in future work.

The Impact of Committee Agendas

The second factor we consider in our comparative matrix is the type of agenda. We distinguished between closed committee agendas (set by the government

which proposes new legislation) and open ones (set by the committee or external actors themselves). We argued that closed agendas increase the dominance of interest groups since institutions will generally find it less attractive to invest resources in battles already won by the government. Further, we argued that closed agendas are likely to decrease the concentration of evidence submitted because open agendas will attract resourceful and professional lobbyists who are likely to be very active in the political system.

In these analyses we only include Denmark and the UK as we have already explained how our Dutch data make it difficult to determine committee agendas in a reliable manner. To separate closed and open agendas, we distinguish between written evidence to select and bill committees, respectively, in the UK, and in Denmark we compare letters filed under the so-called 'specific part' of committee agendas with letters filed under the so-called 'general part'.

Table 3 supports our hypothesis regarding the composition of actors. In both Denmark and the UK the dominance of interest groups is even higher when

Table 3: Within-Case Analyses: The Impact of Committee Agenda on Interest Participation

	Denmark		United Kingdom	
	Non-legislative	Legislative	Non-legislative	Legislative
	Evidence on General Part	Evidence on Specific Part	Select Committees (written evidence)	Bill Committees (written evidence)
Institutions	586 (23.3)	78 (12.1)	1877 (34.89)	301 (29.5)
Governmental stakeholders	64 (2.5)	2 (0.3)	382 (7.1)	74 (7.3)
Municipal stakeholders	10 (4.3)	12 (1.9)	227 (4.2)	80 (7.9)
Public stakeholders	93 (3.7)	4 (0.6)	523 (9.7)	54 (5.3)
Private companies	252 (10.0)	55 (8.5)	663 (12.3)	79 (7.8)
Public committees	70 (2.8)	5 (0.8)	82 (1.5)	14 (1.4)
Interest groups	1096 (43.5)	442 (68.3)	1851(34.4)	409 (40.1)
National interest groups	905 (36.0)	389 (60.1)	1467 (27.3)	370 (36.3)
Local interest groups	168 (6.7)	48 (7.4)	321 (6.0)	38 (3.7)
International interest groups	23 (0.9)	5 (0.8)	63 (1.2)	1 (0.1)
Other actors	835 (33.2)	127 (19.6)	1646 (30.6)	309 (30.3)
Experts	1 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	292 (5.4)	26 (2.6)
Individuals	789 (31.3)	118 (18.2)	953 (17.7)	232 (22.8)
Political parties and politicians	8 (0.3)	1 (0.2)	79 (1.5)	4 (0.4)
Various other actors (e.g. think tanks and foundations)	34 (1.4)	3 (0.5)	303 (5.6)	40 (3.9)
<i>Unable to determine</i>	<i>3 (0.1)</i>	<i>5 (0.8)</i>	<i>19 (0.4)</i>	<i>7 (0.7)</i>
Total:	2517 (100.0)	647 (100.0)	5374 (100.0)	1019 (100.0)

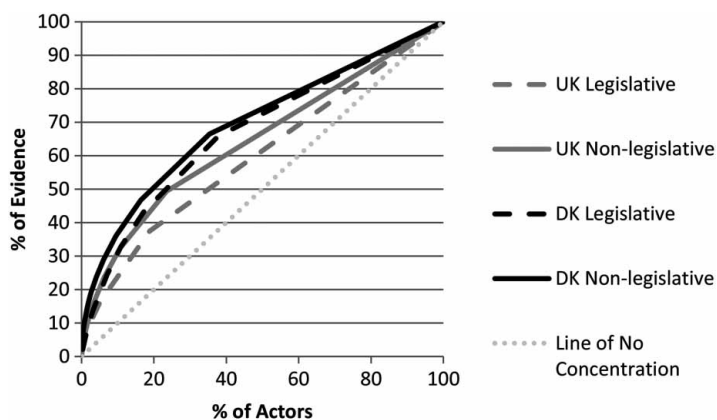
Note: Units are contributions from external actors.

committees discuss bills as compared with non-legislative activities. This is particularly the case for Denmark. Not just the overall category of institutions but all types of institution constitute a smaller share of the evidence given on closed agendas compared with open agendas. Moreover, the share of interest group evidence increases from 43.5 to 68.3 per cent ($\text{Chi}^2 = 74.23, p < 0.000$). We see a similar but weaker trend in the UK where the share of interest group increases from 34 to 40 per cent ($\text{Chi}^2 = 15.18, p = 0.001$). Hence, as expected, the agenda of parliamentary committees does influence the type of actors willing to invest time and resources in contacting the committees and voicing their interests.

Figure 2 shows the concentration of evidence for different types of agenda in the different countries. We expected higher concentration when the agenda was open than when it was closed. This means that lines for legislative evidence in Figure 2 should be placed closer to the baseline in the diagram than lines for the non-legislative evidence. The figure supports our expectation. In both countries the dotted line for legislative evidence is placed closer to the baseline than the full line.

In the UK 24 per cent of the actors account for 50 per cent of the evidence provided for the non-legislative agenda, whereas 35 per cent of the actors account for 50 per cent of evidence regarding bills. The most active actors giving written evidence to select committees are all organisations (the Local Government Association, British Medical Association, National Farmers' Union and the Public and Commercial Services Union) whereas the top score

Figure 2: The Impact of Agenda Procedures for Evidence Concentration in Denmark and the United Kingdom. Legislative versus Non-legislative Committee Activities.



Note: The figure only includes evidence given by organisations and institutions, as it would bias the picture if we included different other actors such as individuals or experts who are unlikely to participate in the political process several times during the same year.

for providing written evidence to bill committees is the Department for Education, followed by Age UK and MenCap, a charity for people with learning disabilities.

In Denmark the difference is smaller and the lines are closer together. Here 20 per cent of the actors account for 50 per cent of the non-legislative evidence whereas 23 per cent account for 50 per cent of the legislative evidence. The three actors providing most written evidence to the non-legislative agenda of Danish committees are two usual suspects, the Disabled Peoples' Organisations Denmark and Danish Regions, plus the Free Consumers of Electricity, which is not a major political player in Danish politics but uses the open agenda and access to engage in campaigning (Pedersen, 2014). The three actors providing most written evidence to the legislative agenda are Disabled Peoples' Organisations Denmark, the Danish Bankers' Association and Travelling Workers for Fair Taxes.

In total, fewer actors were active in relation to the closed, legislative agendas of the committees, but the evidence was more dispersed among these actors than in the case of the open, non-legislative agenda. In sum, procedures of committee agenda-setting do influence evidence concentration as we expected and in a similar way across two very different countries in terms of state–society relations.

Conclusion

This article set out to address a gap in the literature on legislative committees. Namely, to develop a better empirical understanding of who gives evidence to committees rather than focusing on the legislative impact of these committees. At the same time, we aspired to work towards the development of a clearer set of expectations about the composition and concentration of populations of organised interest engaging with legislative committees, from a comparative perspective.

In line with our expectations, we saw that the composition and concentration of external actor evidence depend on the institutional procedures for taking evidence within countries. First, we highlighted the importance of whether access required invitation and whether the agenda related to legislative or non-legislative activities. As expected, procedures of open access where prior invitation was not required in order to submit evidence increased the dominance of interest groups over other actors and it intensified the tendency for evidence giving to be concentrated in the hands of a few actors. By contrast, more exclusive, closed access procedures – where actors are invited to give evidence – mobilise different types of actor (such as experts and private companies) to give evidence. In such cases, the evidence provided is also less concentrated and comes from a broader number of different actors.

Second, the analysis also supports our expectation that closed agendas increase the dominance of interest groups compared to open committee agendas, where the agenda is not set beforehand but can be influenced by

committee members and external interest. Under closed agendas, interest groups are more willing to engage in the legislative work of committees than other actor types even though governments mostly dominate this process. They are likely to do so because they have a greater incentive to voice their interest and publicly represent their members than other actor types analysed. Finally, we also saw that evidence is less concentrated in the hands of a few active groups when the committee agenda is closed. Hence, even though fewer actors are active under such closed agendas the evidence they provide is distributed more equally among them.

Overall, our theoretical framework helped us to describe and explain the relationship between committees and external actors. Although it no doubt has room for refinement, the dimensions of agenda and access offer a useful heuristic in exploring data on external actor engagement with legislative committees.

Our findings suggest that the political engagement of civil society is not only a product of structural state–society relations but also influenced by the specific institutions regulating this contact, which vary within a given political system. Actually, more demand-driven procedures of invitations may lead to the involvement of a greater variety of actors whose input may be of great relevance but could be overlooked if they are not urged to contribute. However, such exclusive procedures also come with a cost in the number of mobilised actors. Hence, the committees face a trade-off between open procedures making room for many voices but also highly dominated by the political professional, on the one hand, and closed procedures reducing the amount of evidence but increasing the diversity in the actors providing it, on the other. The institutional design of parliamentary committees is by no means trivial for their ability to function as a linkage between state and civil society.

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Notes

1. Here United Kingdom refers to Westminster and we include evidence from bills as well as select committees.
2. This is consistent with the practice of others in the field using large data sets; see, for example, Gray and Lowery (1996).

3. In documents on parliamentary activities we also find a number of expert meetings but no data are provided regarding where these meetings took place or the participants. We have asked for further information about these meetings but have not been able to obtain any.
4. A few documents are not published if they contain sensitive details on personal matters.
5. Controlling for committee shows that invitations are used slightly differently in bill and select committees. Select committee invitations benefit institutions at the cost of organisations as well as other types of actor. Bill committees tend to invite relatively more organisations at the expense of other actors while institutions constitute the same share across procedures.

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