

Unit 2: A Model of Parliamentary Power

Learning Objectives **A Model of Parliamentary Power**

After studying this unit, you should be able to:

- Describe different types of legislatures according to the models presented below;
- Categorize your own legislature as one of the four types – or at least present characteristics from the different types which do describe your legislature;
- Better understand the pressures for change in your parliament, if yours is an emerging legislature.

Are you and your colleagues experiencing new kinds of pressures on your jobs in parliament? Are demands from parliament members, from leadership, or from the public growing? Is your parliament bringing on additional new kinds of staff? Are you installing new information systems in parliament, or are growing numbers of constituents visiting the parliament?

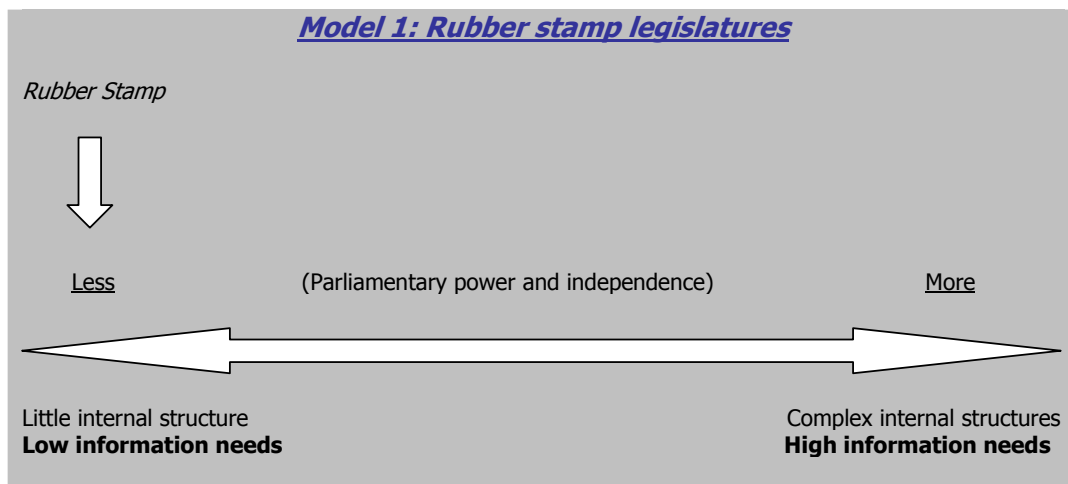
If you answered “yes” to any of these questions, it could be that your parliament is in transition from one type of parliament to another. And, as you know from personal experience, while transitions are some of the most challenging times in life – they are also times of great growth.

In this Unit we propose a simple model of parliamentary power. We have presented to parliamentarians and parliamentary staff in several nations who have told us that it helped them better understand their parliaments. The model attempts to categorize parliaments with regard to their level of independence, and the extent to which they exercise power relative to the executive. As you read the unit, try to determine which model of legislature best describes your own.

Rubber Stamp Legislatures

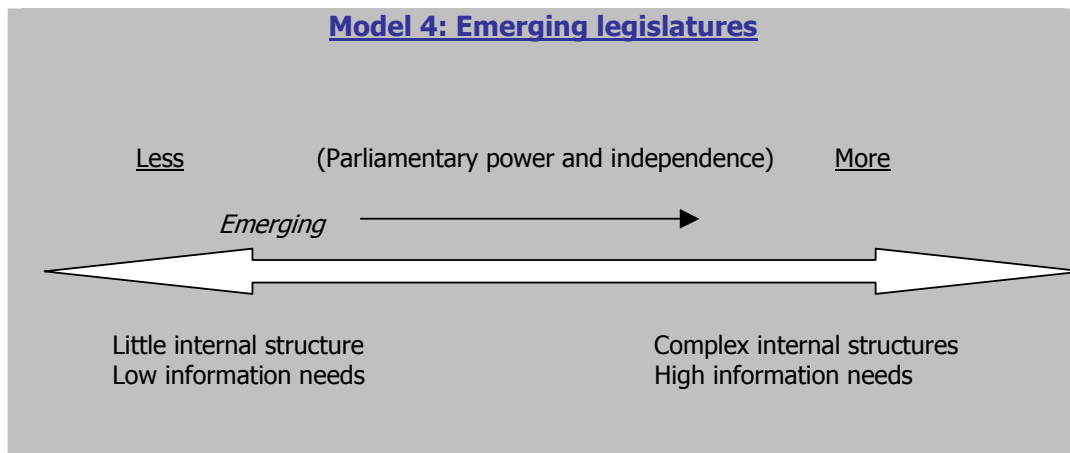
We may think of parliamentary power as moving along a continuum from little independence and power on one end, to very influential and active legislatures on the other. The simplest of legislatures are called rubber stamp legislatures. These bodies simply endorse decisions made elsewhere in the political system, usually by parties and/ or the executive branch. They are often associated with communist or totalitarian nations, where decisions are made by a leader or vanguard party, and in which the parliament is expected to simply endorse their decisions.

Because demands on them are few, rubber stamp legislatures need little internal structure or expert staff and need not conduct long legislative sessions. The Duma of the former Soviet Union and the Mexican Congress during the decades of PRI dominance could be considered rubber stamp legislatures. "Rubber stamp" generally connotes non-democratic, but it could also describe components of the election process such as the US Electoral College, whose delegates are expected to vote according to the dictates of those who sent them, and not according to personal opinion. Because rubber stamp legislatures do communicate extensively with citizens, do not process great quantities of information, do not hold public hearings, and do not amend laws and budgets, their resource requirements are few and they are generally the least expensive legislatures to operate.



legislatures (See Annex 1). In recent years both Mexico and Uganda established professional budget offices, helping those parliaments to play a more assertive role in the budget process. All three legislatures expanded professional staff, and Kenya and Uganda's have made their administration independent of the executive. Kenya and Uganda staff members are no longer civil servants; they serve at the command of parliament's leadership. The parliaments also now set their own budgets.

Emerging legislatures are under significant stress, as parliament's managers and staff struggle to meet the growing demands. Staff and resources that were sufficient for a less assertive legislature are no longer adequate. Emerging legislatures need new kinds of staff, more professional staff, better information systems, additional office space, and other capacities to help them carry out their representation, lawmaking, and oversight roles more effectively. MPs demand more of parliamentary staff members, who must respond more quickly, work faster, and do more than they have in the past. Model 4 shows a legislature growing in strength relative to parties and executives.



The balance of political power in any political system ebbs and flows, with the legislature at times gaining, and at other times losing power relative to the executive. In balanced governments, the branches act as checks on one another so that no branch becomes overly powerful relative to the others.

In developing - and frequently in developed - countries, legislatures tend to be weak cousins of the executive, lacking sufficient powers and resources to function as an effective check on the executive. An overly assertive legislature is much less

common, but as legislatures grow in strength we should pay heed to one of the US's founding fathers James Madison's warning in Federalist Paper Number 48. Madison warns of the dangers of "... legislative usurpations, which, by assembling all power in the same hands, must lead to the same tyranny as is threatened by executive usurpations." Checks and balances in democracies are meant to keep any branch of the government from gaining too much power, and this can include parliaments.

Unit 2 Questions

Please answer each of the following questions. If you are taking this course in a group you may then meet to discuss your answers.

1. Which model (rubber stamp, arena, transformative, emerging) best describes your parliament?
2. Are demands of parliament and parliamentarians on legislative staff and systems in your legislature increasing, decreasing, or staying about the same? Can you illustrate this with any specific examples?
3. Which types of legislatures are probably the least difficult for staff to function in? Which are the most difficult?
4. Which legislative type(s) would you most prefer to work in? Why?

Unit 1 described different functions of legislatures, and some of the ways they carry them out. Unit 2 compared legislatures in terms of their power and independence. In Unit 3 we will consider several characteristics of parliaments which help explain why they behave so differently in different nations.