

The Politics of Legislative Debates

Hanna Bäck, Marc Debus, Jorge M. Fernandes (eds.)

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Caroline Bhattacharya

Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Helsinki / Department of Political and International Studies, University of Birmingham
caroline.bhattacharya@helsinki.fi

Parliamentary debates and the (party) politics shaping them have attracted increasing attention from the academic community. The emergence of digital parliamentary records has given researchers new opportunities to draw on advanced statistical methods and text-as-data techniques to analyse legislative debates over longer periods and more cases. This new impetus has revived discussions about how debates are organised, how parliamentary actors behave in them and, ultimately, what these debates say about our democratic politics more generally – especially in comparison to extensively studied roll-call votes. The *Politics of Legislative Debates* provides an excellent insight into the state-of-the-art of the field and where it might be heading. Its main objectives are to map the different institutional settings and provide recent empirical insights into speechmaking patterns across the globe to enhance our understanding of “how and why some representatives participate more frequently in legislative debates than others” (p. 825). Bäck, Debus and Fernandes brought together an impressive number of leading scholars and country experts to achieve this.

The book is organised into five chapters, which accompany the introduction and conclusion in setting out the framework for the comparative analysis, and 33 detailed case studies. The theoretical framework builds on Proksch and Slapin’s (2012; 2015) influential theory of speech allocation between the frontbenches and backbenches in the face of intra-party disagreement, which portrays individual MPs and party leaders as strategic actors operating in the “institutional structure of parliament, as well as party rules, [that] reflect the

underlying incentive structures resulting from electoral rules” (Chapter 3, 39). This approach is extended here to (semi-)presidential systems, which tend to have more open floor access (see Taylor in Chapter 4), and to consider agenda control, MPs’ personal characteristics, seniority, broader inter-party and government–opposition dynamics, as well as party ideology. A deeper understanding of the different conditions under which speeches are held will improve our inferences about broader phenomena. As highlighted by Laver, “[p]arty discipline is no longer an assumption but a model prediction” (Chapter 2, 32), but our theoretical assumptions differ depending on whether we want to draw inferences about inter- or intra-party politics. Speech data is incredibly rich, and Goplerud reminds us that “[w]hile sophisticated tools from computer science or statistics can lead to great insights, similarly considerable insights can come from thinking about simple but theoretically motivated ways of transforming the original data” (Chapter 5, p. 86). In this volume, the number and length of speeches given by an individual MP are used as straightforward measures to tell a story about debate participation.

Very coherently, each case study presents an overview of where the parliament sits constitutionally in the political system, the main features of the party system, the formal and informal rules of legislative debate and empirical findings of speechmaking patterns. Unrestricted access to the floor for individual legislators is rare, with speaking opportunities usually controlled by party leaders. In 60 per cent of the cases, women speak less often and/or shorter than their male counterparts,

and there is some evidence that this gender gap is smaller or absent when there are *fewer* female representatives in the party or legislature. Experience has a positive effect in two-thirds of the cases; whereas no clear conclusion can be drawn whether party leaders speak more often themselves where the institutional setting grants them more control over floor access. Particularly interesting are cases where changes in procedural or electoral rules allow for within-parliament comparisons (see, e.g., the chapters on the European Parliament by Sorace and on Italy by Giannetti and Pedrazzani).

The Politics of Legislative Debates is a comprehensive and enlightening collection of empirical research on parliamentary speechmaking. Taylor touches upon why broad participation is desirable from a deliberative perspective (Chapter 4, 59–60), but this line of research would benefit from more discussion of the normative implications. As pointed out by Slapin and Proksch, the next step needs to be “to generate a more complete picture of the relevance and impact of parliamentary debate on representation” (Chapter 3, 48). This calls for more research into the substantive content of speeches. Thanks to large-scale datasets like *ParlSpeech V2* (Rauh/Schwalbach 2020), researchers can access speech data from more and more parliaments with just a few clicks, but as Schwalbach and Rauh (Chapter 6) note, the importance of ‘local’ knowledge (pertaining to language and understanding of procedures and conventions in the respective chamber) must not be underestimated. As data on politicians’ background is becoming more accessible (see, e.g., Göbel/Munzert 2022), this type of analysis can be extended to include more personal characteristics.

Since scholars also consult edited collections like this one to choose cases for comparative analyses or to find (country) experts for collaborations, etc., the geographical coverage of cases and authors as well as personal characteristics of contributors such as gender matter for the progression of our sub-discipline. While narrowing the case selection to democratic countries is justified, the editors acknowledge that “more work needs to be done covering additional cases in, for example, Africa and Latin America” (11). I would also add Asia to the list of regions that deserve more scholarly attention; for instance, the absence of India is striking. It would also be advisable to redress the gender balance of authors in any future edition.

I have already used the book on numerous occasions to double-check rules or look up findings for cases I am researching myself, to gain a more detailed understanding of less familiar cases when commenting on other researchers’ work, as well as to satisfy my curiosity about the arrangements in parliaments I know little or nothing about. It is a fantastic reference book for all these use cases and highly recommended for anyone

with an interest in parliamentary speech and debates, whether from a comparative perspective or not. *The Politics of Legislative Debates* not only makes a significant contribution on its own, but also complements other handbooks that scholars in parliamentary and legislative studies have been treated with in recent years (e.g., Martin et al. 2014, Benoît/Rozenberg 2020).

References

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