

Why do Members of the Scottish Parliament switch committees? Evidence from the Fifth Session

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A report for Alex Neil MSP



Adam Elder/Scottish Parliament. Photograph ©2004 Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body.



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1. Introduction

- Committee work lies at the core of parliamentary activities in many established democracies. Activities in committees are extensively researched, yet **studies into why legislators switch committees are limited**.
- Much of what is known comes from the USA. Certainly, committee switching is under-investigated in the case of the Scottish Parliament. Moreover, since the parliament's fifth session began in 2016, **around half of MSPs have at some stage left a committee**.
- Many leavers did not exit committee service all together. Some were promoted to government. Others obtained a new committee placement; in other words, they switched committees.

2. Design and analysis

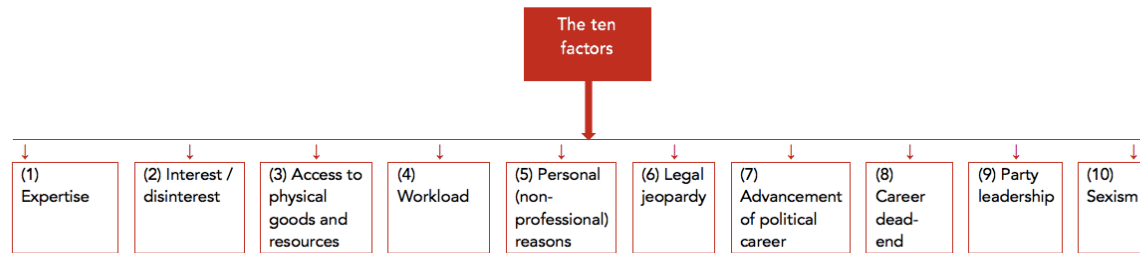
The participants

- **Seven MSPs agreed to be interviewed anonymously**. Ethics approval was sought before recruiting.
- Party-wise, the sample included **Conservatives, Labour, and the SNP**. *At the 2016 election these parties include 118 of 129 MSPs.*
- **Geographically represented were six of the parliament's eight electoral regions**: Central Scotland, Glasgow, Highlands and Islands, Lothian, Mid Scotland and Fife, and West Scotland. *(Not represented were South Scotland and North East Scotland).*

Profile of interviewees				
Participant #	Since their election, has MSP served in over or under five committees?	Age Range	Gender	Interview length (mins)
1	5 or more	45–50	Male	28
2	<5	40–45	Male	13
3	<5	55–60	Male	22
4	5 or more	65+	Male	29
5	5 or more	65+	Male	42
6	5 or more	55–60	Male	16
7	5 or more	65+	Male	14

Interview design and content

- Ten potential factors could potentially explain why legislators may leave committees:



- Semi-structured interviews that:
 - ⇒ Provide flexibility to probe further in participants' responses and
 - ⇒ Maintain a grounding in pre-existing theory.
- A thematic analysis was used to study MSPs' answers. The thematic analysis involves coding interview transcripts, codes serve as a basis for themes, and themes are a basis to identify the reasons behind committee switching.
- **This study unveiled 12 different reasons** for which the MSPs have switched committees this session.

3. Findings and conclusions

- **MSPs switch because they are told to.**
- **They also switch because they request.**
- They do not switch because of workload, legal jeopardy, or access to physical goods and resources.

Party requests

- **MSPs agree party is the pre-eminent actor in switching.**
- Driving party requests are:
 - ⇒ Political reward;
 - ⇒ de-platforming;
 - ⇒ meritocracy;
 - ⇒ time-limited situations;
 - ⇒ slot-filling exercises;
 - ⇒ developing expertise;
 - ⇒ career dead-ends;
 - ⇒ generalism;
 - ⇒ committee resizes.

- The politics of switching appears here no different to politics in other party personnel decisions (such as ministerial/spokesperson promotions and demotions).

MSP requests

- MSPs can and do negotiate 'in the softest variety' with whips to switch committees.
- Motivating MSP requests are:
 - ⇒ Background/expertise;
 - ⇒ Frustration;
 - ⇒ Personal (non-professional) reasons.
- MSPs are not treated equally in the switching process. One legislator receives next to no consultation, while another member can expect their preferences to be widely accounted for.

Limitations

- *Despite there being good geographic- and party- representation...*
- *The data was not sufficient to come to conclusions on career advancement or sexism's role in switching;*
- *Gender representation is lacking for women; and*
- *This study accounts for the experience of seven MSPs in a parliament of 129.*

4. Suggestions for changing the committee switching system

Throughout researching why MSPs switch committees, areas became visible on where scope exists for possible changes to be made regarding the switching process.

Critically, the following must be kept in mind when thinking of potential changes:

- Committee work lies at the heart of what parliaments do – legislate for the public. Committee work sees the development of critical clauses for the functioning of bills, and is intended to scrutinise executive work;

- Parties by and large control Scottish Parliament committee switches, and thus their role warrants special scrutiny.

Committee membership is perhaps not best thought of in the same lines as other party personnel decisions. Accordingly, this report makes the following suggestions:

1. Unless there is an exceptional circumstance – for instance, a member tries to sabotage a manifesto commitment – party whips disregard how MSPs vote in committees when making personnel decisions.
2. Effective scrutiny work, as is expected in committees, seems incompatible with the fear that parties levy political reward, deplatforming, and dead-ending careers over members. These factors then appear inappropriate as bases for determining committee switches.
3. Equal consultation for MSPs requesting committee switches be granted. Committee service is not the gift of the party, it is a necessity of legislative work. The public ultimately suffer the consequences of poor work in committee scrutiny.
4. Ability for MSPs to reject a switch without fear of consequence from their party.
5. Thinking more widely, a debate on how far political parties can be involved in the committee system as a whole may be worthwhile for MSPs.