

Determinants of time allocation for plenary debates on bills

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Abstract: A growing literature has examined how electoral incentives of party leaders and individual legislators affect speech making activity in legislative assemblies; and how parliamentary rules regulating debates are used by party leaders to keep control of legislators. These contributions mostly focus on legislative debates as an arena for understanding intra-party politics. In this paper our focus is on the allocation of speaking time for plenary debates on bills, by combining an inter-party perspective with a focus on agenda setting powers of parliamentary collective directing authorities. We show that, due to time pressures in modern legislatures, parties have to make explicit trade-offs among bill proposals. Using an original dataset that includes information about almost 450 bill proposals scheduled for floor debates in three Italian legislative terms (2001-2011), we provide evidence that parties agree to schedule longer debates for divisive and salient issues, while they decide to move more quickly on salient, but less divisive proposals.

Keywords: Debates, Agenda setting, Legislative calendar, Parliamentary directing boards, Italian politics

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Introduction

Modern parliaments have to deal with several crucial functions ranging from policy making to constituency services. Nevertheless, they have only a limited number of sitting days during the legislative term in order to perform these important tasks, as the length of a legislature is generally fixed in the constitution. Given the time constraints that characterize modern assemblies, specialized agenda-setting offices have been created in order to deal with the extreme scarcity of plenary time. In doing so, modern legislatures have managed to move from an hypothetical “legislative state of nature” into fully organized bodies (Cox 2006, 141). In fact, under egalitarian and unregulated access to floor time nothing could be done. In this view, agenda-setting privileges, i.e. the ability to control the design and the selection of those proposals that gain access to the vote in the plenary sessions (Döring 1995a) can be conceived as a central source of power in democratic legislatures (Cox and McCubbins 2011). However, the *voting agenda* – which deals with the subset of bills that reach the plenary and are then voted on – constitutes only one element of what Cox (2006) has defined as the “plenary bottleneck”. Together with the right to introduce proposals to the legislature, modern assemblies have also to regulate MPs’ right to express their opinions in floor speeches (i.e. the *debate agenda*). As a consequence, exploring the ways in which parliamentary calendars are organized and, in particular, how time is allocated for debates in the assembly can offer important insights for the study of deliberative bodies. Setting the order of the day enables to determine what will be decided, representing therefore a crucial aspect of the overall agenda control power (Laver and Shepsle 1994, 295).

Existing research has studied legislative agenda in parliamentary settings by looking mainly at the timing of bill introduction and at the sequence of bill discussion. While Döring (1995b) focused on the institutional rules underpinning agenda control in West European democracies, subsequent works have analyzed the impact of government’s control of parliamentary agenda on the lawmaking process (Martin 2004; Martin and Vanberg 2004, 2005, 2011; Zubek and Klüver 2013). At the same time, another strand of literature has highlighted the importance of plenary debates on legislation as a venue for communicating with voters and other legislators and for serving the re-election and re-selection purposes of parties and single MPs. Within this research program, some scholars have analyzed parliamentary debates in inter-party terms (Martin and Vanberg 2008), while others have adopted an intra-party perspective (Proksch and Slapin 2012). However, a proper account of how parliamentary timetables are arranged is still lacking in the literature. This paper aims to fill this gap by investigating the organization of the legislative agenda, looking directly at the ways in which parliamentary calendars are set up. More precisely, we analyze how plenary time is allocated among the bill proposals introduced in the parliament. In order to do so, we examine the

calendars arranged by the Conference of Group Chairpersons in the Italian Chamber of Deputies over a relatively long period of time (2001-2011).

Although lawmaking in parliamentary settings tends undoubtedly to be dominated by the executives (Andeweg and Nijzink 1995, 171; Gamm and Huber 2002, 323), often the government is not the only actor exerting influence on the legislative agenda process. Even though the government will find its way to make parliament paying attention to its priorities, throughout the legislative process several other actors are usually endowed with agenda-setting powers (Döring 1995b).¹ These bodies participate – to various degree – in decisions concerning which bills are to be given priority, in which sequence proposals are to be examined, and how much time is to be allocated to each piece of legislation. In most parliamentary democracies, one of these powerful legislative bodies is the conference of representatives of parliamentary groups that acts as a directing board for the whole chamber. In several national assemblies, including the Italian parliament, the conference is charged with establishing the parliamentary calendar, and hence plays a major role in regulating the day-to-day use of plenary time. Although all bills must go through parliament in order to become law, only a small subset do so. Furthermore, bills can absorb just a limited portion of legislative time. Therefore the conference is a prominent institution set up for solving the coordination problems stemming from these time constraints, as it decides not only which bills are admitted to parliament, but also how much time is allocated to each piece of legislation.

Focusing on the role of parliamentary directing boards in setting the timetable for the assembly, this study proceeds by introducing two main hypotheses concerning time allocation for plenary debates on bill proposals. Our central argument is that parties benefit from investing time in debating legislative proposals. However, because time turns out to be an extremely scarce commodity in modern legislatures, parties have to make explicit tradeoffs among bill proposals. We argue that the propensity to allocate more time for a bill at the expense of others is a simple function of the *divisiveness* and the *salience* of the issues to be discussed. In order to test our argument, we use an original dataset that includes information on almost 450 bill proposals scheduled for floor debates in three Italian legislatures. These data provide evidence that parties agree to schedule longer debates for divisive and salient issues, and they decide to move more quickly on salient, but less divisive proposals. As a result, this paper provides an explanation for the variation in the allocation of legislative time among the bills submitted to parliament. Moreover, it sheds some light on the role of parliamentary directing boards in defining the legislative agenda. This work thus suggests that comparative legislative research might benefit from taking into account the role of

¹ As Döring (1995b, 225) shows, among West European countries only in the UK and Ireland the government alone determines the plenary agenda.

parliamentary directing authorities – along with the government’s role – in shaping the legislative agenda.

Literature review

Alongside cabinet formation and termination, activities related to day-by-day policymaking have recently received growing attention in comparative parliamentary studies. Although those factors and circumstances that account for the birth and death of governments are undoubtedly crucial to understanding the working of parliamentary democracies, studying what happens in the legislative arena in between can prove to be extremely useful for a better evaluation of policy processes under parliamentarism (Döring 1995a; Strom, Muller and Bergman 2003, 2008). Recently, a number of influential studies have focused on the policymaking problems inherent in the relationships among governmental actors, emphasizing the role of the legislative process as an arena that enables coalition parties to make joint policy. Focusing on legislative production, these works have analyzed government-sponsored legislation by looking at the length of the legislative process and at the modifications undergone by bills in parliament, and have used cabinet-related variables in order to explain the timing and sequence of government bills introduction (Martin 2004; Martin and Vanberg 2004, 2005, 2011).

In particular, Martin (2004) has investigated how the policy agenda of the government is constructed in four parliamentary democracies (Belgium, Germany, Luxembourg and the Netherlands), emphasizing the divisiveness and the salience of legislation as the two crucial factors that account for the timing of bill introduction. Each of the coalition partners prioritizes different issues, and positions on various policy domains can be very different within the cabinet. These two problems, exacerbated by the scarcity of time in the legislature, make it hard for government parties to agree on which bills to introduce first and which bills to postpone. As Martin’s findings indicate, the government policy agenda is arranged in a rather “accommodative” fashion, as those policy initiatives that are relatively attractive for the coalition (i.e., proposals that are salient for the coalition partners but do not divide them) are given priority in scheduling activity. Conversely, the introduction of “unattractive” bills (i.e., proposals that divide the coalition or are perceived as unimportant) tends to be postponed. Building on similar assumptions, Zubek and Klüver (2013) have focused on the post-electoral legislative agenda of governments. Investigating the implementation of government’s legislative pledges in Poland, the authors have shown that pledges dealing with less divisive and more salient issues are likely to be fulfilled sooner than those dealing with more divisive and less important issues.

The literature on parliamentary systems has devoted much less attention to other fundamental aspects of the legislative agenda, and in particular to the definition of parliamentary calendars. While in session, parliaments need to allocate their time to debates on legislation, question time, committee deliberation, hearings, and other activities. For each of these activities, a timetable has to be set. The definition of a calendar for discussing legislation on the floor – that is, the allocation of a certain amount of plenary time for each of the bills submitted to parliament – is thus a crucial aspect of the organization of parliamentary businesses. The organization of the calendar is related to what Cox (2006) has defined as the plenary bottleneck: the voting agenda, dealing with members' right to introduce bills to parliament, and the debate agenda, concerning the individual right to make speeches on the floor. While, as we stated above, the former aspect has been extensively investigated (see also Cox and McCubbins 1993, 2005; Shepsle and Weingast 1987; Tsebelis 2002),² the latter has received adequate scholarly attention only in recent times (Proksch and Slapin 2012). Including both aspects of the plenary bottleneck, Döring (1995b) has identified seven institutional variables that define the extent to which executives are able to control the legislative agenda in different parliamentary countries. Remarkably, control over the floor timetable is one of the most relevant prerogatives considered by the author.³ Döring's variables have been subsequently used as explanatory factors for legislative outcomes (Döring 1995c; Tsebelis 2002; Tsebelis and Ha 2014).

As far as the debate agenda is concerned, a number of studies have emphasized the importance of parliamentary rules and legislative hierarchies for understanding time allocation among legislative actors. Proksch and Slapin (2012) have developed a model for explaining the organization of floor debates based on partisan and legislative rules, which are in turn a function of electoral incentives. In their model, parties manage plenary time by designing partisan rules and parliamentary procedures that enhance their chances of electoral success. Accordingly, Proksch and Slapin find out that in the UK, where individual reputation is important for MPs' re-election in plurality districts, party leaders allow dissenting members to express their views in the floor. On the contrary, in Germany, where party unity matters more for running successful election campaigns, party leaders are reluctant to delegate speaking time to dissenting MPs and, in general, to backbenchers. Focusing on plenary debates in the Italian parliament, Giannetti and Pedrazzani (2013) have shown that different rules regulating access to plenary time generate differences in

² For recent formal theories on legislative scheduling, see Palmer (2014) and Patty and Penn (2008). These models focus on the choice of issues that are considered in legislative sessions.

³ More precisely, the first of the seven dimensions indicated by Döring (1995b, 224) concerns which body is formally charged with setting the order of the day. The order of the day can be decided by a number of bodies ranging from the government alone, to a steering committee and finally to the chamber itself (see also Andeweg and Nijzink 1995).

speech-making behaviour, as party leaders are able to exert effective control on speakers only when access to floor debate is restricted and time is allocated on a party basis.

Both strands of research are useful for the purposes of the present paper. On the one hand, studies on the voting agenda indicate a number of factors that may explain why parliamentary calendars are organized as they are. On the other hand, works on the debate agenda suggest that use of plenary time in parliamentary processes can be shaped not only by governments, but also by a set of rules and legislative-level offices with special agenda-setting powers whose role has yet to be explored.

Theory and hypotheses

In most parliamentary assemblies the timetable is arranged by collective directing authorities of the plenary, such as conferences where all the parliamentary groups are represented. Directing boards are institutional responses to the scarcity of time in busy legislatures and are typically found among the most influential legislative agenda-setting offices (Cox 2006), or “privileged groups” (Strom 1995) in modern parliaments. In Carroll, Cox and Pachón’s (2006) words, directing boards are among the most important legislative positions – “mega-seats” – that are subject to a new round of party competition taking place in parliament after elections. Although seats in these directing authorities vary in their power from assembly to assembly, they are often important and sought-after. In the authors’ view, the procedures for allocating seats in legislative directing boards – and, more generally, in special agenda-setting offices – form “Chapter Two” of how parties create electoral democracy. Some prominent examples of legislative directing boards are the Council of Elders in the German *Bundestag*, the Conference of Spokesmen in the Spanish *Cortes*, the Presidium in the Polish *Sejm* and the Conference of Group Chairpersons in the Italian Chamber of Deputies.

Parliamentary directing boards are usually chaired by the president of the chamber, and their decisions are affected to various degree by the government. In any case, only in a limited number of countries the government has total control over the organization of the legislative timetable (see Döring 1995b, 224-231). Moreover, parliamentary directing boards must often reach unanimity or some qualified majority in order to set the calendar, and this can make it difficult for the government and its majority alone to fully control the agenda (Cox and McCubbins 2011). Finally, it should be noted that even though governments find their priorities paid attention to in some way or another by assemblies, parliamentary procedures must usually balance “the right of the majority to govern and the right of the opposition to be heard” (Döring 1995b, 238; on this point see also Powell 2000). Thus, even in the extreme case where government’s right to make proposals for the

plenary is unrestricted (i.e. the executive alone proposes the subset of legislation to be considered by the assembly, as in the Laver and Shepsle's (1996) model of parliamentary regimes), the allocation of time for debates can be seen as the result of some mutual agreement between parties in parliament.

Building on the role of these institutional arrangements, we develop our argument about the allocation of time in plenary debates. Our theoretical framework is based on four simple premises: legislatures operate under severe time pressures; the allocation of time for plenary debates depends on super-majoritarian agreements between parliamentary groups; parties benefit from investing time in debating legislative proposals; and, finally, parties and individual legislators need to make explicit tradeoffs about bill proposals in order to deal with parliamentary activity. The first and the second feature have been extensively discussed above. Legislatures are busy institutions where plenary bottlenecks form. The amount of work that they can get done is limited by the length of the session, which is generally an external constraint imposed by the constitution, and bill proposals can be enacted only if they are allowed sufficient time in the plenary session. In order to cope with the scarcity of time, legislatures create offices such as directing boards, which contribute to determine which bills are presented to the floor and how much plenary time will be allocated to these proposals. In this paper we deal with the latter aspect of agenda-setting. Starting from a fixed set of proposals, which we assume actors who control the voting agenda agree upon, we posit that the length of debates may be arranged in advance by super-majorities or even by unanimous agreement between parliamentary parties.

Our third premise recognizes the importance that debates hold in democratic legislatures. According to the literature, legislative debates serve not only for the purpose of legislating, but also as instruments of persuasion and communication. During plenary debates parties try, on the one hand, to convince their counterparts of the superiority of their position and, on the other hand, to explain their policies to the voters and to attract media attention (on this point see Maltzman and Sigelman 1996; Martin and Vanberg 2008; Mayhew 1974; Proksch and Slapin 2012). Therefore, if the calendar assures longer time for discussing a certain bill, parties and their members know that they will have higher opportunities for scrutinizing the proposal, and for publicly taking positions on that piece of legislation. Finally, our fourth premise states that, due to time constraints, parties are aware that every hour devoted to a certain debate will reduce the time available for other debates: the decision of allocating more time for a bill is taken at the expense of the time allocated for other proposals. All this considered, why do parties agree to devote more time for some legislative debates and allocate shorter plenary time for some other debates?

In our first hypothesis, parties in parliament have a greater propensity to jointly decide to schedule longer time for a debate when the issues involved are more *divisive*. On contentious issues, there is a higher probability that one or more parties in the parliament could be highly disappointed by changes of the status quo that are going to follow the bill proposal once adopted. This can be true both for governing and opposition parties. For the former, since participating to the executive requires some compromises, two contrasting pressures arise. On the one hand, as members of the cabinet, government parties should be open to make policy concessions, especially in case of divisive issues, as part of coalition negotiations. On the other hand, government members have to justify and explain to their constituencies the policies they support in order to persuade voters that they are doing the right thing. According to Martin and Vanberg (2008), the process of legislative debates represents a unique chance to do so.

Conversely, opposition parties, in particular when they have scarce influence in controlling the voting agenda, face strong incentives to “go public” while considering divisive proposals. This allows them to appeal to the electorate in order “to advance an alternative agenda” in contrast to the one sponsored by the government (Maltzman and Sigelman 1996, 822). Legislative debates, with their capacity to attract media attention, are therefore the best instrument to perform these tasks. In addition, legislative debates offer the possibility for parties and rank-and-file members to scrutinize the final version of the bills that, due to the process of legislative review, could differ significantly from the original draft (Martin and Vanberg 2005).

In short, on a contentious issue, both government and opposition parties should benefit from longer debates. However, engaging in debates is costly, as floor speeches consume scarce time that parties could allocate to other bills. For this reason, parties have incentives to discriminate among proposals according not only to their divisiveness, but also to their importance. Time is in fact too precious to be “wasted” on trivial legislation. As a consequence, on policies that are not really salient we do not expect issue divisiveness to have any impact on the allocation of plenary time. In other words, we recognize that the relationship between divisiveness and saliency is *interactive* in its nature. This leads us to the following expectation:

H1: Divisiveness among parties in parliament should increase the time allocated for plenary debates only when issue salience is sufficiently high. Its effect should be stronger when salience is at its highest level.

Saliency is the second key explanatory factor in this paper. The allocation of time should in fact depend on the overall importance of the issue that has to be debated. Salient issues could bring

greater benefit to parties supporting the proposal, while they could seriously harm those that oppose it (Martin 2004). However, as the effect of divisiveness depends on saliency, the effect of the issue importance on the length of debates should be largely contingent on the distribution of policy positions in the parliament. Salient but not divisive issues convey widespread benefits to most of the parliamentary parties, which should have thus an incentive to “save” floor time in order to consume it for more contentious proposals. On the contrary, we should expect parties to schedule longer debates on more salient legislation if the issue involved is highly divisive. In this scenario, time serves different purposes. For parties that sustain a proposal, more time will allow them to persuade their constituency that they are achieving an important goal. For parties that oppose it, longer debates will grant them better opportunity to appeal to voters in order to explain their critical position on that important subject. In short, parties should agree to schedule shorter debates on generally salient but scarcely divisive issues. On the contrary, when issues are salient and divisive longer debates should be scheduled. This line of reasoning brings us to state the following hypothesis:⁴

H2: Overall issue salience should decrease the time allocated for plenary debates when divisiveness is sufficiently low. As divisiveness rises the effect of salience should become positive, increasing the scheduled length of debates when divisiveness is sufficiently high.

Data and Operationalization

The present paper investigates a fundamental aspect of the legislative agenda – that is, the organization of parliamentary calendars. In particular, we analyze how plenary time is allocated among the bills submitted to the parliament. We empirically evaluate the two hypotheses put forward in the previous section against data from Italy, where the legislative timetable is set in both houses of parliament by a steering committee named Conference of Group Chairpersons (CGC). More precisely, we examine the parliamentary calendars arranged by the CGC in the Italian Chamber of Deputies over the decade between 2001 and 2011. In this paragraph, we will first illustrate the ways in which the legislative timetable is arranged in the Italian lower chamber; then, we will describe how we tested our argument about the organization of parliamentary calendars.

⁴ Our argument is general. When the function of the directing board of the assembly is entirely performed by the government as in the UK and in the Irish Republic, our argument applies to the cabinet. In the House of Commons, for example, the Speaker simply implements the timetable settled by the government. In these situations, just like in Carroll, Cox and Pachón’s (2006, 155) analysis of directing boards, the government can be viewed as being the directing board.

In both branches of the Italian parliament, the CGC is charged with arranging ex ante the order of the day of the plenary. Both in the Chamber and in the Senate, the CGC is convened by the President and has to fix the long-term “program” (two-three months) and the short-term “calendar” (no more than three weeks). The latter is the focus of the present paper. Until 1997, the CGC had to reach unanimity in order to set the program and the calendar. In cases of disagreement, it was up to the President to decide upon the legislative agenda. During debates on legislation, speaking time was allocated to MPs on an individual basis in almost all the stages of the discussion, and legislators were not subject to effective constraints on their participation in debates.

In 1997, a major reform of the Standing Orders extensively changed the rules regulating the allocation of time during debates and the organization of the timetable in the Chamber. Remarkably, the unanimity rule required in the CGC was changed into a qualified-majority rule.⁵ Under the new Articles 23 and 24, an agreement of chairpersons representing three-quarters of the members of the Chamber is needed in order to decide upon the parliamentary program and calendar. Failing that, it is up to the President of the Chamber to set the program and the calendar of the plenary. In this case, the President inserts the proposals put forward by opposition parties in the order of business, ensuring them at least one-fifth of the overall time. The government priorities are in any case taken into consideration by the CGC. Once decided by the CGC (or by the President), the legislative calendar cannot be amended by the assembly. In addition, according to the reformed Article 24 restrictive rules regarding the duration of debates on bills (*contingentamento*) are applied to all the stages of plenary debates, with the only (important) exception of bills converting law decrees into laws.⁶ Once agreed in advance the total time to allocate for the discussion of each bill, the CGC distributes speaking time among parliamentary party groups almost in proportion to their size, after granting a portion of time to the rapporteur, to the government representative and to dissenting MPs within groups.

The rules governing the organization of parliamentary calendars in the Italian Chamber therefore do not enable the government alone to fix the order of the day of the plenary. The super-majoritarian rule in force in the CGC prompts group chairpersons to reach consensual agreements on the calendar, as opposition proposals cannot be easily stopped by simply keeping them off the timetable. Moreover, the government cannot overturn ex post the decisions of the CGC by

⁵ The rules governing the organization of plenary debates were modified in the Senate in 1998, where however the unanimity rule in the Conference of Group Chairpersons was not changed.

⁶ Law decrees are decrees promulgated by the government with immediate force of law. If they are not “converted” into laws by the parliament within 60 days, they lose their effects. Law decrees are not subject to the restrictive rules limiting the duration of parliamentary debates established under Article 24. Since law decrees are entirely governmental acts, the rules of *contingentamento* do not apply in order to grant the parliament the possibility to examine the government’s legislation.

proposing amendments to the timetable in the assembly. Hence, some broader agreement in the parliament – i.e., outside the mere government boundaries – has to be made in order to arrange the timetable.

With regard to the data used for our analysis, the chosen time span covers two entire legislative terms – the 14th legislature (2001-2006) and the 15th legislature (2006-2008) – as well as most part of the 16th legislature (2008-2013). We collected data on parliamentary calendars starting from 2001 because the 14th term was the first one after the reform of the Standing Orders of the Chamber in 1997. Our data do not go beyond November 2011, when an entirely non-partisan cabinet was nominated in Italy as an emergency executive (see Giannetti 2013; Pedrazzani and Pinto 2013). Importantly, debates on bills converting law decrees into laws are excluded from our dataset as those bills are included in the calendar without indicating the maximum amount of time for their discussion. As stated above, the length of debates over government decrees is not limited in advance by the decisions of the CGC.⁷

The units of analysis examined in this study are bills scheduled for discussion in the parliament. The dependent variable is the amount of *time allocated to plenary debates* for bill proposals, which is coded as the number of minutes allotted for discussion to each bill by the CGC. Information on the length of debates can be derived from short-term calendars set by the CGC and published on the website of the Italian Chamber of Deputies. Overall, we examined 122 calendars throughout the 2001-2011 period, including a total of 447 bills debated on the floor. This variable ranges from 370 (about 6 hours) to 8,100 minutes (about 135 hours). According to Table 1, the average amount of time allocated to plenary debates is 940 minutes (about 16 hours). However, there is a considerable variation among bills (640 minutes), and the distribution of time is highly skewed to the right as 75% of the observations included in the dataset count no more than 1,020 minutes (17 hours) of discussion.

[Table 1 about here]

As stated in the theoretical section, we argue that the propensity to allocate more time for a bill at the expense of others is a function of the *divisiveness* and the *salience* of the issues to be discussed from the perspective of those parties represented in the parliament. In order to compute the two measures, following previous research (Martin 2004; Martin and Vanberg 2004, 2005, 2008, 2011; Zubek and Klüver 2013) we rely on expert survey data. In the expert survey

⁷ We drop from our data also bills relating to the ratification of international treaties, with the relevant exclusion of those concerning the EU. To these laws a standard time of two hours is usually assigned for the debate.

methodology, policy domains are pre-defined by the researcher and parties are located on these scales by country experts. Estimates of party positions and issue salience are thus the aggregated results of expert judgements. In this study, we use data from expert surveys employing the methodology developed by Benoit and Laver (2006). Expert surveys are conducted at specific time points and usually do not provide time series data (McDonald and Mendes 2001).⁸ However, expert survey data for Italian elections have been gathered since 2001 thereby allowing variations across time.⁹ Before constructing the two measures of divisiveness and salience, we first assign each bill to one of the policy domains included in the Benoit and Laver's expert survey. Table 2 summarizes our coding strategy, as well as the dimensions taken into consideration. As reported in table 2, about 75% of bill proposals deal with only three domains (fiscal, deregulation and social policies). The remaining 25% is distributed across the other five dimensions included in the analysis (immigration, environment, decentralization, EU authority and security).

[Table 2 about here]

In order to construct the variable *issue divisiveness*, we use expert survey estimates of party policy positions. For each legislative term, we proceed as follows. For each domain, we first compute the absolute ideological distance between all the possible pairs of parties represented in the parliament. Second, we weight each distance by the proportion of legislative seats contributed by the relative pair of parties in the assembly. Finally, we obtain the final measure of *issue divisiveness* of each bill proposal by taking the average weighted distances between party pairs on the corresponding dimension. In order to compute the overall issue importance, we turn instead on the expert surveys' estimates of party saliency scores. We measure the overall *issue salience* for each policy dimension included in the analysis by computing, for each issue in each legislature, the mean of the party-specific saliency scores, weighting it by the seat share contributed by each party in the parliament. Descriptive statistics about the two main independent variables are reported in Table 1.¹⁰

⁸ Another limitation of expert survey data is related to comparison across countries, whereas the substantive content of dimensions can change from country to country (Laver and Benoit 2006). However, in the context of this research, this shortcoming is less relevant since the analysis is limited to a single country.

⁹ For expert survey data about Italy, see Benoit and Laver (2006) and Curini and Iacus (2008). The first survey covers the 14th legislature (2001-2006); the second one the 16th legislature (2008-2013). We thank Kenneth Benoit for providing us data about 15th legislature (2006-2008). For further information about policy positions of Italian parties using expert survey methodology, see Di Virgilio *et al.* (2014).

¹⁰ The reason why we weight the two measures by seat contribution has to do with the fact that there is a possibility that larger parties have a greater influence on the allocation of time on plenary debates. Weighting is also a common procedure with expert survey data (see Laver and Benoit 2006; Martin 2004).

To properly isolate the effects of our main covariates, we also take into account a number of other variables we believe should be relevant in explaining the allocation of time for plenary debates. The Standing Order of the Chamber suggests that parties must take into account also the complexity of the bill proposal before allotting time for its discussion. Therefore, we include in our analysis three standard measures of bill complexity: the number of committee referrals to which the bill is assigned, the number of articles and the number of words included in the draft bill (Martin and Vanberg 2005). We use also principal components factor analysis (PCA) to compute an overall index of bill *complexity*. When using PCA each of the extracted factors can be substantively interpreted by looking at the original variables that correlate (or “load”) onto each factor estimated. Results of the PCA indicate that only one factor has an eigenvalue greater than one. This means that the set of our three indicators related to complexity can be reduced to only one primary latent factor, which is positively correlated to all the covariates capturing intricacy of draft bills and accounts for about 64% of the total variance of our three original variables. We then estimate the *complexity* of draft bills using predicted regression scores from factor analysis, which is successively rescaled to generate a continuous variable ranging between 0 and 100 (see Table 1 for descriptive statistics).¹¹

As a final step in our analysis, we control for a further set of covariates. First, we include the *type of bill*, coding each proposal as an ordinary bill, a budget law or a constitutional act. Second, we check whether the bill proposal was initiated by the government or by the parliament (*initiative*). Third, we control whether the *proposer* belongs either to the majority or the opposition, or if the bill is cosponsored by members of both majority and opposition (i.e. it is a consensual proposal).¹² Fourth, we include the months remaining before the end of the term when the calendar was published (*months until the end of the legislature*). Table 1 provides information on descriptive statistics for all of these variables. Finally, we incorporate legislature dummies in order to control for unobserved factor at legislature level.

Analysis and Findings

As table 1 shows, the number of minutes allocated to bill proposals is a non-negative count variable with a strong right skewness. As the data generating process follows a Poisson rather than normal distribution, using OLS regression could lead to biased, inconsistent and inefficient estimates (King 1988, 845-846; Long 1997, 217). However, many count data processes are not “pure” Poisson in nature having additional variation, which could leads to overdispersion if a Poisson regression

¹¹ PCA is a statistical “data reduction” technique that allows us to describe variability among a set of observed variables in terms of a few unobserved underlying or latent factors (Sharma 1996). Results of factor analysis are not reported in the paper, but are available upon request.

¹² If the proposer is a cabinet minister, we code the bill as it was proposed by the majority.

model were to be specified. In the literature, the Negative Binomial model is the standard approach to dealing with a Poisson process with additional variance (Cameron and Trivedi 1998; Long 1997; Winkelman 2008). Table 3 reports the results of two negative binomial regressions (Models 1 and 2), plus those from an OLS regression, included as a robust check. As we can see, the alpha (α) parameter estimated in our analyses shows that overdispersion is present in the data (i.e. $\alpha \neq 0$ with $p < 0.01$), thus indicating that a negative binomial regression is the best modeling strategy in this situation.

[Table 3 about here]

Model 1 includes three original indicators of bill *complexity* (number of committee referrals, articles and words). Model 2 uses instead the composite index of complexity obtained applying PCA to the three original covariates listed above. Model 3 replicates Model 2 employing OLS regression instead of a negative binomial model. According to Table 3, the results pertaining to our main independent variables (*divisiveness* and *salience*) are similar throughout the different models, thus indicating that our findings are quite robust to different specifications. Both the Akaike and Bayesian information criteria (AIC and BIC) indicate that Model 2 best fits the data, thus in the following pages we comment results using exclusively estimation from this model. Finally, since the hypotheses presented above are interactive in their nature, we assess them using graphical representation as suggested by Brambor, Clark and Golder (2006) and Berry, Golder and Milton (2012).

The first hypothesis states that issue *divisiveness* among parties in the parliament should increase the amount of time allocated for plenary debates only when issue *salience* is sufficiently high. The black solid line in Figure 1 represents the average marginal effect of one unit increase in divisiveness on the length of debates, plotted against each value of salience.¹³ The dashed lines represent the 95% confidence intervals. When the confidence intervals are both below or above the zero line the effect is statistically significant. As Figure 1 shows, at the very beginning the impact of divisiveness among parties in the parliament is not statistically different from zero. As predicted, it starts to significantly increase the scheduled length of debates when issue salience is higher than 12.5, a condition that, according to the histogram plotted in Figure 1, is satisfied by about 93% of the bills included in the dataset. Moreover, as hypothesized, the effect of divisiveness becomes stronger as issue salience increases. Substantially, on average, an increase in divisiveness brings

¹³ The average marginal effect is computed as the impact of divisiveness on each value of salience averaged across the observed values of all the other variables included in the model (Bartus 2005).

parties to allocate for bill discussion 28 more minutes when salience is fixed to a value of 12.6; 54 when it is set at its mean (13.9); 77 when salience is at its highest level (15.0). This seems to indicate that ideological divisions among parties in parliament are a strong predictor of the scheduled length of debates on bill proposals starting from relatively low levels of issue salience. Then, the impact of divisions becomes stronger as the topic to be discussed is perceived as more important by parties.

[Figure 1 about here]

The second hypothesis is related to the impact of issue salience on the time allocated to debates. In particular, our argument is that issue salience should decrease the scheduled length of plenary debates when divisiveness is low. However, as divisiveness rises, the effect of salience should become positive and significant. Figure 2 shows the average marginal effect of one unit increase in issue salience plotted against the observed values of divisiveness (with confidence intervals of 90%), providing evidence consistent with our prediction. According to our results, when ideological divisions are at their lowest observed level (1.6), one unit more of salience decreases the scheduled length of debates by 55 minutes. However, starting from a value of divisiveness of 3.9 it ceases to be statistically significant. Finally, issue importance enters into positive territory when divisions are at their highest level (7). In this scenario, issue salience brings parties to invest 44 more minutes in the discussion of bill proposals. However, the two conditions stated above are verified only for a small portion of bills in the data (9% and 2%, respectively), while for the bulk of the proposal included in the analysis the effect of salience is indistinguishable from zero. This suggests that the impact of issue importance (negative or positive) is confined only to extreme cases on which parties are either not divided or extremely polarized. On the contrary, ideological divisions among parties exert a far stronger impact on a wide range of salience values.¹⁴

[Figure 2 about here]

The substantial impact of issue divisiveness and salience can be better appreciated by looking at Table 4, which describes four hypothetical scenarios that parties could face when deciding about how much time they should allocate for a bill proposal. Scenario 1 depicts a situation in which a proposal has a low degree of both divisiveness and salience (mean-1SD). In this

¹⁴ We test different specifications of divisiveness (weighted by seat distribution, unweighted, the range between the two most extreme parties). Results are similar across all the specifications. Data are available upon request.

case, the predicted scheduled length of the debates is 897 minutes (about 15 hours). On the opposite extreme, we have a bill which is highly divisive and salient (mean+1SD). This brings to a predicted length of 1,095 minutes (more or less 18 hours). In the middle, we have two intermediate situations: the situation game in which divisiveness is low while salience is high, and the opposite one. In the former case, we find a predicted duration of 858 minutes (about 14 hours), due to the negative effect of issue importance on less divisive proposals. In the latter, the predicted amount of time scheduled for plenary debates is of 1,006 minutes (almost 17 hours).

[Table 4 about here]

Among the control variables, only the complexity of bill proposals, their type and the months until the end of the legislature are significant. In particular, one more point in the composite index of complexity brings to longer scheduled debates (about 45 more minutes). Instead, a constitutional bill requires on average an impressive figure of 650 more minutes (almost 11 hours) than an ordinary proposal, which is the reference category. This is not surprising, since constitutional revisions modify the general rules of the democratic game (Buchanan and Tullock 1962). Finally, as expected, approaching the constitutional term of the legislatures, debates are scheduled with a slightly shorter time.

Conclusions

In most of the modern parliamentary democracies, the government is not the only actor endowed with agenda-setting powers. Moreover, the ability to direct the design and the content of the proposals that gain access to the vote in the plenary session is not the only relevant prerogative implied in controlling the parliamentary agenda. Adopting a novel perspective, in this study we have investigated on the one hand the role of parliamentary directing boards in managing the parliamentary agenda, and on the other hand the mechanisms under which parties represented in these collective bodies organize the legislative timetable, allocating debating time among the bill proposals introduced in the parliament. Parliamentary debates represent in fact a crucial moment in which the two contradictory principles of parliamentarism – i.e. the majority right to govern and the opposition right to be listened to – reach a delicate equilibrium. Legislative calendars, although often neglected by the literature, constitute therefore a central aspect of the democratic life of legislatures.

In this work, we have offered an explanation of how parties allot time for plenary debates on bill proposals. In particular, we have showed that the opportunity to allocate more time for a bill at

the expense of others is a function of the *divisiveness* and the *salience* of the issues to be discussed. The main result of our analysis is that parties distribute more time for the discussion of divisive and salient bill proposals. An immediate implication of this finding is that less polarized legislatures do not need to “waste” too much time for long debates. Given the time constraints that characterize modern assemblies, this means that parliaments with a low level of internal ideological divisions can examine and approve more pieces of legislation. Although our argument is tested only on one country – Italy in the 2001-2011 period –, we believe that it could be easily generalized to other parliamentary democracies where the government has not the total control over the organization of the legislative timetable. Additional work should then be done to test our hypotheses in political systems beyond Italy.

With this study we have contributed to a vast literature, creating a bridge between those scholars mainly interested in studying the impact of agenda control on the lawmaking process, and those concerned with legislative debates as instruments for communicating with the electorate and other legislators, serving the re-election and re-selection purposes of parties and single MPs. Our research suggests new avenues for future research by examining for example how different styles in the organization of the timetable have an impact on the legislative process, or how decisions to allocate more or less time for a discussion affect the strategic intra-party interactions of party leaders and backbenchers. These topics have been touched only marginally in the present work, but they may constitute fruitful directions of research for scholars interested in legislative studies.

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Tables and Figures

Table 1 – Descriptive Statistics.

<i>Dependent Variable: Time (Minutes) Allocated for Plenary Debates</i>		
Percentiles	Minutes	
1%	390	
5%	550	
10%	603	
25%	690	
Median	805	
75%	1020	
90%	1270	
95%	1500	
99%	4200	
Mean	SD	N
940.19	639.20	447
<i>Continuous Independent Variables</i>		
	Mean	SD
Divisiveness	5.34	1.26
Issue Saliency	13.90	1.08
N. of Committee Referrals	5.68	3.95
N. of Articles in Draft Bill	12.34	18.28
N. of Words in Draft Bill (Hundreds)	41.85	85.14
Complexity of Draft Bill	4.46	4.73
Months Until the End of the Legislature	28.62	14.87
<i>Discrete Independent Variables</i>		
	%	
Type of Bill: Ordinary	87.02	
Type of Bill: Budget	9.40	
Type of Bill: Constitutional	3.58	
Initiative: Government	50.78	
Initiative: Parliament	49.22	
Proposer: Consensual	30.65	
Proposer: Majority	58.39	
Proposer: Opposition	10.96	

Table 2 – Coding of Bills and Classification by Policy Domains, Italy (2001-2011).

<i>Policy Domain</i>	<i>Topics of Bills</i>	<i>No. of Bills</i>	<i>% of Bills</i>
Taxes vs. spending	Income tax rates, tax allowances and exemptions, value-added tax, taxes on salary, property and capital. Social welfare, healthcare, public services, pensions.	136	30.43
Deregulation	Market regulation, state ownership of business and industry, relations between employers and unions, professional categories.	103	23.04
Social policy	Abortion, homosexuality, euthanasia. Family, domestic partnerships. Minority issues, regulation of churches. Civil rights, law and order.	98	21.92
Immigration	Immigrant rights, citizenship, labor immigration, refugees.	13	2.91
Environment	Protection of the environment. Air, soil and water pollution. Natural resources.	25	5.59
Decentralization	Distribution of decision-making powers across territorial levels. Regional reforms. Redistricting of municipal boundaries.	25	5.59
EU authority	Devolution of powers from the national level to EU-level institutions. Common market issues.	32	7.16
EU security	EU peacekeeping operations, defense alliances. Arms control. Army, defense industry.	15	3.36
Total		447	100.00

Table 3 – Models for the allocation of time (minutes) for plenary debates (Italy, 2001-2011).

	(1)	(2)	(3)
Divisiveness	-0.235* (0.133)	-0.239* (0.133)	-373.4* (196.9)
Issue Saliency	-0.105** (0.051)	-0.107** (0.051)	-159.4** (70.38)
Divisiveness*Issue Saliency	0.021** (0.010)	0.021** (0.010)	31.55** (15.24)
N. of Committee Referrals	0.015 (0.009)	—	—
N. of Articles in Draft Bill	0.004 (0.003)	—	—
N. of Words in Draft Bill (Hundreds)	0.001** (0.000)	—	—
Complexity of Draft Bill	—	0.047*** (0.007)	75.13*** (16.68)
Type of Bill: Budget	0.066 (0.132)	0.0513 (0.126)	85.31 (167.3)
Type of Bill: Constitutional	0.530** (0.240)	0.536** (0.238)	761.6 (467.3)
Initiative: Parliament	0.014 (0.042)	0.023 (0.039)	116.5* (59.93)
Proposer: Majority	0.026 (0.039)	0.027 (0.040)	65.81 (57.27)
Proposer: Opposition	-0.015 (0.035)	-0.014 (0.035)	-4.290 (40.48)
Months Until the End of The Legislature	0.003** (0.001)	0.003** (0.001)	1.344 (1.896)
Legislature: 15th	0.342*** (0.059)	0.343*** (0.058)	334.5*** (98.00)
Legislature: 16th	0.127*** (0.047)	0.125*** (0.048)	77.49 (59.26)
Constant	7.553*** (0.678)	7.563*** (0.671)	2.249** (903.9)
Alpha	0.098*** (0.013)	0.098*** (0.013)	—
Observations	447	447	447
Log-likelihood	-3141	-3141	—
R-squared	—	—	0.372
AIC	6313	6310	6861
BIC	6379	6368	6914

Note: Models 1 and 2 are estimated using a negative binomial regression; Model 3 reports estimates of a linear regression model. Models 2 and 3 include a composite index of complexity of draft bill. All the models include observation for 447 bills drafted during legislatures 14, 15 and 16 in Italy. Baseline type of bill is *ordinary*; baseline initiative is *government*; baseline proposer is *consensual* (majority and opposition together); baseline legislature is 14th. Robust standard errors in parentheses. Significance: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.

Table 4 – Substantial effect of issue *divisiveness* and *saliency*.

<i>Scenario</i>	<i>Divisiveness</i>	<i>Saliency</i>	<i>Predicted Time Allocated (Minutes)</i>	<i>95% CIs</i>
1	low	low	897	848, 947
2	low	high	858	802, 916
3	high	low	1006	929, 1084
4	high	high	1095	960, 1229

Figure 1 – Average marginal effect of *divisiveness* on time (minutes) allocated for plenary debates.

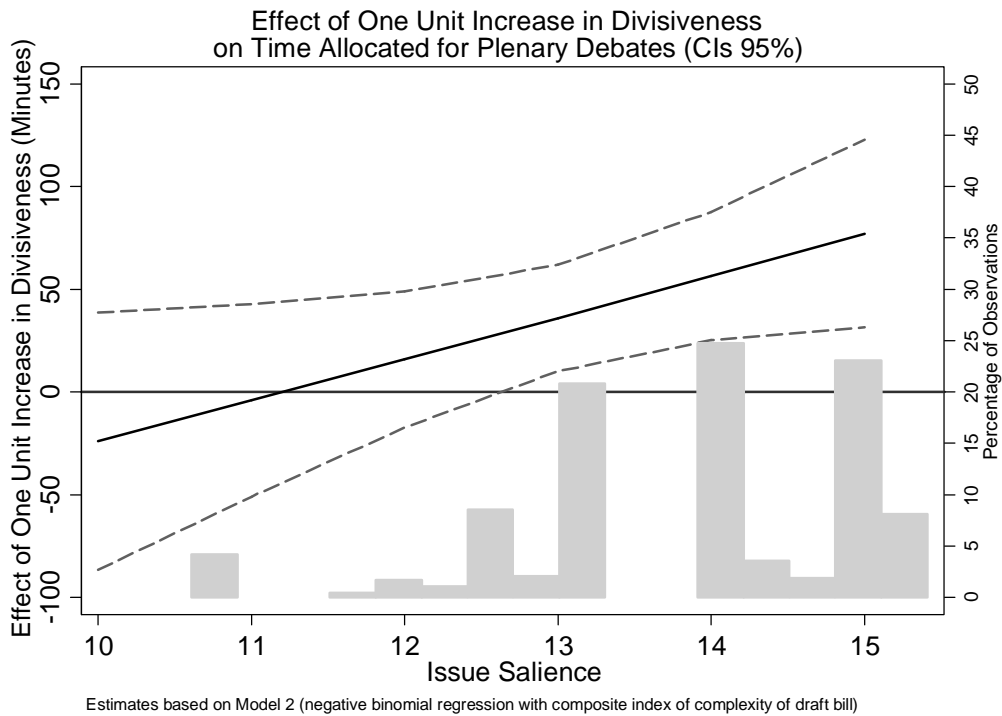
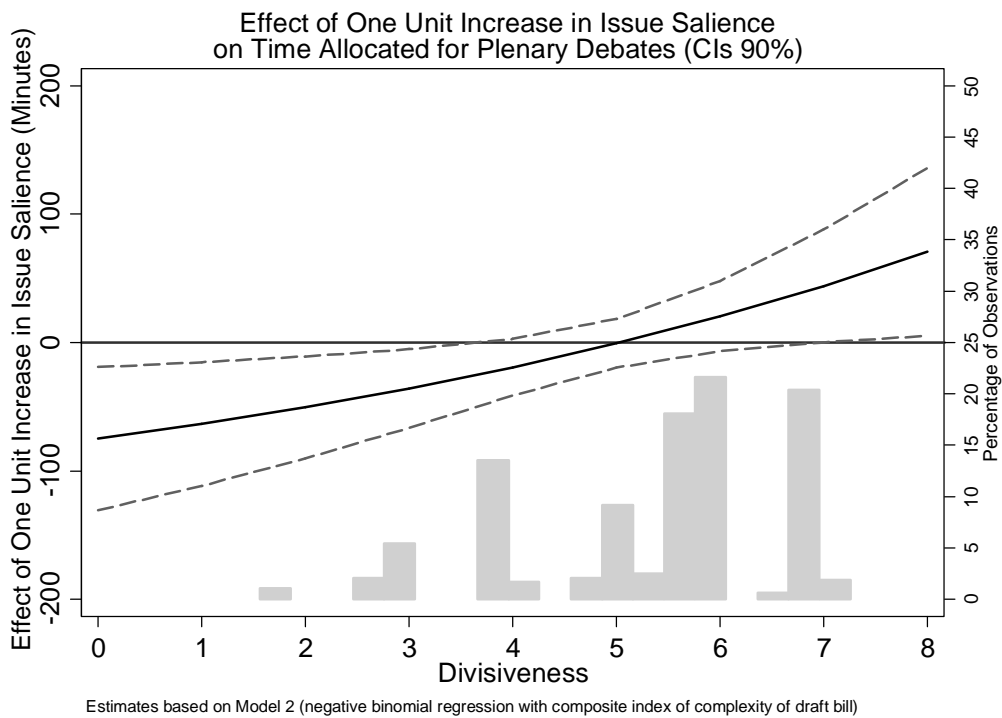


Figure 2 – Average marginal effect of *issue salience* on time (minutes) allocated for plenary debates.



3×3 matrix A using the determinant formula. For any other matrices, just supply real numbers as elements of matrix and click on the GENERATE WORK button. The grade school students and people who study math use this $n \times n$ matrix determinant calculator to generate the work, verify the results of matrix determinant derived by hand, or do their homework problems efficiently. The $n \times n$ matrix determinant calculator, formula, example calculation (work with steps), real world problems and practice problems would be very useful for grade school students (K-12 education) to understand the concept of matrix determinant. This concept is conceived in almost all areas of science, so it will be helpful in solving more complex problems. The debate in the House of Commons must always be relevant to a definite motion. A motion initiates a discussion and gives rise to the question to be decided by the House. A motion, a debate, and a decision on the question, is the essence of the work of the House. Process of Debate in the House. During the process of debate, the House follows a basic sequence of steps: providing notice of the motion, moving and seconding the motion, debating the motion, amending the motion, and finally, making a decision on the motion. Giving notice. Moving the motion. Motion for time allocation on bill 13. Tuesday, May 1 2012 Mr. Milloy moves: That, pursuant to Standing Order 47 and notwithstanding any other Standing Order or Special Order of the House relating to Bill 13, An Act to amend the Education Act with respect to bullying and other matters, when the Bill is next called as a Government Order the Speaker shall put every question necessary to dispose of. the Second Reading stage of the Bill without further debate or amendment and at such time the Bill shall be ordered referred to the Standing Committee on Social Policy; and That the vote on Second Rea