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Party Whips and Expertise: Explaining Committee Switching in the Scottish Parliament

Abstract

Committee work lies at the core of parliamentary activities in established representative democracies. While extensive literature refers to committee activity, there is limited research on committee switching. This article seeks to address this gap and aims to explain what drives Members of the Scottish Parliament to switch committees. It focuses on the fifth session (since 2016) in which committee switching is frequent. The qualitative analysis uses semi-structured interviews conducted with committee switchers in January-February 2020. Findings illustrate that the main drivers for committee switching are a combination of organisational constraints and individual motivations. Among these, key determinants are party control and the legislators' expertise and interest in the subject.

Keywords: parliamentary committees, switching, political parties, expertise, Scotland

Introduction

The parliamentary committees are important for legislative activity and legislators' careers. Earlier research shows how committees have major responsibilities for policy development, deliberate on highly salient issues for society and provide an alternative policy agenda to government (Halpin, MacLeod and McLaverty, 2012; Hendriks and Kay, 2019). The committees rely on the experience and expertise of their members. In that sense, the committee service done by the Members of Parliament (MPs) is highly linked to their legislative and political careers (Sieberer and Müller, 2017). As such, instability in committee composition throughout the term in office can affect both the quality of legislation associated with specialisation and the legislators' future prospects. Earlier research shows how unstable committees, in conjunction with a high turnover of the legislators, undermine expertise in committees and hamper the legislative process (Makse, 2017). Under these circumstances, it is relevant to understand why MPs change their committee affiliation.

Existing empirical evidence from various parliaments shows that legislators switch committees. What remains unknown are the reasons for this. Previous studies on legislative careers cover the topic of committee switching to a limited extent (Martin and Mickler, 2019). Instead, they focus extensively on the process through which legislators switch committees and what consequences for representation arise (Freeman and Hedlund, 1993; Makse, 2017). This article addresses the research gap and aims to explain why the Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs) switch committees. The Scottish Parliament is a critical case for three

reasons. First, committees play an important role in the parliamentary activity. Second, there is a high number of committee switchers, i.e. for details see the research design section and the appendix. Third, the Scottish Parliament is relatively small (129 members) and committee switches may have a relevant impact on policies and politics compared with a large size legislature.

The analysis uses a qualitative approach that relies on semi-structured interviews with committee switchers. It focuses on the individual-level characteristics of the parliamentarians as potential drivers for switching. The interviewees include members of the Conservative Party, Labour Party, and the Scottish National Party, and represent areas spanning much of the geography of Scotland. These parties cover the vast majority of seats in the Scottish Parliament. Moreover, the other parliamentary parties have one or two switchers and the anonymity of respondents would be compromised if included in the analysis. The article uses deductive thematic analysis to analyse the answers provided by interviewees. The results show that MSPs' decisions to switch committees are driven by a combination of organisational constraints and individual opportunities.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. The first section reviews the literature on committee switching and identifies the factors that can determine the legislators to switch committees. The second section presents the research design with a focus on the case selection, timeframe for analysis, and methods of data collection and analysis. The third section analyses and interprets the results of the semi-structured interviews with committee switchers, linking some of the findings to the literature. The conclusions summarise the key findings and emphasises the implications for the broader field of legislative behaviour.

Organisational Constraints and Personal Motivations

The literature about the causes for committee switching is scarce. However, committee switching is a component of the internal dynamic of contemporary parliaments. In many ways, it is similar with parliamentary party switching or promotion / demotion to various offices. These processes have been intensely studied and most analyses indicate that they are a function of organisational constraints and personal motivations. We structure our discussion about potential explanations for committee switching along these two lines of enquiry.

One straightforward organisational constraint is the workload that legislators face when doing their job. The workload is often rooted in how parliaments are organised and regulations about committee membership. The workload is usually associated with two general features. One of them is the assignment of parliamentarians to multiple committees. The latter is common when the parliament deals with high volume of legislation or when it is too small (McLeay, 2001). There are also instances in which specialised committees do not count as compulsory. Their members also serve in other committees, which means additional workload (Ahrens, 2016). Multiple membership creates situations in which informed participation by members on committee work is difficult. Another general feature is the different method of election. Earlier research finds that parliamentarians who are elected via the party list do more committee work than those elected via the single member district (Battle, 2011). This usually happens because the legislators elected in single member districts engage more in constituency work, which involves a trade-off with their activity in committees.

Related to legislators' workload issues, the workings of the Scottish Parliament's committee system changed since its establishment (Carman and Shephard, 2009). Some of these changes refer to the introduction of substitutes filling in for absent members. The reforms shrunk typical committee membership from 11 to seven and 'altered the power balance away from MSPs and towards parties... fewer slots per committee increased competition for places, making support of the party line more important in both selection and maintenance of committee posts' (Carman and Shephard, 2009, p. 25). In other contexts, the 'loss in productivity' is not seen as being detrimental, and reorganisation is done to benefit the biggest party or the entire legislature, e.g. the state legislatures in the US (Makse, 2017). The New Zealand Parliament has been institutionally reformed many times in past decades. It presents a situation of 'multiple committee membership and too many substitutions' that provide 'little opportunity for members to specialise in particular policy areas' (McLeay, 2001, p. 125).

The reorganisation substantiates the idea that political parties – in this case party leadership – used or perceived reform to be to their strategic benefit (Sieberer *et al.*, 2016). This takes us to the second institutional constraint: party control over committee membership. Previous studies illustrate that political parties play a major role in assigning committees to parliamentarians (Giannetti, Pedrazzani and Pinto, 2019). Parties take

decisions according to several considerations such as expertise, experience or policy influence. Parties are often inclined to use efficiently the expertise of parliamentarians by assigning them to those committees that match best their profile and that allow further specialisation in the policy area (Krehbiel, 1992; Giannetti, Pedrazzani and Pinto, 2019). Political parties that pursue policy specialisation can use the legislators' experience in that committee. The experience can be measured on various components, each of them with separate implications for the committee activity (Chiru and Gherghina, 2019). Parties may also allocate committee membership with the desire to increase their policy influence in particular area, to block or enact specific legislation according to their policy agenda (Cox and McCubbins, 2005).

One final organisational constraint is the composition of committees. There are two important elements here: gender and expertise. To start with gender, earlier studies classify legislatures into 'citizen' and professionalized types according to their style of management and functioning. The 'citizen' legislatures are characterised by a culturally feminine management-style of 'inclusion and a motivation focused on people-oriented concerns'. The 'professional' legislatures are mostly characterised by 'vocabulary' associated with masculinity, including 'independence, rationality, expertise, and competition with the executive', these committees inhibiting 'inclusive or collegial committee strategies and public-minded motives' (Rosenthal, 1997, p. 597). This division can be expanded to committee composition in which gender dominance can influence the type of activity and interaction between committee members. An earlier study illustrates that women predominate in low-status committees addressing domestic and social issues, while men are overrepresented in prestigious and influential committees dealing with economics and international affairs (Murray and Sénac, 2018). The constraints of a gendered committee composition is that the dominant group will defend the access to limited political resources (Heath, Schwindt-Bayer and Taylor-Robinson, 2005). This can easily turn into a hostile environment for those legislators who are in minority.

Expertise and career opportunities

Expertise in parliamentary committees lies at the core of their functioning and, implicitly, of their composition (Strøm, 1998). In theory, the composition of committees should be driven by MPs' expertise and knowledge. In practice, there is great variation in the degree of

expertise that members have in the area of their committee's activity. Legislators with expertise are very likely to generate information asymmetries within the committee (Giannetti, Pedrazzani and Pinto, 2019). Such asymmetries can lead to situations in which some committee members are more engaged in the decision-making process than others or to frustration. The committee members who lack expertise can continue working in that committee or they may decide to change committees. The committee members who decide to continue are usually motivated by a want to acquire expertise in a substantive field, to increase specialised knowledge, to expand their relationships with stakeholders or policy network actors, and to influence their party policy position in that particular field (Oñate and Ortega, 2019). Consequently, expertise – and to a great extent the interest in the subject of the committee – can determine whether or not legislators continue their activity in that particular committee.

The individual motivations of committee switchers are often related to career advancement. Three decades ago, two-thirds of the UK committee members viewed their service as an instrument for career advancement (Jogerst, 1991). Career advancement can take several forms: within the political party, getting elected to a superior chamber of the parliament, or being appointed to the executive. Empirical evidence reveals that committee service is linked to getting a position in the cabinet but not to the other two types of advancements (Cirone and van Coppenolle, 2018). Committee membership and service allow politicians to gain visibility (Pansardi and Vercesi, 2017), help parliamentarians reach higher office in the absence of disciplined party institutions (Cirone and van Coppenolle, 2018), and are thus a means to an end (McKay, Goodwin and Bates, 2019).

Empirical evidence shows that parliamentarians sit on a committee when they aim to boost the seniority of their broader political career. Whitaker (2014) finds that increasing committee retention is part of career-building for Members of the European Parliament. In national parliaments across Europe, legislators use committee work to increase their visibility, boost the support from their parties, and advance in their careers (Sieberer and Müller, 2017). Conversely, parliamentarians may switch committee if they consider their current position as problematic for career advancement.

All these indicate that committee membership heightens the chances for career advancement through visibility and increased expertise. However, there are also other possibilities such as the direct access to positions or resources. Referring to the access to

positions, the Scottish Parliament allows ministers and cabinet secretaries to be committee members. In spite of this possibility it is customary that government MSPs are not appointed to committees, or if a reshuffle occurs the new ministers and cabinet secretaries leave any committees which they serve (McFadden and Lazarowicz, 2010). Related to the access to resources, a study of the Ukrainian Parliament shows that legislators choose to retain committee membership because this provides access to physical goods (Whitmore, 2006).

A final opportunity is the need of protection for career integrity. The organisation of committees and their work may be paramount. A study looking at why committees exist and how committee works can prevent a capture of members' votes by outsiders seeking political influence shows that committee identities can be protected through design and that committee members must know the subject matter (Name-Correa and Yildirim, 2018). Poorly designed committee systems can produce environments where politicians accept bribes or feel threatened. These findings indicate that parliamentarians may switch committee when they face the threat of legal jeopardy.

This brief literature review indicates that three major types of organisational constraints may determine legislators to switch committees: workload, party control and committee composition. Three types of individual motivations can lead to the same outcome: low levels of expertise or interest in the topic, career advancement opportunities (including access to resources) and the integrity of their position (legal jeopardy). We include all these items in the questionnaire (Appendix 1) that we use for the semi-structured interviews with committee switchers. In addition, we ask also about personal (non-professional) reasons for switching, which are potential determinants that are not covered in detail by previous research.

Research Design

We focus on the Scottish Parliament, a relatively new legislature, established in 1999, for two reasons. First, the committee system is important in the devolved Scottish legislature. Since their establishment, the committees are seen as part of the 'new politics' narrative that seeks to diverge from the old and adversarial politics of Westminster (Taylor, 2002). The Scottish Parliament is unicameral and the committees, when the parliament was designed by the Constitutional Convention, were given strong powers to compensate for the lack of a second chamber to scrutinise the first chamber. In the devolved parliament's committees, the MSPs

'have shown considerable independence from the Executive. Committee members ... in general act in a less adversarial way than they do at meetings of the full Parliament' (McFadden and Lazarowicz, 2010, pp. 57–58). Scottish Parliament committee remits include scrutinising the government's policy and administration, examining legislative proposals of the devolved parliament, the UK Parliament, the European Union and other international conventions or agreements, post-legislative scrutiny, and initiating bills (Chapter 6 of the Standing Orders, 2019). Committees have the power to initiate non-executive bills and a public bill goes through its second reading in the relevant committee rather than the whole legislature (Arter, 2004). Second, there is a high number of switchers. In the fifth session of the Scottish Parliament, between its start in 2016 and October 2019, almost two thirds of the MSPs have left their initial parliamentary committee. These leavers belong to two categories: they are either promoted to the cabinet / gained ministerial roles or switched committees.

We conduct semi-structured interviews with committee switchers. We focus on both mandatory and subject committees since there is very little substantive difference between the two. This is also illustrated in practice and legislators, including some of our interviewees, switch from subject to mandatory committees and the other way around. The committees of the Scottish Parliament include between five and 15 legislators (McFadden and Lazarowicz, 2010). These are chosen in a proportionally representative way, that makes and assents to legislation, scrutinises and oversees the executive and other relevant bodies. To gain access to committee switchers, we read the committee reports that include the composition. The Parliament's online records are not conclusive in listing former committee members, with some records only listing committee leavers in the previous year rather than since the beginning of the fifth session in 2016. Until October 2019, there are 78 MSPs that left their initial committees (see Appendix 2), with a large share (more than 50) of the leavers switching to another committee. We conduct seven semi-structured interviews (which accounts for more than 10% of the number of switchers). We contacted a larger number of committee switchers but we either did not hear back from them or they rejected the interview request.

Geographically, the seven MSPs represent constituencies within, or the whole area of, six of the eight electoral regions. Represented are Central Scotland, Glasgow, Highlands and Islands, Lothian, Mid Scotland and Fife, and West Scotland; not represented are South Scotland and North East Scotland. The MSPs come from parties that won 118 of the parliament's 129 seats at the 2016 election, these parties being the Conservatives, Labour,

and SNP. Table 1 presents the profile of participants in which they are grouped by fives their age and historical committee service. Rounding by fives is part of the methodology used by the Higher Education Statistics Agency to reduce the risk of identifying individuals from published figures. Also, we do not report the party because that can endanger the anonymity of respondents. All participants are male since none of the female participants that we contacted replied or agreed to be interviewed. This is a limitation of the analysis especially with respect to the gendered composition of committees.

Table 1: Profile of interviewees

Interviewee	No. committees served since first elected	Age range	Gender	Interview length (min.)
R1	Five or more	45–50	Male	28
R2	Less than five	40–45	Male	13
R3	Less than five	55–60	Male	22
R4	Five or more	75–80	Male	29
R5	Five or more	65–70	Male	42
R6	Five or more	55–60	Male	16
R7	Five or more	65–70	Male	14

We use directed qualitative content analysis to interpret the attitudes and thoughts expressed by interviewees. This approach uses the results of earlier findings (see the previous section) to establish initial codes (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). The latter correspond, in our case, to the organisational constraints and individual opportunities that could lead to committee switching. The pre-established themes that were informed by the literature can be easily observed in the guide presented in Appendix 1. The next section builds a narrative starting with the pre-established codes and continuing with specific insights gained from interviews.

The Importance of Party Control and Expertise

We structure the analysis along the same lines as the theoretical section of this article. We start with the main organisational constraints outlined by the interviews and we continue with the individual opportunities. Among the organisational constraints, party control is the only one that matters and the following lines explain in detail how and why this happens. Workload and committee composition have limited explanatory power.

One of the key reasons for which parliamentarians switch committees is party control. Many interviewees explained that committee switching is more often a decision of the party

than a decision belonging to the MSPs. Political parties are prominent in this decision but the ways in which things happen differ. The MSPs do not share similar experiences about how approachable and understanding their whips could be regarding switching. Some parliamentarians are given just a notice they must switch, while others engage in discussions and negotiations with the party whip. For example, R6 argues that he got told to switch and not requested; there is no consultation involved. Consistent with this perspective, R3 says that 'in reshuffles you do not always get asked what you want to do'. However, R5 has a different experience and characterises discussions with party whips on switching as 'one of discussion, one of collaboration, one of, you know, being a team player'. R4 strengthens the latter view and explains that requests by the party to switch constitute '[n]egotiation in the softest variety is probably right... I think I would use the word accommodation'. R1 also uses the word 'accommodation', thinking this is the common experience across political parties. R7 finds that in terms of convenors switching committees compared to normal members, '[consultation] was not required the same way' for normal members but was still done.

Political parties ask their legislators to switch committees for different reasons. The most common reasons identified by our interviewees are political reward, de-platforming, meritocracy, time-limited situations, and slot-filling practices. For example, during a reshuffle, a new party leader may 'seek to reward the people that supported them' as 'the big thing that drives switches is politics' (R3). Parties may also ask legislators to switch committee membership as part of 'appoint[ing] people to particular roles to keep them out the way' (R1). Or, as R5 explains 'the whips decide who are best to be on particular committees because of their past, expertise'. When questioned on whether there was a political angle in addition to the more meritocratic angle – if parties 'try to shift people just to be a pain to them' – R5 explained that it was a bit of both. In R7's case, the party switched their committee membership due to a situation that existed at 'that particular time'. Individual MSPs can also be moved because 'your whips have got to fill somebody in, '[redacted]'ll move, [redacted]'ll no cause a fuss' (R6).

The interviews reveal that the workload does not play a role in committee switching for the MSPs. They speak about the importance of 'hav[ing] to get up to speed on a new brief' (R2) or that 'every committee workload is heavy', parliamentarians get used to this and 'we're no up there sitting as a lot of people think ... with our feet up on the table' (R5). Concurring with R5, R7 finds workload across committees as 'pretty similar'. The closest thing to the work

of a committee being a factor behind a switch was for R4 who had issues with ‘the mobile bit – not the thinking bit’ as their committee sessions were sometimes held outside Edinburgh. All interviewees illustrate that the MSPs go into their committee roles expecting a high workload and their experiences roughly meet this expectation. Nonetheless, although they do not complain about workload, some MSPs refer to committee effectiveness in terms of under-staffing. Their statements are quite direct: ‘there’s not enough MSPs in here to service this place’ (R4) or ‘[m]y honest belief is that we don’t have enough MSPs to do the job that’s required’ (R7).

The committee composition can only partially explain switching behaviour. In particular, resizing the committee appears to be a valid reason: ‘[There was] a rejigging on the committees and we lost a member... [T]hey reduced the numbers and one part of that deal was that we lost a member’. The gendered composition or sexist behaviour in committees do not appear to be reasons to switch. One of the explanations for this is that sexism is fairly isolated within committees. Two interviewees acknowledge that ‘sexist behaviour ... happens and has happened in this place... [the Scottish Parliament] is no different from any other institution’ (R4) or ‘sure [sexist behaviour]’s happened but I cannot say it’s really been noticeable’ (R7). To further nuance the incidence of such behaviours, some MSPs brought up the MeToo movement, explaining how the Scottish Parliament has been very good at reacting to it (R4).

As a final note about the organisational constraints, none of our interviewees reported any issues with access to physical goods and resources. On the contrary, the MSPs praised the clerking staff, calling them knowledgeable (R3), working with all committee members (R1) and that they had facilitated the convenor in setting up a session unique in terms of set-up, formalities, and attendees.

Individual Motivations

Let us now turn to the individual motivations and investigate the importance of expertise and interest in the subject, possibilities for career advancement and the protection of integrity. To begin with expertise, this matters in deciding for a switch. Expertise is directly related to the legislators’ appointment in a committee and is an incentive to continue: ‘there is an element of considering people’s expertise and also just their capability. You know, you wouldn’t put somebody in a position if you bluntly didn’t think they were able’ (R3).

Committee placements are used to build expertise as R1 explains ‘there is an element of expertise in it, that’s the area that I would be focusing on therefore logic would take you to the fact that you’d be on that committee’. Almost all the interviewees linked their committee placement with initial expertise or with the process of building up expertise. Conversely, its absence is likely to be conducive to committee switch.

The effects of interest in the subject covered by a committee can influence the decision to switch in several ways. First, the lack of interest for the subject covered by a committee ends up in frustration for the committee members who are eager to switch. One interviewee explained that when his party asked him to switch, he was happy to do so because he felt like ‘please get me out of here’ (R6). Second, multiple committees provide legislators the possibility to learn more things, to open their horizons and to expand their interests. The interviews illustrate that the role of MSPs require a wide range of interests and committee service may be beneficial to this. The MSPs explicitly refer to the possibility of becoming ‘too pigeon-holed’ without switching (R3), thus emphasizing the importance of being a generalist in terms of knowledge and interest (R2). Committee switching is an avenue to expand their interests in topics:

[A]t the end of the day to switch to another committee broadens your horizons, it broadens, you know, your thoughts. You could be sitting in one committee for a couple of years totally stale, right, it’s the same old same old. Whereas (indistinguishable) you get a new challenge. So occasionally the new challenge is worthwhile. I would encourage people to accept the challenge, right (R5).

Some MSPs had in addition to lack of interest also frustration related to the length of time in which their committees considered matters, e.g. R5. In this particular case, the MSP has actively sought to switch committees and part of this decision was influenced by this frustration.

Many MSPs disagreed that career advancement possibilities shape their committee service or wider work in the Scottish Parliament. The position of most interviewees is that it makes little sense to link their careers with the committee choice. For example, one of them explains ‘You are there to serve. So, you know you are not there for your own progression (...) there might be some committees that I like and there might be some committees I don’t like [but] every committee in that Parliament is worthwhile’ (R5). Likewise disagreeing that there are career dead-ends, R1 stresses that:

There is some serious work that goes on in [the Scottish Parliament] that is pretty turgid, pretty tedious... But it has to be done. ... There's a lot of dull, turgid stuff that goes on behind the scenes that you've got to grind your way through and a lot of that is done in committees.

When asking if party whips may have a secret agenda when pushing for committee placements, the MSPs were partly divided over the idea of a career dead-end. On the one hand, most MSPs rejected the idea and, consistent with their previous statements, explained that committees are not dead-ends. For example, 'would they put somebody onto a committee for any other ulterior motive? Nah I don't think so (...) I personally don't think there's a dead-end' (R4). On the other hand, one interviewee considered that whips would place MSPs into committees which 'can be a bit of a career dead-end' (R3).

The evidence indicates limited support for the importance of career advancement in committee switching. Only one MSP (R3) claimed that career advancement could be seen as a motivation to switch. However, the other MSPs nuanced this view. For example, R1 argued that career advancement could be seen from an outsider perspective as driving their switch especially if this act promotes the parliamentarians from the backbench to frontbench. Nevertheless, the MSP added:

If I am looking from my own point of view ... I would say no because I got much more personal fulfilment and enjoyment out of [my former committee placement] (...) I've not really regarded myself as having much of a career, it's more things have happened to me and I've not really planned any of them (R1).

R4 was straightforward and explained that 'ambition has never been my driver', that instead 'I've always been support, I've helped people ... including some of the big guns in the party'. R7 cited their age, saying 'I think I'm too old to really think about that political career'. R6 raised a point on how they use committees to advance their area's interests, which indirectly could be viewed as a form of career advancement: 'I've really no political ambitions. What I will use the committees for is to try and rectify any injustices that you see within [the area I represent]'

These observations about the limited role of career in committee switching is not surprising. Career advancement is quite often a sensitive topic and self-reporting about such topics are often problematic. Earlier research shows that in 'overcom[ing] sensitivities, some participants engaged in a kind of self-censoring, being careful with their expression'

(Lancaster, 2017, p. 99). This sensitivity makes it unlikely that a more revealing discussion on the matter could be had. For the participants, either pushing back on the idea of advancing their career or noting only that they had moved was the most we could gauge through the interviews. The optics discussion raised by R1, and R6's point on using committee work to support community work, are topical however.

Neither the integrity of their positions nor legal jeopardy play a role in any switches of the interviewees. The MSPs show high awareness that they must be cautious in their remarks. The interviewees acknowledge that 'you don't have the same protection in the Scottish Parliament ... as in the House of Commons' (R5). One interviewee provided details about a case where an MSP faced legal trouble for remarks made in the Scottish Parliament, while another interviewee directly linked one instance of individuals 'threatening legal action' to MSPs in committee in relation to work said committee was involved in. The overall position of the MSPs on this issue is best summarised by the following:

I was never jeopardised legally. It is fair to say in both committees that if there— if there's ever any issue that ever comes up which is potentially going to be a libel issue which might leave members compromised the— the committee's clerks – in the Parliament in general this is true in the chamber as well – will always [be] very, very careful in making sure members are aware of any legal issues ... so we don't step out of line (R3).

In addition to the determinants investigated on the basis of the reviewed literature, our interviews reveal two contextual drivers for committee switching: personal issues and the recognition of peers. These are briefly outlined here in the order in which they are mentioned in the interviews. One interviewee refers to personal issues, which determined the political party to take them off a particular committee. Once the personal issues 'had dissipated quite a bit' the party appointed the MSP to a new committee. A recognition by an MSP's peers has been, in at least one instance, a partial factor shaping a committee switch. During a switch instigated by the party, 'the other members who were on that committee agreed... they wanted me on that committee' (R5).

As a final point, it is worth noting that the interviewees disagree about committee effectiveness and the extent to which switching occurs. Regarding the latter, the numbers indicate that roughly half of the MSPs leave committees in the Scottish Parliament. Some parliamentarians feel that committee effectiveness is lowered by the high turnover, e.g. R1, R2. More precisely, they refer to a 'churn', which can be beneficial for parliamentary activity

(R2). R1 and R7 explicitly expressed concern over the turnover and its negative impact on committees. A detailed quote is quite illustrative in this respect:

One of the things that I regret about the amount of switching ... It's unavoidable at times, right. But I think that when parties switch very often, the committee loses out of it. Because, you know, you've gained a knowledge and then that knowledge is lost to the committee. (...) You can be halfway through a bill and then you're switched to another committee and then that knowledge that you have gained by seeing witnesses and reading reports, et cetera, has gone. Right. It's gone to another committee and somebody else has gone halfway through. And I think that's shame. (R7)

There are also MSPs who do not notice switching or do not consider it to influence the effectiveness of committee work. For example, 'I don't think there's been a lot of switching. I don't think there's necessarily a problem with switching' (R3) or 'I've never really noticed a lot of switching' (R5). A link can be drawn here to the earlier idea of MSPs being generalists, and that switching committees is part of being a generalist.

Discussion and Conclusion

This article aimed to explain why MSPs from the fifth session of the Scottish Parliament switch committees. The search for an answer involved seven semi-structured interviews with MSPs who switched various committees. Although there is a literature on legislators' career development, committee switching as sub-set of writing is under-studied. The evidence presented in this article indicates that party control and individual expertise and interest are the key factors that determine MSPs to switch committees. In spite of the relatively limited number of respondents, we consider these results to be informative about this unexplored phenomenon.

First, the interviews illustrate the importance of the party whips in setting in motion and determining committee membership. Committee service is seen as part of the wider service to the party and that this perhaps explains a reluctance among MSPs to counter unequal treatment by the whips. The political party has several reasons to ask MSPs to switch, the most common features revealed by the interview are political reward, de-platforming, meritocracy, time-limited situations and slot-filling practices. In this top-down process, the MSPs are not treated equally by their whips during switches. One legislator may be asked to move without any consultation, while others can and successfully do receive a switch in accordance to their own preferences. If the latter applies, our interviewees emphasise that

their own role in the decision-making process is considerably inferior to the party's role, e.g. 'negotiation in the softest variety' or 'accommodation' as some of the answers indicate. These results confirm earlier findings from the literature about other party personnel decisions, such as ministerial / spokesperson promotions and demotions, in which political parties play a crucial role in the decision-making process. In essence, the party is the vital political player in the committee service and composition.

Second, committee switch requests are not only made by the party. The MSPs can and do amend the length of their committee service and make attempts to negotiate with whips to find new committee placements. The main reasons behind the parliamentarian-initiated requests are expertise and interest in the committee subject. This observation contributes to the broader literature on legislature professionalisation and indicates that committee composition is guided to a large extent by expertise. Parliamentarians do not continue in committees in which they do not consider themselves to have expertise or to have a possibility to develop expertise. The latter is crucial for the quality of deliberations and decisions reached within committees. Legislators become frustrated when appointed in committees where they have little interest or expertise and they initiate a switch. Our interviews illustrate that the switch happens after discussions with the party. Consequently, the organisational constraints (party control) and the individual motivations (quest for expertise and subject interest) appear to be interconnected when deciding to switch committees.

Our results also suggest that the MSPs do not switch committees due to workload or in a desire for career advancement. Related to the latter, no interviewee considers committees as career dead-ends. Access to physical goods and resources is not related to committee switching, nor is legal jeopardy despite its high concern in MSPs' minds. A general conclusion is that parliamentarians treat committees equally in terms of opportunities and challenges.

The implications of these findings reach beyond the single case study investigated here. At theoretical level, this study proposes an analytical framework that combines organisational constraints and individual motivations in explaining party switching. The two major types of potential determinants are not mutually exclusive and, as the evidence also points out, they interact in producing the outcome. This analytical framework is comprehensive and captures the potential determinants that can occur on a systematic basis. When asked about other reasons to switch, few legislators refer to contextual factors such as personal reasons or need

for peer recognition. Empirically, this analysis brings new insights into both choices for legislative careers and into the behaviours of parties and legislators. The committee switching is a function of several components of parliamentary dynamic, which indicate that the process is confined within the institutional realm. Since committee activity lies at the core of many parliamentary systems, knowing how committee composition can be altered through switches makes the entire process more predictable and understandable.

One limitation of this study, apart from the relatively small number of interviewees, is the gender biased profile of interviewees. Consequently, the issue of sexism of gendered composition of committees could not be assessed appropriately. Further qualitative research can use interviews with female legislators to gauge their experiences about this variable and analyse the extent to which it matters. Another limitation is the consideration of individual level characteristics that do not account for a potentially relevant explanation for switching such as the size of the legislature. That point is reflected in the answers provided by two of our interviewees (R4 and R7) who make a point about the limited numbers of MSPs. A smaller legislature is more sensitive to cabinet reshuffling than a larger legislature: minister resignations are more likely to lead to rotations in a small size legislature. In this sense, future studies could compare the committee switching in the Holyrood and Westminster Parliaments to outline the impact of the legislature size in this decision.

A further avenue for research can be the disaggregation of the large concept of legislative career. This has several components and legislators usually pursue different objectives in their career. A more fine-grained questionnaire may seek to link committee switching to some of those components. A third direction that is worth exploring is the interaction between party and legislator requests to switch. Our results indicate that both matters but it remains unclear if the interaction is characterised by a collaborative decision-making process and when such a collaboration occurs between the party and the parliamentarian relative to the moment of elections.

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Appendix 1: Questionnaire for the semi-structured interviews

1. In how many committees did you serve as a member in your parliamentary activity in the Scottish Parliament (since you were elected)?
 - *Follow-up:* How many of these were in the current term in office?
2. In the recent term in office, you have switched from Committee (A) to Committee (B). To what extent your expertise played a role in this decision?
3. What about the interest / disinterest in topics from Committee (A) / (B)?
4. Was access to physical goods or resources relevant? This can include – but isn't limited to – staff, IT equipment, and means of transport.
5. Has the workload in a committee driven you to switch?
6. Without getting into specifics, have personal reasons – things unrelated to your professional life – been factors influencing your switch?
7. Has committee work ever left you feeling jeopardised legally?
 - *Follow-up:* If so, did this play a role?
8. Was there a relationship between this committee switching and your political career?
 - *Follow-up:* was advancing your career a motivation to switch?
9. Do you see some committees as career dead-ends?
 - *Follow-up:* did this motivate you?
10. Did your party have an influence in your decision to switch?
 - *Follow-up:* if yes, how?
11. Have you experienced something that can be labelled as sexist behaviour when working in committees?
 - *Follow-up:* only if yes, has sexism played a role in switching the committee?
12. Was any other issue relevant for your decision to switch committees?

Appendix 2: Committee leavers' distribution across committees (2016-2019)

<p>Culture, Tourism, Europe and External Affairs: Jamie Greene (Con) Tavish Scott (LD) Jackson Carlaw (Con) Rachael Hamilton (Con) Mairi Gougeon (SNP) Richard Lochead (SNP) Lewis MacDonald (Lab) Emma Harper (SNP) Bruce Crawford (SNP) Ash Denham (SNP)</p>	<p>Delegated Powers and Law Reform: Neil Findlay (Lab) Rachael Hamilton (Con) Alison Harris (Con) Monica Lennon (Lab) John Scott (Con) Elaine Smith (Lab) David Torrance (SNP)</p>	<p>Economy, Energy and Fair Work: Angela Constance (SNP) John Mason (SNP) Kezia Dugdale (Lab) Fulton MacGregor (SNP) Gillian Martin (SNP) Bill Bowman (Con) Gil Paterson (SNP) Ash Denham (SNP) Richard Leonard (Lab) Daniel Johnson (Lab) Tom Arthur (SNP) Liam Kerr (Con)</p>	<p>Education and Skills: Dep Convener Daniel Johnson (Lab) Oliver Mundell (Con) George Adam (SNP) Colin Beattie (SNP) James Dornan (SNP) Mary Fee (Lab) Jenny Gilruth (SNP) Clare Haughey (SNP) Richard Lochead (SNP) Gordon MacDonald (SNP) Fulton MacGregor (SNP) Johann Lamont (Lab) Ruth Maguire (SNP) Gillian Martin (SNP) Tavish Scott (LD) Ross Thomson (Con)</p>	<p>Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform: Alexander Burnett (Con) Donald Cameron (Con) Graeme Day (SNP) Kate Forbes (SNP) Jenny Gilruth (SNP) Maurice Golden (Con) Rhoda Grant (Lab) Emma Harper (SNP) Richard Lyle (SNP) Alex Neil (SNP) Gil Paterson (SNP) Gail Ross (SNP) Alex Rowley (Lab) John Scott (Con) David Stewart (Lab)</p>	<p>Equalities and Human Rights: Jeremy Balfour (Con) Willie Coffey (SNP) Jamie Greene (Con) Christina McKelvie (SNP) Gail Ross (SNP) David Torrance (SNP)</p>	<p>Finance and Constitution: Willie Coffey (SNP) Ash Denham (SNP) Kate Forbes (SNP) Emma Harper (SNP) Alex Johnstone (Con) James Kelly (Lab) Liam Kerr (Con) Dean Lockhart (Con) Ivan McKee (SNP) Michael Russell (SNP) Maree Todd (SNP)</p>	<p>Health and Sport: Tom Arthur (SNP) Keith Brown (SNP) Donald Cameron (Con) Ash Denham (SNP) Neil Findlay (Lab) Kate Forbes (SNP) Jenny Gilruth (SNP) Clare Haughey (SNP) Alison Johnstone (Grn) Richard Lyle (SNP) Ivan McKee (SNP) Colin Smyth (Lab) Maree Todd (SNP)</p>
<p>Justice: Fulton MacGregor (SNP) George Adam (SNP) Daniel Johnson (Lab) Maurice Corry (Con) Mary Fee (Lab) Mairi Gougeon (SNP) Ben Macpherson (SNP) Oliver Mundell (Con) Douglas Ross (Con) Stewart Stevenson (SNP)</p>	<p>Justice sub-committee on policing: Mary Fee (Lab) Daniel Johnson (Lab) Ben Macpherson (SNP) Stewart Stevenson (SNP)</p>	<p>Local Government and Communities: Bob Doris (SNP) Jenny Gilruth (SNP) Mairi Gougeon (SNP) Monica Lennon (Lab) Ruth Maguire (SNP) Alex Rowley (Lab) Elaine Smith (Lab)</p>	<p>Public Audit and Post-Legislative Scrutiny: Jackie Baillie (Lab) Iain Gray (Lab) Alison Harris (Con) Monica Lennon (Lab) Gail Ross (SNP) Ross Thomson (Con) Jenny Gilruth (SNP)</p>	<p>Public Petitions: Rona Mackay (SNP) Michelle Ballantyne (Con) Angus MacDonald (SNP) Rachael Hamilton (Con)</p>	<p>Rural Economy and Connectivity: Kate Forbes (SNP) Mairi Gougeon (SNP) Rhoda Grant (Lab) Emma Harper (SNP) Fulton MacGregor (SNP) John Mason (SNP) Gail Ross (SNP)</p>	<p>Social Security: George Adam (SNP) Clare Adamson (SNP) Gordon Lindhurst (Con) Ben Macpherson (SNP) Ruth Macguire (SNP) Adam Tomkins (Con) Sandra White (SNP)</p>	<p>Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments: Clare Adamson (SNP) Tom Arthur (SNP) Claire Baker (Lab) Kate Forbes (SNP) Emma Harper (SNP) Patrick Harvie (Grn) Clare Haughey (SNP) Daniel Johnson (Lab) John Scott (Con) Elaine Smith (Lab) Alexander Stewart (Con) David Torrance (SNP)</p>

