**Michael Atkinson and Paul G. Thomas. 1993. “Studying the Canadian Parliament.” *Legislative Studies Quarterly*. 18(3): 423-451**

**Thesis**

Canadian legislative studies remain primarily descriptive, atheoretical and isolated from the comparative literature. This situation is caused by the tendency to uncritically accept and normatively defend the Westminster model.

**Approach**

Literature review / neo-institutionalist

**Key findings**

* In 1984 Sproule-Jones complained Canadians uncritically accept the Westminster system without considering alternative arrangements or exploring the principles of institutional design (e.g. protecting liberty and restraining authority).
* Canadian legislative studies have also lacked a theoretical basis, with “richly textured description” being preferred instead. This lack of theory has limited its ability to incorporate advancements from other jurisdictions, such as rational choice
* Some concepts have been brought into the Canadian from other jurisdictions and particularly from the US, but the impact has been only marginal.
* Concerned that students will be drawn towards fields with greater theoretical sophistication
* Franks (1987) is typical of the Westminster approach. He defends the system against reform, stressing the benefit of the policy leadership provided by the strong executive and arguing that the failure of parliament is caused more by the party system than the institutions. He thinks Parliament is “more in need of understanding than change.”
* *Parliament and lawmaking*
  + Generally accepted that Parliament does not make laws but instead scrutinizes and approves the proposals from the government and bureaucracy
  + However there is no theory of legislative influence regarding what influence if any parliament could have or should have.
  + Stewart (1977) questioned wisdom of comparisons with the US and the extent to which Parliament can be seen as an independent “legislature.” He also questioned the wisdom of focusing on individual MPs in a parliamentary context dominated by parties.
  + MPs’ influence comes not in voting on bills but behind the scenes in caucuses. Governments also seen to self-censor by anticipating negative reactions (especially on regional concerns).
  + Franks argued against reducing party discipline since it could increase lobbying
  + Game theory models have not been applied to legislative strategy, but no substitutes offered.
* *Responsible Government and Administrative Accountability* 
  + Party discipline has eroded responsible government (i.e. ability to withdraw confidence) except for periods of minority parliament. Instead, its the government that controls parliament.
  + Some say this erosion is okay since Canadians want stable, efficient government and the ideas of accountability are more from the congressional model.
  + Consensus is that MPs and cabinet have lost control over policy making/implementing to the civil service, which is not under effective review.
  + Widely accepted that MPs can’t meaningfully review of government expenditures
* *Representation*
  + Canadians either fail to employ a well developed definition or simply borrow one from the US
  + General question is how MPs can represent citizens given party discipline. Given brokerage parties, representation is often seen to occur at a level above the individual MP
  + However, Skogstad showed that MPs do try to represent the interests of their constituents in parliamentary committees
  + Behavioural approaches were applied to the question of representation but often with assumptions from the US.
* *Recruitment / legislative careers*
  + Canadians have generally just described the how elites are different from the general population
  + Some study has been done about how composition affects decisions, but more is needed.
  + There is longstanding concern about the relative lack of experience among most MPs
  + Ministers seen to be from elite, often entering cabinet quickly after election.

**Contribution**

Assessing the field of legislative studies, they conclude: “Our understanding of parliamentary politics remains rudimentary... There are many gaps in our knowledge and no dominant theoretical perspective from which a coherent research agenda might be extracted. Canadian political scientists have not balanced their cautious attitude toward foreign models with an interest in comparing the Canadian Parliament to other parliaments or developing an indigenous theoretical tradition.”