

# Party caucuses:

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## The foundation of Canadian parliamentary democracy?

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# Caucus defined

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## Party caucus

- Body of politicians at a legislature who belong to the same political party, including both front and backbench members.

## Other types

- Sub-party caucus (geographic, thematic, by chamber)
- All-party caucuses



# Caucus defined

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## Party caucus meetings

- Weekly
- Private and confidential
- Informal (no legal standing)

## Very difficult to study

- Utilize accounts from participants
- Dark matter – look at impact on nearby objects



# Why are caucuses important?

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- Canada has a system of responsible government
- Government must maintain confidence of the Commons to remain in power
- Scrutiny is supposed to be exercised by **ALL** backbench MPs, including on government side
- Yet parties impose discipline on members



# Why are caucuses important?

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## Caucus as a bargain:

- Allows backbench MPs to scrutinize party leaders and have input into government/party decisions **in private**
- In return, backbench politicians remain supportive of party policies **in public**



# Conflicting interpretations

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## Caucus as enhancing democracy

- Facilitates compromise between social and regional interests
- Creates clear lines of accountability for voters
- Oppose efforts to relax party discipline through free votes, etc.



# Conflicting interpretations

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## Caucus as facilitating centralization

- No way to know if it is effective
- Agenda and membership controlled by leadership
- Meetings with 100+ participants not effective
- Gives MPs the illusion of input, but real decisions are taken elsewhere
- Support efforts to give MPs more independence through free votes, more powerful committees



# Limited research

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## Paul G. Thomas

- Studied caucus in 1980s and early 1990s
- Found instances of caucus influence
- Party leaders also limited their actions based on anticipated caucus reactions
- However, found that overall caucuses were “*more exercises in social psychology than policy deliberation*”





# Comparison with UK

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## UK Conservative Party:

- Backbench Tory MPs meets separately from the front bench in the “1922 Committee”
- Conservative members of the Lords meet in the “Association of Conservative Peers”
- 1922 can start a leadership review and selects leadership candidates
- Much more scrutiny takes place in public



# Strengths and weaknesses

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## Canada

- Weekly meeting with front bench offers MPs regular chances to give feedback, suggestions
- Clear lines of accountability for voters

## United Kingdom

- Scrutiny is more public and transparent
- Leaders can be held accountable by MPs
- Parliament more chaotic, less predictable



# Thanks!

# Questions?

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