C. Garner and N. Letki, “Party Structure and Backbench Dissent in the Canadian and British Parliaments,” *CJPS* 38

**Overview**

Authors analyze intra-party determinants of dissenting behaviour of government backbenchers. Authors find that the major factor determining cross-voting, next to MPs tenure, is perceptions of isolation from party communication and influence channels. Results suggest that the difference in the dissent levels between Cdn and British HOCs can be explained by front-benchers’ approach to managing the major resource of the party, i.e. backbenchers.

**Background**

* In late 1980s, C.E.S. Franks argued that party discipline is stronger in Canada than it is in the British HOC
* A decade later, the evidence appears to support this – when looking at backbench dissent: 15% of bills attracted dissent in UK Parliament, while only 3.7% of bills attracting backbench dissent in Canada
* Paper aims to explain why the voting behaviour of MPs operating within two almost identical institutional systems differs so radically

Explaining Cohesion/Dissent

* Institutional approaches to cohesion/dissent in legislative bodies usually refer to 2 main groups of factors:

1. The type of governmental system (parliamentary vs. presidential) or levels of inter-party competition within Parliament; and
2. Considering party as a discrete system that affects MPs’ attitudes/behaviours. Intra-party factors are hypothesized to influence MP voting behaviour (such as socializing effects of the party on MPs, institution of the party whip, ideological distance between leader and backbencher, etc)
   * + Authors add a new one: they believe that the internal party structure and backbenchers’ perceptions of opportunities to voice their concerns/objections *prior* to voting is crucial for levels of dissent in Parliament.

**Conclusions**

* Found that, against a popular socialization and de-radicalization thesis, long tenure in Parliament increases backbench MPs’ independence from the party, making dissenting behaviour more likely.
* Also found that in the UK Labour party, right-wing MPs dissent less often then left-wing MPs, and that this effect was magnified by tenure. Authors link this to the relative ideological distance of MPs to their leaders
* Authors argue that they have demonstrated that the institution of the party in Parliament does affect behaviour. Party leadership, through the determination of party organization, can have a significant impact on managing backbench behaviour.