



THE IMPORTANCE OF PARLIAMENATARY OVERSIGHT

Daniella Springer, with introduction by Rick Stapenhurst



McGill

School of
Continuing Studies

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DISCUSSION



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Introduction

Four years ago, the Inter-Parliamentary Union published what may be the definitive work on parliamentary oversight.

In the Global Parliamentary Report (2017) they noted that parliamentary oversight aims to “promote people’s freedoms and well-being, and to improve accountability and transparency in government. Oversight processes assess the impact of government action on society; help ensure that appropriate resources are provided to implement government programmes; identify unintended or negative effects of government policy and actions; and monitor the meeting of national and international commitments. Effective oversight underpins progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals through strengthened legislation and policy, which lead to economic and human development.” (see <https://www.ipu.org/our-impact/strong-parliaments/setting-standards/global-parliamentary-report/global-parliamentary-report-2017-parliamentary-oversight-parliaments>.)

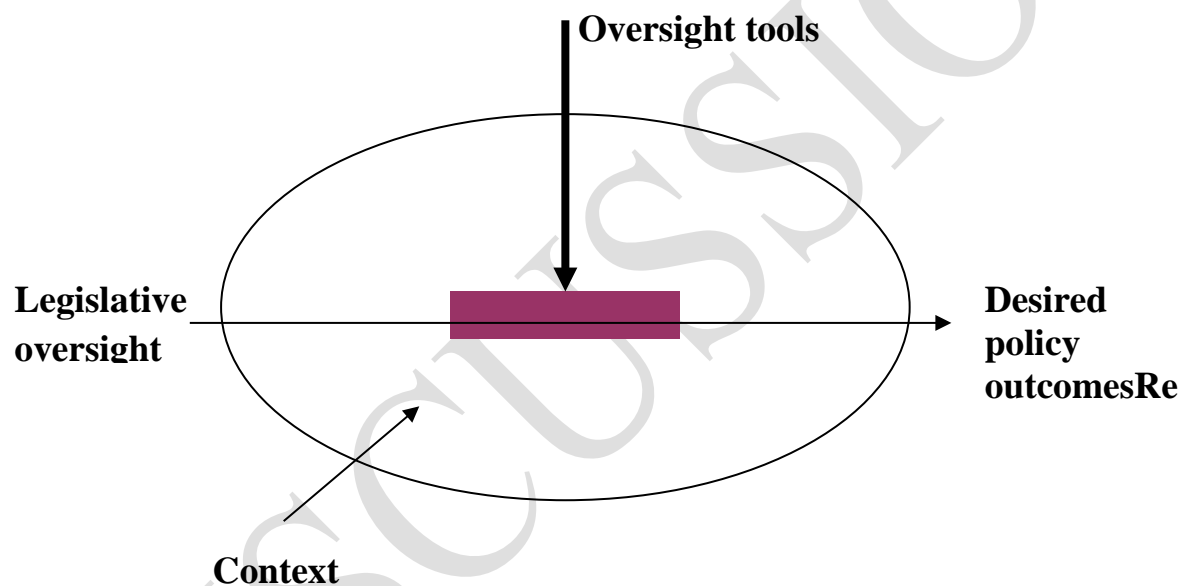
The Report contains a wealth of descriptive data, gleaned from parliamentarians and parliamentary officials, of how oversight is conducted at both the institutional and individual level. It is rather thin, however, on statistical analysis; it fails to explore the rich causal relationships between parliamentary oversight and desired policy outcomes.

This Discussion Paper seeks to address this shortcoming. It examines the relationship between parliamentary oversight the promotion of democracy, gender equality & diversity, climate change, corruption, human rights. In so doing, it uses Fish & Kroenig’s ‘Parliamentary Powers Index’ as the independent variable.

The model behind this analysis is a simple one, that the relationship between legislative oversight and policy outcomes should be considered a *policy process*. The desired policy outcome is enhanced democracy, greater gender equality, better climate change policies, reduced corruption, and greater respect of human rights. The input is legislative oversight. How the input affects the outcome is the policy process. This notion is presented in the diagram below. Legislative oversight

comprises the oversight tools¹ that a legislature adopts and the governance context (e.g., form of government and type of electoral system). Process is the glue binds these two concepts – oversight tools and governance context. This relationship is implicit in much of the current literature, but it has not been empirically tested.

Realist Explanation of the Relationship between Legislative Oversight and Corruption



Source: Stapenhurst (2011)

This Discussion Paper is not presented as a definitive analytical assessment of parliamentary oversight. Indeed, the statistical analysis only incorporates basic analysis. But it is presented as a critical first building block for subsequent analysis. It is organized as follows: Section 1 examines the relationship between parliamentary power and democracy, building on Fish's seminal work. Section 2 examines the impact of parliamentary powers on gender equality and diversity while

¹ Such oversight tools typically include (1) parliamentary committees, who carry out systematic investigations into the work of departments and ministries, (2) commissions of inquiry, (3) direct questioning of ministries, and (4) scrutiny of executive appointments. (Byrnes et al., n.d.)

Section 3 looks at climate change. Section 4 extends Stapenhurst's (2013) work on parliamentary oversight and corruption by also considering national responses to COVID-19 and existence of the underground economy. Section 5 concludes the Paper, by examining the relationship between parliamentary oversight and human rights.

DISCUSSION

SECTION 1: The Promotion of Democracy

In this section, we consider the relationship between parliamentary power and democracy. Comparing the levels of democracy of 26 countries with Fish & Kroenig's 'Parliamentary Powers Index' (PPI), we arrive at a number of conclusions — most prominently, that parliamentary power is essential to both the promotion and integrity of democratic systems.

The Promotion of Democracy

Strøm (2000) claims: "Parliamentary democracy is the world's most popular political project", estimating "a third of the world's population live under this form of regime". "By in large," he surmises, "the great majority of those citizens accept parliamentarism as a legitimate vehicle" (Strøm, 2000).

Nonetheless, Beetham (2006) suggests a paradox between the hail of democratic victory spreading across nations and the ever-growing disillusionment it inspires in its most loyal patrons. Parliaments are meant to "embody the will of the people" and represent all parts of society — "men and women, minorities and marginalized groups", yet there is much discussion surrounding the ability of political processes to produce effective parliaments (Beetham, 2006).

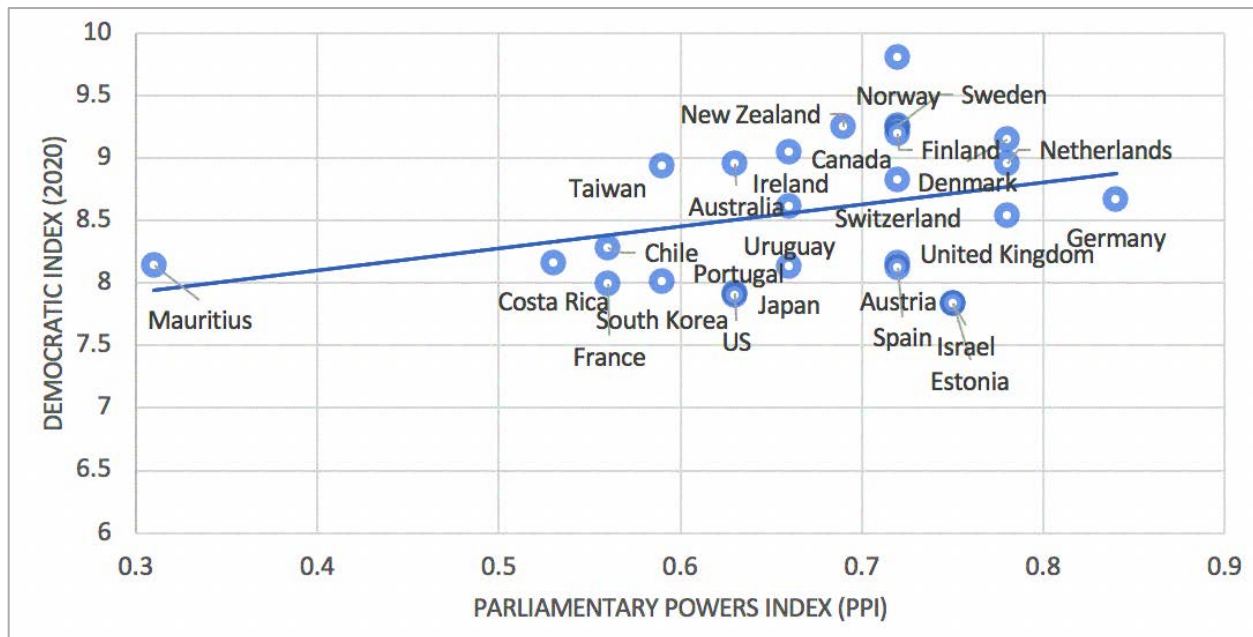
Parliaments, through oversight functions, must protect the human rights of "poor and marginalized" groups..

Fish (2006), through his research on democratization in post communist countries, asserts national legislature is the "institutional key to democratization". However, Fish (2006) cautions, "[I]f politicians fail to establish a national legislature with far-reaching powers, the people will soon find themselves in a polity where their votes do not count". His research concludes, "[f]ailing to empower legislators at the dawn of the post communist period [is] a sufficient condition for remaining mired in authoritarianism", as the oversight ability of legislature is critical for holding presidents and heads of state accountable (Fish, 2006). A legislature with the power to (1) "investigate the executive in practice", (2) "control its own finances", and/or (3) "pass legislation" can "impose more constraints on the executive than does a legislature without these powers, and these powers help deter the executive from committing corrupt acts" (Fish, Michael, & Lindberg, 2015).

Furthermore, as shown in **Figure 1.1**, which incorporates the Fish & Kroenig's 'Parliamentary Powers Index' (PPI), as a country's parliamentary powers increase, its democracy level tends to rise. Thus, countries marked by high parliamentary power, such as Germany, the

United Kingdom, Sweden, and the Netherlands, tend to score higher on the Democratic Index. Conversely, countries marked by low parliamentary powers, such as Mauritius and Costa Rica, tend to score lower on the Democratic Index.

Figure 1.1: Parliamentary Powers vs. Level of Democracy



In accordance with these findings, Pelizzo & Staphurst (2006) demonstrate “the probability that a country is formally democratic increases as the number of oversight tools increases”.

According to Griner (2016), “oversight is the most neglected function of legislatures because it is the least politically rewarding behaviour”. Still, Griner (2016) stresses its importance in sustaining the very foundation of democracies. In comparing parliamentary oversight in two countries — Bangladesh and Japan — Griner (2016) found that the “tools and procedures for oversight” cannot produce democracies alone; their effective application is of utmost importance. As Pelizzo & Staphurst (2006) argue, “the presence of the oversight tool is a necessary but insufficient condition for effective oversight”. Effective parliaments “do not simply need the tools with which they can oversee the government actions but they also need the political will to do so” (Pelizzo & Staphurst, 2006). In that same vein, Beetham (2006) maintains that “[e]lectorates are

not well served if parliaments [...] are wasteful or ineffective in the use made of the resources they have”.

Furthermore, for parliaments to function effectively, it is sometimes advised that branches of government are controlled by different parties; “the configuration of party power [...] can often determine the relation between parliament and executive”(Beetham, 2006). Although oversight can be blunted by coalition and lack of competition between parties, Beetham (2006) outlines, “in situations where the legislature is controlled by a different party from the presidency, parliamentary oversight is [...] typically rigorous”. Nonetheless, (Beetham, 2006) warned that "party competition can easily degenerate into obstruction and gridlock”.

SECTION 2: Gender Equality & Diversity

In this section, we consider the relationship between parliamentary power and gender equality/diversity. While addressing issues of gender equality, diversity, tolerance of immigrants, and sex work, we consider parliament's implication and functions. Once again, through the use of Fish & Kroenig's 'Parliamentary Powers Index' (PPI), we conclude that levels of parliamentary power may not only indicate and alter levels of gender equality, but also levels of general tolerance towards and acceptance of minorities and foreigners.

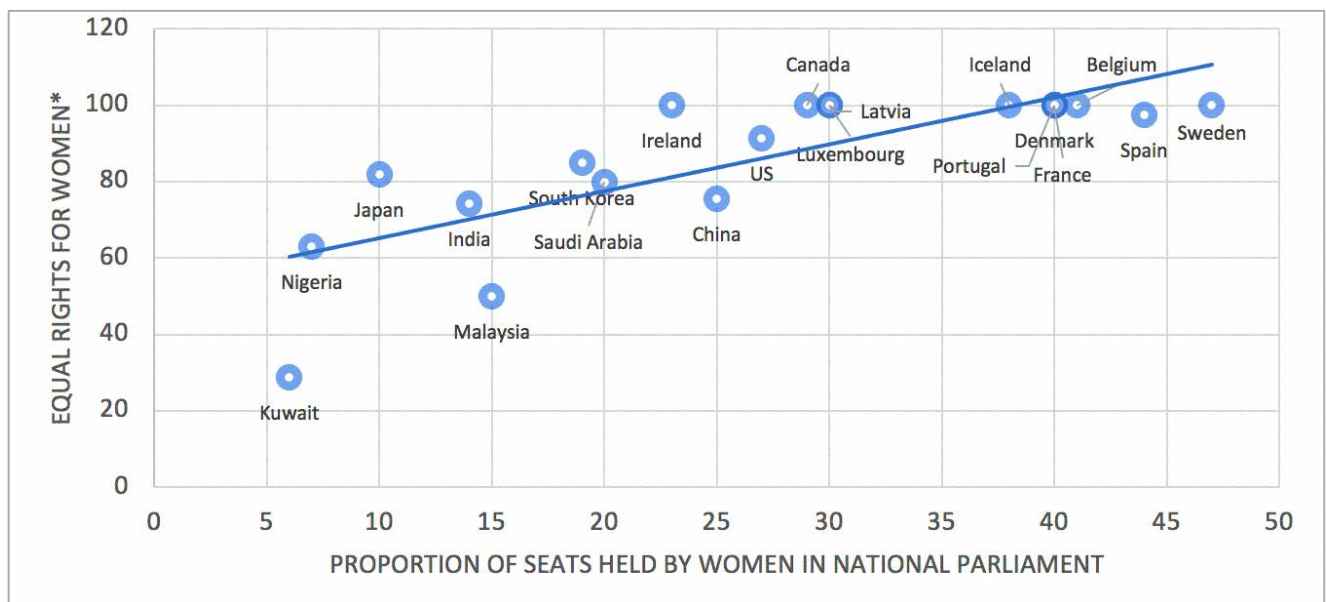
Gender Equality

Holli et al. (2016) suggest that parliamentary committees — comprised of feminist actors, including women and MPs concerned with gender issues — should advocate gender issues through oversight power. As shown by **Figures 2.1**, countries with high shares of women in national parliament — including Belgium, Portugal, France, Denmark, and Sweden — tend to score higher in 'equality guaranteed by law'. According to the World Bank's report "Women, Business and the Law 2021", "only ten countries in the world offer full legal protections to women" (Buchholz, 2021). Undeniably, there exists a symbiotic relationship between women's rights and women's power; if a woman has power, she is able to grant herself rights. As represented in **Figure 2.1**, Kuwait has an exceptionally low index score for equality of 28.8 which could be explained by the lack of its female representation in parliament and/or consultative body, accounting for just 6.3% of seats held. The lowest recorders of women's rights — countries such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Yemen, and Sudan — do not offer women proportionate seats in any government or legislative branch (Buchholz, 2021). This, in turn, displaces feminist actors from positions of power, dismantling feminist voices, and resulting in perpetual oppression and inequality.

Although female representation in parliament can improve gender equality through legislation and oversight, efforts are rendered ineffective when the parliament itself is less powerful. As demonstrated in **Figure 2.2**, countries that score high on the Parliamentary Powers Index (PPI), such as Latvia, Denmark, Belgium, and Sweden, tend to score higher on the Gender Equality Index. Conversely, countries that score low on the PPI, such as Malaysia and Kuwait, tend to score lower on the Gender Equality Index. Buchholz (2021) indicates the Gender Equality Index takes into account the nature of laws concerning freedom of movement, work, pay, marriage, child rearing, business ownership, asset management and pensions².

² Thus explaining, for example, the relatively high score of Saudi Arabia

Figure 2.1: Share of Women in National Parliament vs. Equality Index Score in Selected Countries



*Index scores for equality guaranteed by law in selected countries. Laws concerning freedom of movement, work, equal pay, marriage, child rearing, business ownership, asset management, and pensions taken into account.

As shown by **Figure 2.2**, no Asian countries were among those with high shares of women in parliament. This lack of representation for women likely reduces the visibility of their cause in political circles.

Figure 2.2: Parliamentary Powers vs. Gender Equality

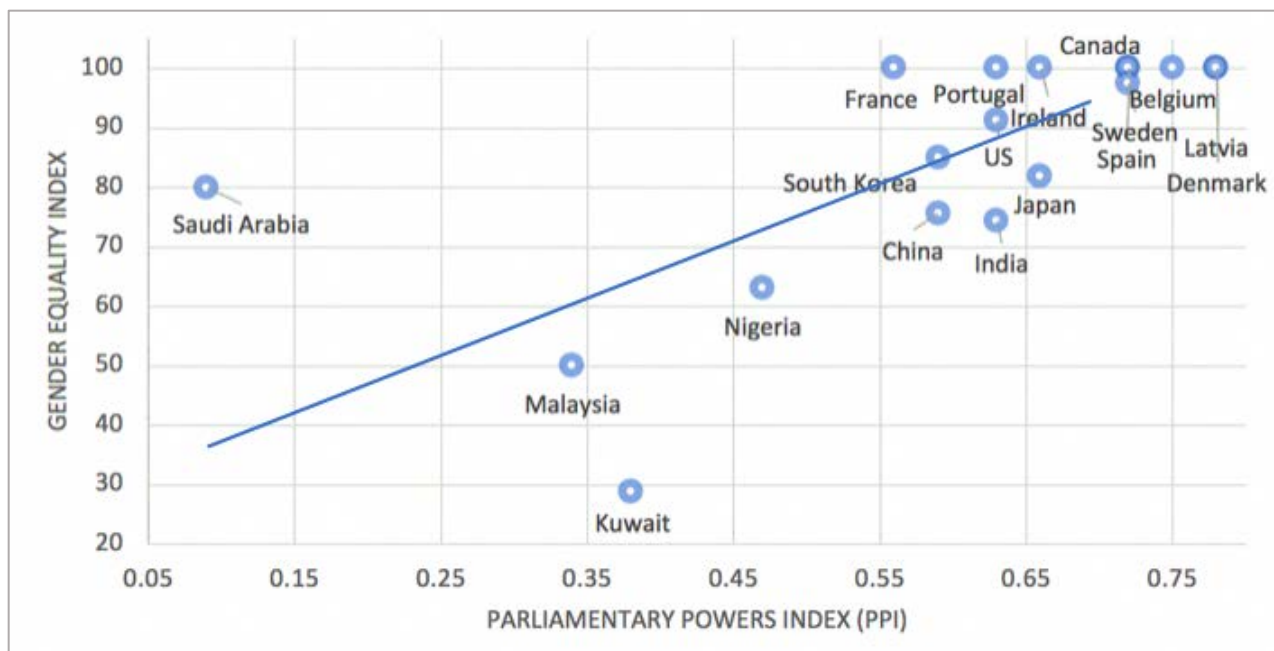
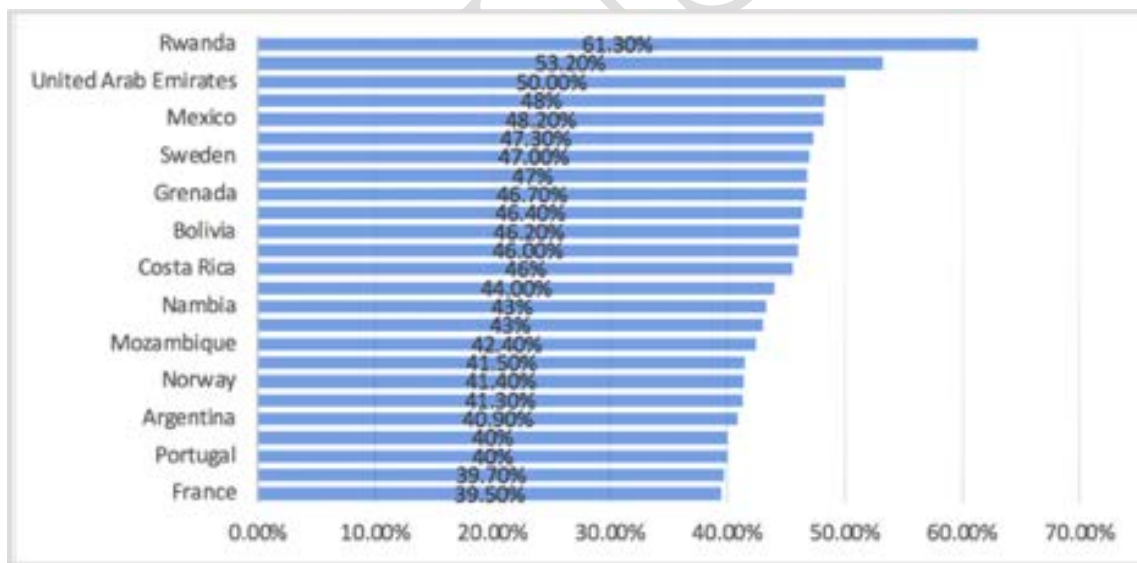


Figure 2.2: Share of Women in Selected National Parliaments, lower or single house (2020)



SECTION 3: Climate Change

This section considers the relationship between parliamentary power and climate change — particularly, a country's ability to curb greenhouse gas emissions (GHGs). While considering a country's historical records of GHGs, and their current environmental performance, we conclude that parliamentary power is a strong indicator of a country's ability to manage the ongoing climate change crisis.

Climate Change

Climate change — primarily a human-produced heat-trapping phenomenon, manipulating cyclical ocean patterns (like El Niño and La Niña), the Pacific Decadal Oscillation, volcanic activity, changes in the Sun's energy output, and variations in Earth's orbit — has given rise to a broad portfolio of emergency responses (NASA, 2021). Notably, disadvantaged groups — often highly exposed and susceptible to climatological natural disasters, such as earthquakes, landslides, tsunamis, avalanches, floods, cyclones, wildfires, extreme temperatures, insect outbreaks, and disease epidemics — suffer disproportionately from the adverse effects of climate change and are less likely to cope and recover from them — a phenomenon otherwise deemed “the inequality-aggravating effect of climate change” (Islam & Winkel, 2017). According to the 2021 Climate Risk Index (CRI) report, the countries most affected by global climate change are Mozambique (2.67), Japan (5.5), Zimbabwe (6.17), The Bahamas (6.5), Malawi (15.17), Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (16), India (16.67), South Sudan (17.33), Niger (18.17), and Bolivia (19.67). It is therefore no surprise that a 2019 climate-change-induced deadly tropical storm, Cyclone Idai, was “one of the worst weather-related catastrophes in the history of Africa”, wrecking havoc in Mozambique, Zimbabwe, and Malawi (Jaganmohan, 2021). Global land and ocean surface temperature anomalies have caused increases in sea level, decreases in arctic ice, and a “growing number of weather-related catastrophes, including storms, floods, and droughts”, making coastlines particularly vulnerable (Jaganmohan, 2021; King, 2004).

Policy initiatives have included: (1) drastic emissions reductions programmes, (2) carbon dioxide removal, complete with “land-use and forestry, enhanced ocean sequestration, algae, artificial air capture, mineral sequestration”, (3) solar radiation management (SRM), otherwise known as “emergency cooling” which includes “stratospheric aerosol injection, space reflectors, cloud modification, terrestrial albedo modification”, and (4) emergency adaption options including

water safety solutions and supply, nature protection, and migration from vulnerable areas (Swart & Marinova, 2010).

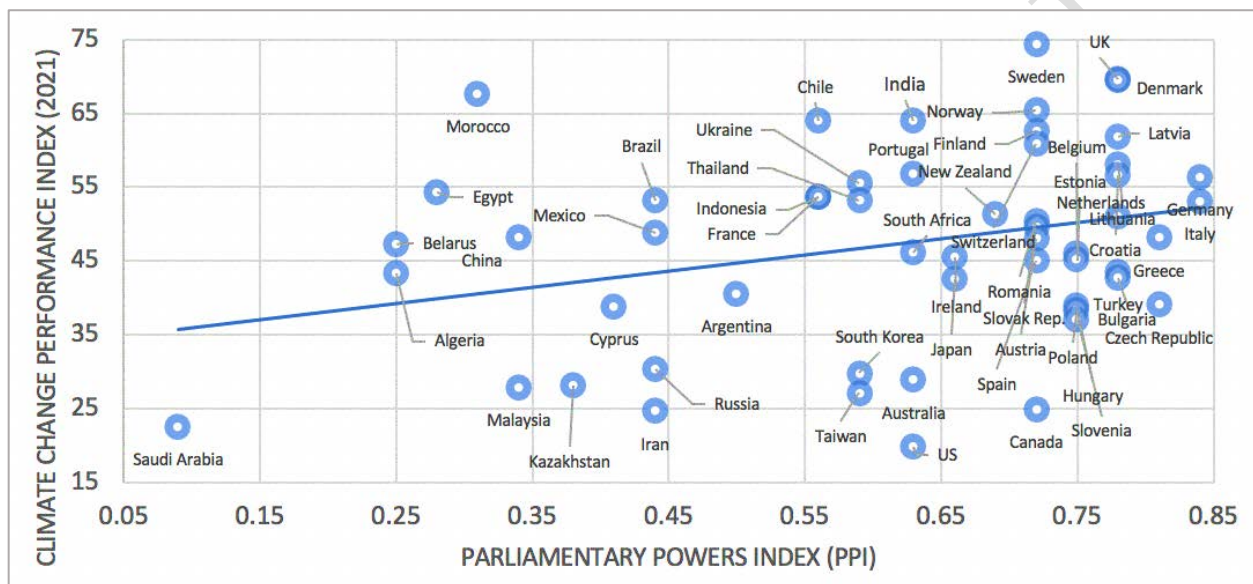
Although international commissions and intergovernmental panels urge countries to reduce and regulate global GHGs, individual parliaments must comply and act swiftly in order to regulate the adverse effects of climate change in their independent countries. “[N]ational legislation is as critical to combating climate change as a successful international agreement” (Townshend et al., 2011). Furthermore, to “globally coordinate collective action”, the international community requires reform from all major economies, as “[w]orldwide emissions cannot be curbed to the extent required without meaningful [country] contributions”. According to the Global Carbon Project, the largest producers of fossil fuels carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions worldwide, by share of emissions, include China (27.92%), the United States of America (14.5%), India (7.17%), the Russian Federation (4.6%), Japan (3.03%) and Iran (Tiseo, 2021). Parliamentary committees with an “environmental remit”, such as Canada’s Environment Committee, China’s National Peoples Congress Committee on Environment Protection and Resources Conservation, the EU’s Committee on Environment and Public Health, Italy’s Senate Environment Committee, and South Korea’s Standing Committee on the Environment are responsible for “providing transparency, oversight, and accountability to climate policies” (Townshend et al., 2011). Although many countries have vowed to reduce their carbon dioxide emissions, they fail to do so without proper oversight. Parliaments may have the tools for monitoring the implementation of policies, and the legislature pushing for reform, but little can be achieved without effective use of these oversight tools.

The Paris Agreement of December 2015 — an urgent international treaty adopted by 196 parties to limit global greenhouse gas emissions (GHGs) — was arguably one of the world’s most broadcasted attempts at acknowledging and responding to the climate crisis (UNFCCC, 2021). With the Paris Agreement, nations are to follow an “enhanced transparency framework” (ETF) to track progress (UNFCCC, 2021). “Whilst providing a framework for international cooperation [...] each state is responsible for developing its own plan [...] to contribute to the overall goal of limiting climate change to between a 1.5°C and 2°C rise in global average temperature” (Willis, 2017).

As shown by **Figure 3.1**, high parliamentary powers are an indicator of climate change performance. The Climate Change Performance Index (CCPI) provides an analysis on the progress

and setbacks of countries' climate change policy implementation following the Paris Agreement (CCPI, 2021). The CCPI overlooks four categories: (1) Greenhouse Gas Emissions (40% of the overall score), (2) Renewable Energy (20%), (3) Energy Use (20%), and (4) Climate Policy (20%) (CCPI, 2021).

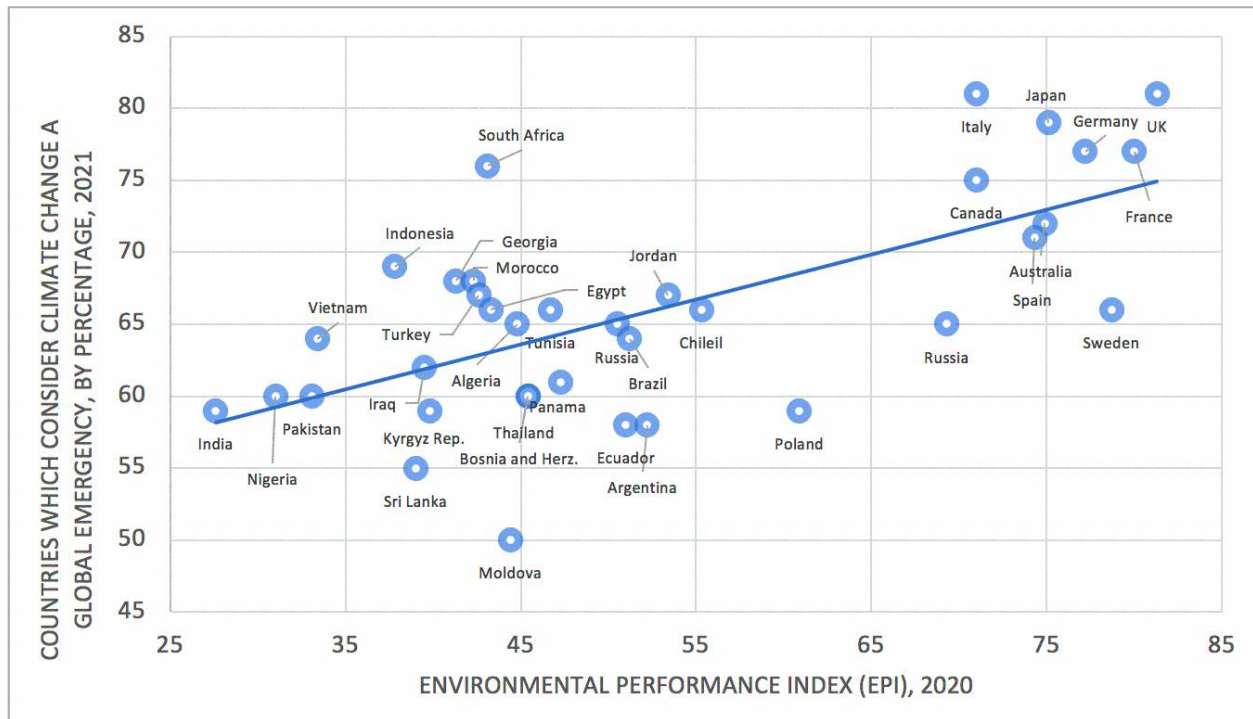
Figure 3.1: Parliamentary Powers vs. Climate Change Performance



Although parliamentary powers are a strong indicator of climate change performance, other factors alter the CCPI of individual countries. According to the 2020 Environmental Performance Index (EPI) — which summarized “the state of sustainability around the world”, providing a “gauge of at a national scale of how close countries are to established environmental policy targets” — GDP per capita is one of the strongest indicators of environmental performance. In addition, low EPI scores can often be attributed to “weak governance” and a lack of methodology for implementation and oversight (Wendling et al., 2020).

Another indicator for a country's EPI score is the level at which they consider climate change a global emergency (see **Figure 3.2**). Countries with a higher percentage of their population who view climate change as an urgent threat to human existence, such as the UK and Japan, are under pressure to implement change. Conversely, countries, such as Sri Lanka, who do not perceive climate change as an imminent threat are less likely to implement policies which reduce their GHGs. The public's opinion or belief on climate change can greatly affect the effort put forth by elected officials in developing and overseeing policies which promote sustainability.

Figure 3.2: Environmental Performance Index vs. Countries which consider climate change a global emergency



SECTION 4: Corruption

In this section, we consider the relationship between parliamentary power and corruption. While comparing the ‘Corruption Perception Index’ (CPI) with Fish & Kroenig’s ‘Parliamentary Powers Index’ (PPI), we arrive at a number of fascinating conclusions. Notably, our findings suggest that parliamentary power is not only a strong indicator of a country’s level of corruption and shadow economy size, but also a strong indicator of a country’s ability to respond to emergencies amid crises requiring swift expenditures, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Corruption

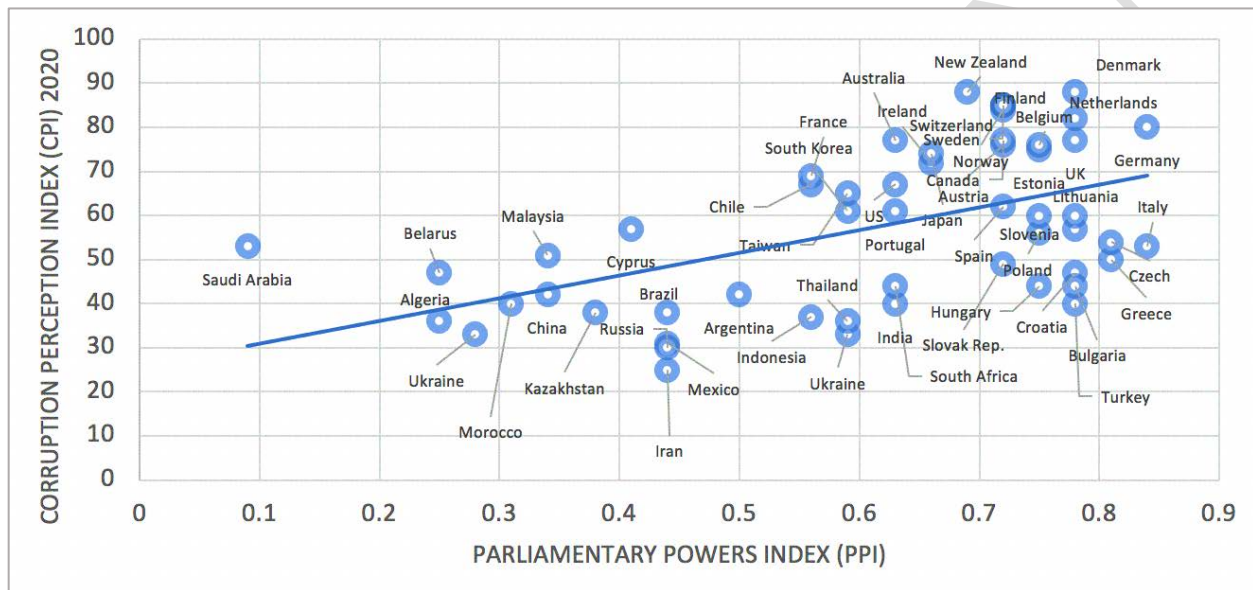
Parliaments play a critical role in curbing corruption “as the institution holding government accountable to citizens” (Chêne, 2017). As Stapenhurst et al. (2013) explain, “often, audit institutions, ombuds and anti-corruption agencies report to parliament, as a means of ensuring both their independence from government and reinforcing parliament's position at the apex of accountability institutions”. Parliaments — through their legislative mandate — are responsible for constructing a robust legal framework for their country’s unique struggles and circumstance that curbs corruption, including “legislation on access to information, protection of whistleblowers” and common anti-corruption legislation that tackles issues such as bribery (Chêne, 2017). However, the laws meant to curb corrupt practices, including, inter alia, nepotism, extortion, fraud, speed money, kickbacks, embezzlement, conflicts of interests, and statutes of limitation, are “never sufficient” (Stapenhurst, Johnston, & Pelizzo, 2006; Leers & Tallo, 2000). “Corruption is a global phenomenon which occurs in developed and developing countries alike and has existed at all times and in virtually every society, albeit to varying degrees” (IPU, 2001). Although corruption can be found in every part of the world, “corruption seems to flourish where state institutions are weak; where loopholes in governmental policies or regulatory regimes provide scope for it; and where watchdog institutions — the parliament, the judiciary or civil society, notably the press — are marginalized or suffer corruption themselves” (Leers & Tallo, 2000).

Corruption is often difficult to quantify due to its nature of secrecy. Nonetheless, Transparency International provides an annual index, known as the ‘Corruption Perception Index’ (CPI), whereby countries are ranked by their “perceived levels of public sector corruption” (Transparency International, 2020). As evidenced by the strong correlation in **Figure 4.1**, the level of parliamentary power may significantly impact perceived corruption. For instance, Denmark

exhibits high levels of parliamentary power (*score = 0.78*) and holds a very high ranking on the ‘Corruption Perception Index’ (*score = 88*), indicating the corruption in Denmark is amongst the lowest in the world (Transparency International, 2020).

On the opposite end, countries with low scores on the Parliamentary Powers Index, such as Algeria and Ukraine, also hold low rankings on the ‘Corruption Perception Index’.

Figure 4.1: Parliamentary Powers vs. Corruption Perception Index



The World Bank Group’s report, “Enhancing Government Effectiveness and Transparency: The Fight Against Corruption”, outlines five major areas of corruption: (1) public procurement, (2) infrastructure, (3) state-owned enterprises, (4) customs administration, and (5) service delivery. Many countries, such as Brazil, Kenya, Mongolia, Serbia, Somalia, and Ukraine have made strides in the fight against corruption by improving transparency, restructuring bureaucratic systems, removing red tape, and providing citizens with access to public expenditure information through secure online portals (The World Bank, 2020).

COVID-19 Response

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, marginalized, poor, and disadvantaged groups have shouldered the costs of corruption in the procurement of drugs and medical equipment, with unofficial payments for services, sub-standard and harmful products (The World Bank, 2020).

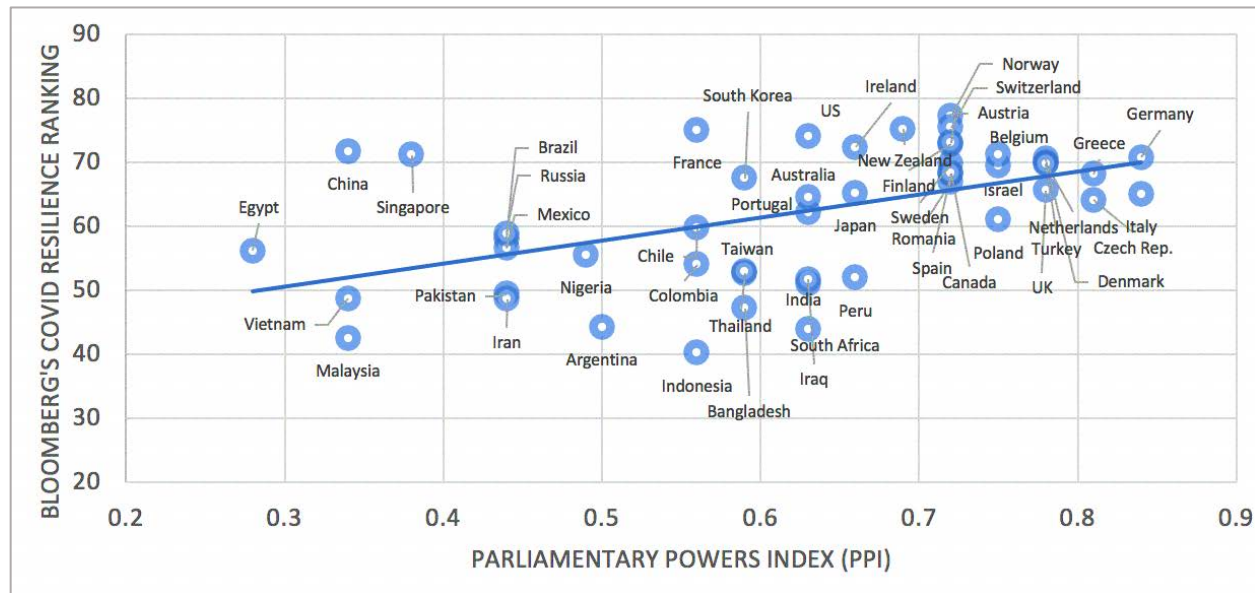
Aside from trillions of dollars worth of financial costs, counterfeit drugs and vaccinations will have “life-long impacts” and cause irreversible human suffering (The World Bank, 2020). The UN-Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) lays emphasis on the scarcity of essential products and medical equipment, underscoring the dire consequences of corruption amid the pandemic, and claiming the potential for corruption “cannot be overstated” (United Nations, 2021). According to the Chair of Transparency International, Delia Ferreira Rubio, “COVID-19 is not just a health and economic crisis. It is a corruption crisis. And one that we are currently failing to manage” (Transparency International, 2020).

As corruption undermines the COVID-19 response, it is no surprise that Bloomberg’s Covid Resilience Ranking strongly correlates with countries that not only have low Corruption Perception indexes, but also high parliamentary powers (see **Figure 4.2**). Regulatory challenges amid the COVID-19 pandemic allowed “substandard and falsified medicines to be more easily introduced into the marketplace by unscrupulous operators” (Tsfaye et al., 2020). The global surge in counterfeit pharmaceuticals, including “antiviral medications, antimalarial chloroquine, vitamin C, painkillers, and antibiotics” and medical supplies, such as masks, has sparked debate surrounding Parliaments’ ability to surveil and regulate the distribution of falsified products in the underground marketplaces (Tsfaye et al., 2020). Particular attention has been placed on Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Niger, whose histories are marked by falsified antimalarial drugs prior to the recent confirmation of falsified chloroquine products in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic (Tsfaye et al., 2020).

Underground Economies

“Links between corruption and other forms of crime, particularly organized crime, terrorism, drug trafficking, money laundering and other economic crime at both national and international level are very disturbing” (IPU, 2001). In the absence of legal frameworks that “criminalize corruption” and provide “appropriate punishment and other deterrent measures”, corruption often becomes systematic — therefore, losing its “moral stigma” and reducing the likelihood that it will be “unearthed and punished” (IPU, 2001; Leers & Tallo, 2000). Where “bribes are large, the chances of being caught slim and penalties modest, many people will succumb to the temptation” (Leers & Tallo, 2000). Furthermore, in countries mired in red tape and bureaucracy, “[m]afiosi elements [...] serve as the chief negotiators in a complex system of arranged contracts and

Figure 4.2: Parliamentary Powers vs. Bloomberg's Covid Resilience Ranking

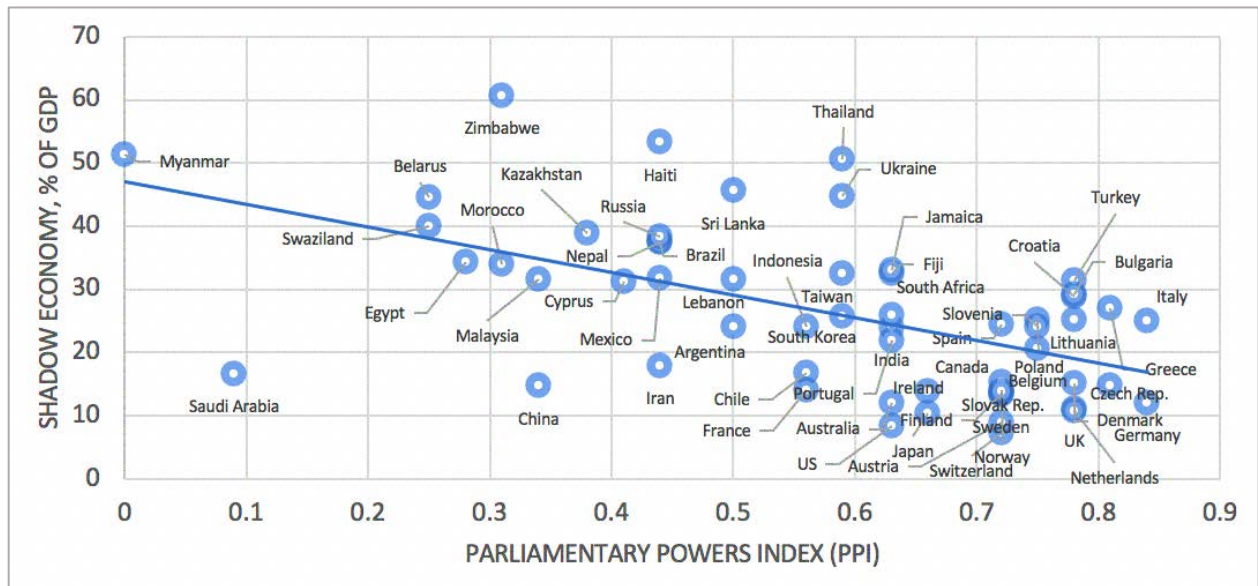


kickbacks to corrupt officials” (Leers & Tallo, 2000). Leers & Tallo (2000) note: “One remedy is to reduce red tape as far as possible and thus deprive the corrupt of finding an excuse for delays, and to make as transparent as possible whatever red tape remains”.

The IPU (2001) states: “[T]he role of parliaments in combatting corruption is recognized world-wide”; however, “many parliaments, especially in the developing world and emerging democracies often lack the capacity to fulfill this role efficiently”, and therefore, corruption is often considered “necessary to speed up the bureaucracy” (Leers & Tallo, 2000).

As shown in **Figure 4.3**, countries, such as Germany, Italy, and Denmark, with strong parliamentary powers, including the powers to (1) “[s]treamline and ensure the equity of laws and regulations on government procurement procedures, taxation, the administration of justice, etc” and (2) “[i]nstitute and/or reinforce mechanisms within parliament for bringing government to account” through the promotion of watchdog and investigative agencies tend to have a lesser percentage of their GDP coming from the shadow economy. Conversely, countries with weak parliamentary powers, such as Myanmar, tend to have high percentages of their GDP owing to their shadow economies, with constitutes undeclared work, illicit enrichments, and black-market transactions such as terrorism funding, drug trafficking, and sexual exploitation.

Figure 4.3: Parliamentary Powers vs. Size of the Shadow Economy, % of GDP



SECTION 5: Human Rights

In this section, we consider the relationship between parliamentary power and human rights. While comparing the Freedom House Index with Fish & Kroenig's 'Parliamentary Powers Index' (PPI), we conclude that parliamentary power is integral to the promotion and legitimacy of human rights.

Human Rights

"Parliament is a guardian of Human Rights" (Agora, n.d.). Parliaments "oversee the actions of the executive by ensuring that laws, policy and practice are in compliance with international human rights commitments" (Webb & Lyster, 2018). According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union, parliaments "ratify and implement specific UN human rights treaties" to address challenges including the "impunity for perpetrators, trafficking in children and child labour, undue limitations to the rights to freedom of expression and assembly, and discrimination against and exclusion of vulnerable groups" (IPU, 2021). International human rights councils, such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), later replaced by the Human Rights Council (UN HRC), set the tone for human rights law; however, it is the parliament's responsibility to comply with international standards and uphold human rights on the domestic level (Agora, n.d.). Ultimately, parliaments must be the primary agents in monitoring and overseeing the quality of their country's human rights. Although many parliaments pass laws abiding by international conventions of human rights, they fail in their oversight functions or willingly turn a blind eye. Moreover, countless countries have sought membership on UN human rights councils to "protect themselves against criticism" (Brangwin, 2017).

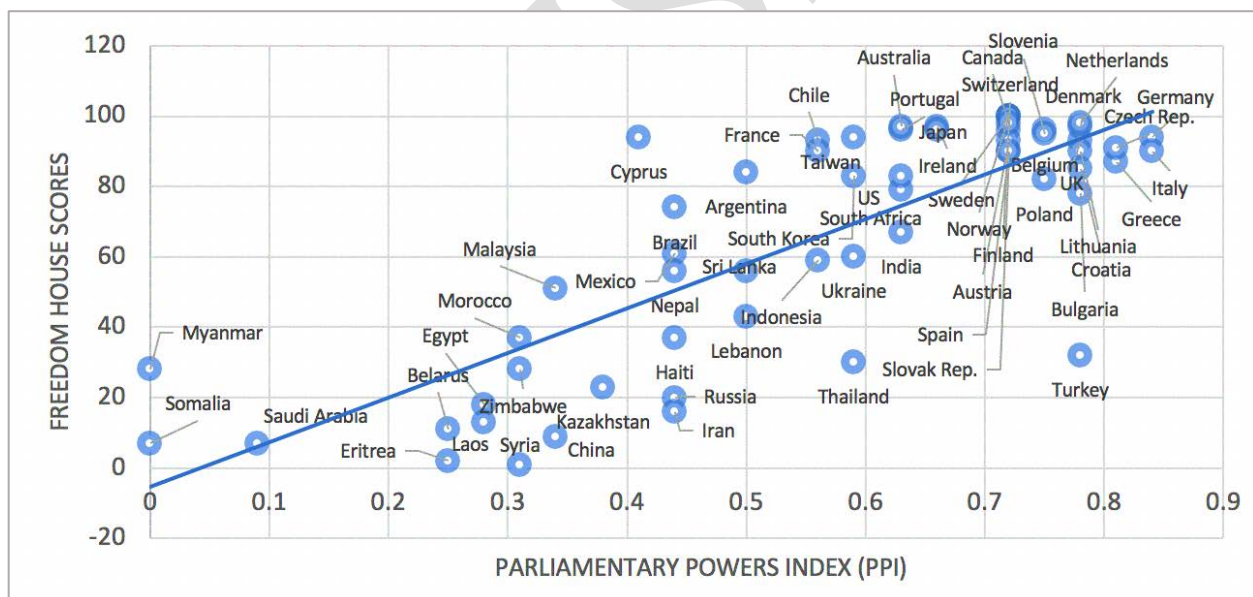
The concept of international human rights law first appeared in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), enshrining the rights and freedoms of all human beings (United Nations, n.d.).

"In order to encourage parliaments to participate systematically with human rights issues, a set of proposals have been drafted at the UN level", known as the 2018 Draft Principles on Parliaments and Human Rights (Lyster, 2019). "Given their powers to oversee the executive, and functions that can ensure laws, policy and practice are in compliance with the state's international human rights commitments, [parliaments] have significant potential in supporting the international human rights system and improving the implementation of international standards at the domestic level" (Lyster, 2019). Furthermore, as parliaments, like other national authorities, have "direct democratic legitimation", they are, in principle, "better placed than an international court to

evaluate local needs and conditions” (Lyer, 2019). Lastly, parliaments have the capacity to work closely with domestic human rights actors such as NGOs, ombudspersons, and civil societies (Lyer, 2019).

As shown by **Figure 5.1**, there is a strong correlation between parliamentary powers and the Freedom House³ scores. The Freedom House ranks “people’s access to political rights and civil liberties [...] ranging from the right to vote to freedom of expression and equality before the law” (Freedom House, 2021). Countries such as Saudi Arabia, with low parliamentary powers tend to rank low on the Freedom House. Conversely, countries with high parliamentary powers, such as Germany tend to rank high on the Freedom House. Furthermore, countries, such as Indonesia, with mid-level parliamentary powers tend to rank at mid-level on the Freedom House index.

Figure 5.1: Parliamentary Powers vs. Freedom House



³ The Freedom House is a highly-regarded and world-recognized index; however, it has been criticized for being “politically biased” as it is inherently “American” and, therefore, may reflect positively on US allies and poorly on US enemies (Steiner, 2014). Despite its “appearance of neutrality”, the Freedom House has been founded upon subjectivity (Bush, 2017). “The most influential ratings often are powerful precisely because they reflect the value judgments of the powerful” (Bush, 2017). Although the index may present inherent biases, the general trend is to be expected. If parliaments are to act as the defenders of civil liberties and democracy, surely their power would be expected to linearly correlate with domestic levels of human rights.

CONCLUSION

As evidenced throughout this paper, a nation's parliamentary power impacts: (1) The Promotion of Democracy, (2) Gender Equality, (3) Climate Change, (4) Corruption, and (5) Human Rights. Comparing Fish & Kroenig's 'Parliamentary Powers Index' (PPI) with levels of democracy, gender equality, climate change performance, the 'Corruption Perception Index' (CPI), Bloomberg's Covid Resilience Ranking, Size of the Shadow Economy as a percentage of GDP, and the Freedom House, we draw a number of preliminary conclusions. Although additional factors must be considered, the strong correlations present in these comparisons underline parliament's importance.

Of course correlation does not prove causation; further, more sophisticated statistical analysis is required to demonstrate causation. Such analysis has been undertaken in the case of the promotion of democracy and in reducing corruption and the evidence is clear. More research is needed if the causal links are as strong regarding parliaments and the other desired policy outcomes considered here.

But the importance of parliament in public policy seems evident. Effective parliaments can help countries achieve desired policy outcomes, while weak parliaments will hinder such achievements. Strengthening parliaments is not just a good thing, in and of itself, but is also a necessary component of achieving important policy goals.

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