

Support for Parliamentary Groups

UK and International Comparisons Executive Summary

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Parliamentary groups are a feature of many legislatures, but there does not appear to be an agreed definition of what the purpose of these groups should be, nor the extent to which they should be supported by the parliament in which they operate.

Specific definitions of a party parliamentary group differ between parliaments, but a 2021 report prepared for the European Parliament includes a useful summary of the role that party parliamentary groups tend to play:

"...they distribute tasks and responsibilities between their members, facilitate decision-making by aggregating the individual interest of the group members and negotiation of compromises between parliamentarians of different political affiliations, and contribute to informing the public on parliamentary decision-making processes."¹

In most cases a party parliamentary group is formed of elected members from the same political party and provides a central organising function for those members. In some cases the group also provides specific support to the group leader.

Critically important is the distinction between a party parliamentary group and political party. The relationship between the two differs between nations, and the rules around funding apply differing degrees of distinction between the two, but generally a party parliamentary group is focused specifically on the work of the parliament and duties of elected Members. While a political party engages in explicit election campaigning, and includes membership that goes much wider than elected members.

¹ European Parliament (2021) *Financing of political structures in EU Member States – How funding is provided to national political parties, their foundations and parliamentary political groups and how the use of funds is controlled*

https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2014_2019/plmrep/COMMITTEES/AFCO/DV/2021/10-27/2021-JUNE_PE694.836_Financingpoliticalstructures_withAnnex3_EN.pdf

Support to political groups or parties in parliament differs in notable ways across the legislatures reviewed for this paper.

Allocation

In most of the examples reviewed funding is provided to **party parliamentary groups**. In some, such as the UK, Scotland and Ireland, reference is instead made to “parties”, albeit with a clear restriction that any funding should be used in support of parliamentary duties.

In almost all of the examples reviewed, allocation of parliamentary group funding is linked in some way to the size of the group, or the number of Members connected to a registered party. Some models are based entirely on a per member calculation, while others also include a basic element, available to all eligible groups – the Senedd, Germany, Sweden.

Some models exclude groups that are represented in government completely (the UK Parliament). In other models, it is common for some form of reduction or supplement to be applied so that opposition parties receive a higher amount of funding. For example, in the Senedd the amount of funding available to a group represented in government is capped, in Ireland the rate per Member is reduced for government parties and in Norway opposition groups of three to four Members receive 50% more support, while groups of more than five receive a 100% uplift in funding. Some of the examples reviewed apply a tiered system based on group size, with the rate per member decreasing as the overall group size increases, e.g. Ireland.

A small number of parliaments have specific support in place for leaders of the opposition. This appears to be less common in the international examples, where the focus is on groups as opposed to leaders when allocations are being determined. It is however commonplace for the group leaders to be specified in rules and regulations about reporting on use of parliamentary support.

Purpose and restrictions on use

Many parliaments draw a clear distinction between parliamentary and political activity, with rules and regulations in place that seek to restrict the use of parliamentary funding to parliamentary activities.

The level of detail provided to groups on what is eligible or ineligible spend varies significantly. Some parliaments have more detailed guidance in place while others have a

high level definition of “parliamentary business” to which all groups and Members are expected to comply.

A number of the parliaments included in this paper note legitimate communications or public relations activity as an eligible spend, with a strict steer that this cannot include any electioneering or political campaign communications.

Commonly cited legitimate expenditure for party parliamentary group funding includes central administration and coordination of groups, central research and policy formulation, communications coordination and support, equipment, training, services and staffing to support the group.

Reporting and Accountability

Most parliaments have in place a system whereby groups and Members are held accountable for their use of financial support. The most common approach is to require regular reporting by groups on their use of funds, coupled with some form of independent audit. It is common for the group leader or group whip to be responsible for ensuring compliance with expenditure rules and reporting.

In the UK Parliament, Scottish Parliament and Irish Oireachtas a statement of expenditure must be prepared and accompanied with an independent auditor’s report on an annual basis. In Northern Ireland, expenditure by each party is published quarterly, with the Commission organising an annual review by an independent auditor.