Bridging the Information Gap: 
Legislative Member Organizations as Social Networks in the United States and the European Union

Nils Ringe
Jennifer N. Victor
(With Christopher J. Carman)

Abstract

Why do legislators invest scarce time and resources into forming and maintaining voluntary groups that provide few obvious benefits? Legislative member organizations (LMOs)—such as caucuses in the US Congress and intergroups in the European Parliament (EP)—exist in numerous law-making bodies around the world. Yet unlike parties and committees, LMOs play no obvious and pre-defined role in the legislative process. “Bridging the Information Gap” argues that LMOs provide legislators with opportunities to establish social relationships with colleagues with whom they share a common interest in an issue or theme. The social networks composed of these relationships, in turn, offer valuable opportunity structures for the efficient exchange of policy-relevant information between legislative offices. Building on classic insights from the study of social networks, the authors demonstrate that LMO networks are composed of weak, bridging ties that cut across party and committee lines, thus providing lawmakers with access to otherwise unattainable information and make all members of the network better informed. Building on a comparative approach, the book provides an overview of the existence of LMOs across advanced, liberal democracies and offers two nuanced case studies of LMOs in the European Parliament and the U.S. Congress. These case studies rely on a mixed method set-up that garners the respective strengths of social network analysis, sophisticated statistical methods, and careful qualitative analysis of a large number of in-depth interviews.
Chapter 1

Networking the Information Gap:

The Social and Political Power of Legislative Member Organizations

In the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the United States a number of lawmakers and commentators put forward a short-lived and ultimately unsuccessful proposal that the U.S. Congress have the option to do its work remotely—a “virtual Congress” they called it (Cohen 2002). The proposal was fueled, in part, by widespread speculation that the target of one of the hijacked airplanes may have been the White House or the U.S. Capitol; however, a number of members of Congress raised immediate and strong opposition to the virtual Congress suggestion, objecting to the loss of human interaction. Congressman David Dreier (R-CA), then Chair of the House Rules Committee, wrote:

“As an organization, Congress functions in large part because of the regular and personal interactions among Members as they work to build consensus on issues ranging from procedural matters to the budget and appropriations legislation” (Dreier 2001).

Dreier and others recognized that there is great value in the personal relationships between lawmakers. However, lawmaking has changed dramatically over the last 50 years. Across different legislatures and parliaments, lawmakers find they have fewer opportunities to interact personally with their colleagues because of busy travel schedules and because face-to-face discussions are being replaced with electronic exchanges using smart phones and internet-based communication. In the U.S., for example, many
members of Congress are part of the so-called “Tuesday to Thursday” club, where legislators tend to only be in town for a few days mid-week and spend the remainder of their time in their districts (Mann and Ornstein 2006, 169). Such developments have raised concerns about a decline in civil interaction in legislative politics (Uslaner 1993), because “personal relationships, face-to-face negotiations, building of trust and reciprocity in human behavior on the Hill necessitates being together in one room” (James Thurber, quoted in Keller 2001).

While personal connections and contacts are often significant in determining the outcome of political events, it is not well understood how such relationships and social networks are created and maintained, and what specific benefits they provide. Lawmakers are notoriously busy people whose time is constantly pressed and whose attention is constantly sought. They also face countless collective action and coordination problems in their pursuit of policy, power, and electoral victories. What mechanisms do lawmakers have to help overcome these collective action and coordination problems and develop useful networks with fellow lawmakers and relevant outside actors? The obvious answers discussed in the literature are institutional leadership, party organizations, legislative committees, and the seniority system, among other institutions (see Shepsle and Bonchek 1997 and Stewart 2001 for overviews). But do these institutions sufficiently satisfy lawmakers’ needs to build and maintain the relationships that are imperative to the lawmaking process?

In this volume we argue that Legislative Member Organizations (LMOs) are often overlooked institutions that help to connect lawmakers in a loose web of relationships that enable vital information to flow efficiently through lawmaking bodies. These LMOs
serve a utilitarian purpose, are common throughout the world, and are woefully understudied.

**What is a Legislative Member Organization?**

All decision-making bodies face a variety of coordination dilemmas. Scholars have written extensively about the formal institutions that legislatures have developed to help decision-makers solve their coordination and collective action dilemmas. Legislative parties help large governing groups coordinate strategies and votes (Cox and McCubbins 1993, 2005). Committee systems promote division of labor and help legislators or parliamentarians develop policy expertise (Krehbiel 1991). However, numerous parliaments and legislatures have created additional infrastructure that appear to provide another mechanism for overcoming collective action problems: Legislative Member Organizations. In the United States Congress, for example, the number of LMOs has proliferated in recent years. Examples of LMOs (or, in the U.S., Congressional Member Organizations, or simply “caucuses”) include the Congressional Black Caucus, the Biomedical Research Caucus, the Congressional Arts Caucus, the Congressional Caucus for Women's Issues, the Older Americans Caucus, the Congressional Hispanic Caucus, and the Rural Health Care Coalition. In the European Parliament (EP) LMOs, called “intergroups,” have become a regular feature of internal politics and are used by parliamentary assistants and Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) who seek to share information and shepherd legislation. Examples are the Sky and Space Intergroup, the Intergroup on Ageing and Intergenerational Solidarity, the New Media Intergroup, the
Public Services Intergroup, the Tibet Intergroup, the Social Economy Intergroup, and the Intergroup on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights.

The presence of these organizations in many legislatures suggests their utility, despite their undefined role in the legislative process and the uncertain benefits they seem to offer. We surmise that if legislators decide to join LMOs, maintain them, and take part in their activities, LMOs likely offer some benefits that the more formal legislative institutions of parties and committees do not. Our comparative research identifies the roles and benefits of LMOs across a variety of legislatures, and lays out a generalizable theory of LMOs.

**Relationships and Information: The Role of LMOs in Legislative Politics**

We define Legislative Member Organizations as voluntary organizations within lawmakers' opportunities to build utilitarian social networks that facilitate the efficient flow of policy-relevant information. As such, LMOs help legislators overcome an institutional collective action dilemma, where the outcomes of collective actions may be sub-optimal, but a lack of coordination within the formal institutions makes the realization of a more widely preferred outcome less likely (Feiock and Scholz 2010). In the case at hand, the institutional collective action dilemma revolves around the high demand and insufficient supply of information in legislative politics.
Legislators require information about policy and politics. They want to know their colleagues’ preferences over policy. They want to know their constituents’ preferences over policy. They want to know how policy will affect their constituents and whether there could be court action against a policy. There is virtually no limit to information legislators seek in their efforts to pursue policy and political goals. Since their thirst for information knows no bounds, likewise their desire for good sources of information is never satisfied. Legislators need knowledge and information, and no legislature fully addresses the informational needs of its members. LMOs, we maintain, help alleviate the informational deficit inherent in legislative politics.\(^3\)

LMOs are not the only sources of information for lawmakers, of course. In particular, legislators can and do rely on parties and committees, the principal formal legislative institutions, to gather information. We maintain, however, that parties and committees suffer from a number of weaknesses when it comes to the creation and diffusion of information. Most importantly, they compel individual legislators to primarily interact with a relatively small, predetermined set of colleagues, which impedes the flow of new, innovative policy ideas. LMOs, in contrast, provide opportunities for members of different social groups to form interpersonal ties (see Brass et al. 2004, 808), as they are composed of heterogeneous groups of legislators from different parties and committees. LMOs thus make up social networks that cut across party lines and committee jurisdictions, which makes them important venues for deliberation and cooperation, but most importantly for the exchange of policy-relevant information. LMO networks give legislative actors the opportunity to be better informed when a particular
topic relating to the issue or cause of the LMO rises to prominence on the legislative agenda.

LMOs allow both substantive information (i.e., policy oriented information about the content and expected consequences of legislative proposals) and political information (e.g., strategic information about the policy positions of other decision-makers) to be efficiently diffused throughout legislative arenas. This information flow, we argue, is promoted through LMO-based social networks composed of ties with two key characteristics: they are weak as well as bridging.

Sociologist Mark Granovetter’s seminal work on the “strength of weak ties” demonstrates theoretically and empirically how effective social coordination takes place in networks with many weakly tied actors, rather than from those with many strong ties (Granovetter 1973, 1974). The intuition behind the theory is that close friends, with whom one is connected through strong ties, are likely to have contacts who share characteristics and, therefore, access to the same information. One’s acquaintances, in contrast, with whom one shares weak ties, are more likely to have access to information that would otherwise be outside of one’s reach, because one’s social networks expand beyond one’s group of close friends. Empirically, Granovetter demonstrates that job seekers with many weak ties are more likely to receive information about available jobs and are more likely to secure a better job (in terms of salary and job satisfaction) than those with mostly strong ties (Granovetter 1974).

LMO networks are networks primarily composed of weak ties that bridge structural holes in the legislative network (Burt 1992, 2000, 2004). While many legislators will, of course, have a variety of strong ties to other legislators with whom
they can exchange information, we should expect information in those tightly-knit networks to often be redundant. In contrast, legislators who are able to access information from colleagues who are unlike themselves (e.g., from a different party, from a different region, from a different committee, or from the other side of the ideological spectrum) are more likely to have access to valuable information that they would not otherwise receive. Therefore, social institutions that allow legislators to create weak, bridging connections between one another have great informational value. The more weak connections we observe, and the more cross-cutting these connections are in that they connect otherwise disconnected parts of the network, the more efficiently information should flow through a network of lawmakers. This not only makes individual lawmakers more informed, it also increases the overall level of “informedness” and expertise of the legislature as a whole (Burt 2000; Carpenter, Esterling and Lazer 1998).

That LMOs are voluntary institutions contributes to their being weak and bridging. Legislators are not assigned to LMOs, and they will not suffer direct negative consequences if they decide to stay outside the LMO system. This means that legislators, as exceedingly busy people, are unlikely to spend as much time on LMO activities as on their formal responsibilities in their parties and committees; that they are not required to interact with their LMO colleagues on a regular basis; and that they are not compelled to expend time and resources on fostering LMO ties. In this sense, voluntariness contributes to the weakness of most LMO ties. The voluntary nature of LMOs also means that lawmakers are free to join and participate in LMOs based on personal interests and policy priorities, rather than ideological preferences or committee jurisdictions. This
encourages the creation of ties that cut across tightly-knit social circles. Hence, voluntary participation contributes to the bridgingness of LMO ties.

It is of crucial importance that the costs associated with participation in LMOs are low, because voluntary organizations designed to help overcome institutional collective action dilemmas will only be successful if the transaction costs associated with creating and maintaining them are low. After all, individuals would not choose to join voluntary organizations if participation was exceedingly costly and made them worse off (Feiock and Scholz 2010, 12).

The voluntary nature of LMOs has additional advantages. The first is that it provides for an open issue space, because LMOs can be established to cover any topic or cause a group of legislators considers to be important enough to warrant their attention. What is more, once established, it is up to LMO leaders and members to determine the activities LMOs engage in, which means that LMO activity can readily be adjusted to meet members’ needs. LMOs, in this sense, are more flexible than either parties or committees. Second, as voluntary organizations LMOs do not play a formal role in the legislative process. For this reason, they do not threaten the formal institutional framework, based on legislative parties and committees. This allows LMOs to exist parallel to parties and committees, and to provide their informational benefits alongside the formal legislative institutions.

Lawmakers can decide for themselves how much time and effort they are willing to expend on their involvement in LMOs and the maintenance of LMO ties, which means that the transaction costs associated with LMO participation are only as high as individual legislators want them to be. In this sense, LMOs invite their members to free-
ride on the benefits they offer. This raises an important question, namely who covers the costs associated with the creation and maintenance of LMOs? These costs are borne in part by individuals or small groups of legislators who have a personal stake in an LMO’s cause and who are, for this reason, willing to expend their limited time and resources on running a given group. Participation in LMOs is also inexpensive, however, because many LMOs maintain privileged partnerships with particular interest groups outside of the legislature. These outside advocates, such as interest groups, lobbyists, constituent organizations, or corporations, provide legislative subsidies (Hall and Deardorff 2006) to LMOs by helping recruit members, by providing secretarial support, or by organizing LMO events. Outside advocates thus bear many of the costs of running LMOs. In return, they are granted privileged access to LMO leaders and rank-and-file members, which is of tremendous value to outside advocates who strive to build long-term, trusted relationships with lawmakers who share their policy priorities.

The symbiotic relationships between LMOs and outside advocates is not only important because it helps keep legislators’ participation in LMOs cheap, it also has an important informational component: outside advocates are providers of both political and policy information. What is more, the inclusion in LMO-based social networks provides an incentive for outsiders to supply what we call “high-utility information” (by which we mean information that is research-based, reliable, and easily-digestible for busy legislators and their staff), for three reasons. First, LMOs give legislators the opportunity to triangulate and verify information they receive from various sources inside and outside the legislature, many of which may be directly involved with the LMO. Second, LMOs create social networks that are internally highly embedded, where everybody is tied to
everybody else; this increases the threat of outsiders suffering reputational costs if they supply low-quality or even misleading information, because news about such transgressions will quickly spread throughout the LMO network. Finally, LMOs grant privileged access to particular outside advocates, which legislators can credibly threaten to revoke if the supplied information is redundant, unreliable, or misleading. High-utility information is thus likely to enter the legislature via LMOs, and it is efficiently diffused throughout the weak-tie LMO network.

Their voluntary nature entails that LMOs “are what you make of them,” which complicates efforts to generalize about the utility of LMOs for individual legislators or the efficacy of different groups. Moreover, LMOs are forums for the exchange of high-utility information, rather than arenas of negotiation and bargaining, which means that their impact on legislation is often indirect and diffuse. Indeed, there is little evidence and few anecdotal examples in which the presence of an LMO helped pass (or defeat) a policy—although we do provide examples from our case studies that show such direct influence. Most of the time, however, LMOs matter because they help legislators make more informed policy decisions by providing access to new, innovative ideas and policy input, which then make their way into the formal negotiations that take place inside parties and committees, or on the floor. In this volume we demonstrate that although LMOs play an indirect role in influencing policy outcomes, indirect does not equate to insignificant; rather LMOs play a consequential role in the early stages of policymaking that enriches the information environment in which legislators operate. In the absence of LMOs, legislators have less information about the political and policy-related consequences of their choices.
Given the difficulties associated with measuring indirect and diffuse influence, it would be easy to discount or dismiss the role of LMOs in legislative politics. This would be problematic, however, not only because it ignores empirical realities, but also because diffuse influence is often exceedingly consequential. By way of analogy, much evidence shows that campaign contributions do not buy the votes of legislators in the U.S. Congress, but nonetheless there is almost universal agreement that the activities of lobbyists and interest groups, as the sources of many campaign funds, have some influence in the policy-making progress. The volumes of literature exploring the various means by which this influence manifests itself show that it is important to understand how these external actors impact policymaking. The same can be said for LMOs—they may only indirectly affect the outcome of a piece of legislation, and it may be difficult to tie LMO activities to particular legislative outcomes; but, as we will show, it is difficult not to recognize that they play an important role in the legislative process.

To summarize our argument, LMOs are voluntary institutions inside legislatures that help lawmakers overcome informational collective action dilemmas by encouraging the establishment and maintenance of social relationships between interested actors inside and outside the legislative arena who share a common policy priority. These relationships make up extensive social networks composed, primarily, of weak ties that cut across party and committee lines, thus facilitating the diffusion of high-utility policy and political information that contributes to the creation of “good” public policy.

What We Know about LMOs
Previous scholarly research on LMOs has concentrated, nearly exclusively, on the U.S. Congress. This body of research has, for example, richly described the history of the caucus system, why members of congress join them, the purposes and functions caucuses serve, and how they interact with other branches of government (e.g., Hammond 1998). We also learn from these studies that the membership of caucuses is ideologically diverse and may counterbalance power from the committee system (Ainsworth and Akins 1997, but see Victor and Ringe 2009). Caucuses serve a number of important functions in lawmaking, including helping to establish and maintain government and public agendas (Hammond, Mulhollan and Stevens 1985), collecting information (Fiellin 1962; Stevens, et al. 1974; Stevens, et al. 1981; Hammond 1998; Hammond, et al., 1985), both challenging and complementing party leadership (Hammond 1991), providing voting cues to members (Levy and Stoudinger 1976), promoting substantive representation without loss to descriptive representation (Canon 1995), and affording a venue for the expression of policy preferences (McCormick and Mitchell 2007).

LMOs also allow for increased opportunities for advocacy and influencing policy, as Bullock and Loomis (1985) and Carman (2005) emphasize for the U.S. Congress and the Scottish Parliament, respectively, and they provide access points for outside actors (for the U.S. Congress see Ainsworth 1997, 523; McCormick and Mitchell 2007; for Westminster see Judge 1981, 141-2; for the EP see Butler 2008, 575-9). Finally, LMOs aid representation for constituencies (Loomis 1981; Stevens, Mullhollan and Rundquist 1981; Singh 1996; Miler 2011) and help promote the political and electoral needs of lawmakers (Ripley 1983; Davidson and Oleszek 1981; Caldwell 1989).
Overall, we may group the potential roles of LMOs in the legislative process into three categories: information acquisition, provision, and exchange; political coordination (such as agenda setting, search for compromise, and building policy coalitions); and signaling (of policy priorities to constituents). We find and present evidence for all three functions throughout this book, yet our focus is primarily on the informational function of LMOs. This emphasis is not to deny or discount the variety of functions LMOs may serve in a given legislature, but the result of three factors. First, while the coordination and signaling functions of LMOs are more or less prominent in different legislatures, for reasons we explain below, their informational role is a universal property: LMOs allow for the efficient exchange of information through the social networks they comprise. Second, the other roles ascribed to LMOs in much of the existing literature, in particular their coordination function, critically depend on the capacity of LMOs to connect political actors who share common policy interests and allow for the efficient flow of information between them. Policy coordination thus presupposes the exchange of both substantive and political information. Finally, our empirical results (in particular our extensive qualitative data) overwhelmingly support the proposition that the major benefit of LMOs lies in their capacity to provide and diffuse policy-relevant information between legislative actors. Ascribing a secondary role to the signaling and coordination function is, therefore, not simply an a priori theoretical decision; it reflects empirical realities on the ground. These considerations warrant our primary focus on LMOs as information networks.

In a first attempt to link the study of social connections in legislative politics with the investigation of the role and structure of LMO-based social networks, Victor and
Ringe (2009) argue that the U.S. congressional caucus system provides legislators with the opportunity to establish and maintain social relationships with colleagues who might help them advance their position within the legislature. Building on the insight that not all relationships are created equal and that being associated with some colleagues is more valuable to individual members than others, they maintain that legislators engage in the caucus system in an effort to maximize the social utility of their relationships. Members of Congress achieve this goal by associating themselves with those actors who are already powerful within the formal institutional structure, because being connected to powerful colleagues, such as party or committee leaders or senior legislators, is more valuable than being linked to just another rank-and-file member. Accordingly, the authors hypothesize that the caucus system does not, as much of the previous literature on congressional caucuses maintains, serve as an alternative institutional structure used by formally disadvantaged legislators to counter-balance their structural weaknesses, but that it replicates and reinforces the existing distribution of power and influence through the more formal institutions of parties and committees. Unlike previous studies, Victor and Ringe do not focus their analysis on a subset of caucuses, but investigate claims using membership information on the entire population of caucuses in the 110th Congress. Their social networks analysis confirms the expectation that formally powerful players, such as legislative leaders, senior members, and legislators who are electorally safe, are both more connected and more central within the caucus network.

The arguments in this book are distinct from Victor and Ringe (2009) in three important ways. First, Victor and Ringe focus on the structural positions of different legislative actors in the caucus network of the U.S. Congress, while we are interested in
the ties that make up LMO networks and how the strength of those ties facilitates
information exchange. Second, Victor and Ringe focus narrowly on one reason why
legislators may join caucuses; they do not consider why legislators may choose to be
active in LMOs, nor do they test broader hypotheses about the purpose and benefits of the
LMOs and the social networks they provide. Finally, Victor and Ringe focuses on a
single legislature, while our argument and our empirical analyses are explicitly
comparative, thus moving us beyond the focus on the U.S. Congress.

Our study therefore makes a significant contribution to the literature on legislative
politics as the first comparative analysis of LMOs as voluntary organizations within law-
making institutions. It does not concentrate on parties and committees, the frequent focus
of legislative research, but examines how other arenas of political activity affect
legislative processes and outcomes. Moreover, our comparative focus provides new
information on an understudied empirical phenomenon across a broad sample of
legislatures, and especially the two lawmaking bodies we examine in detail. We also add
to existing research on the access and influence of outside advocates, such as interest
groups and lobbyists, in the legislative decision-making process, in that we maintain that
LMOs provide an institutionalized means by which external actors can develop
relationships with lawmakers, and examine how LMOs as points of access enhance the
quality of the information that enters the legislative discourse. Moreover, our claim that
LMOs provide a means for legislators to establish ties across institutional divides, such as
party lines, has contemporary relevance in the U.S. Congress, which has become highly
polarized. LMOs offer a means by which legislators can become, or remain, connected to
legislators from the other party—even if only weakly so. The possibility that LMOs serve
as an antidote to congressional partisan polarization is a practical implication to which we return in Chapter 7.

Second, we contribute to the literature on social networks among elite actors, as our argument is explicitly relational and emphasizes the importance of social connections in legislative politics. One important aspect of this focus is our emphasis on LMO ties as cutting across tightly-knit social groups composed of either like-minded political actors (like members of the same party) or those who share a common, narrowly defined substantive focus (like members of the same committee). This bridgingness of LMO ties is critical in a legislative context, where homophily—or the tendency of individuals to associate themselves with similar others—implies a distinct strategic disadvantage for political operators who require extensive information on the positions, strategies, and goals of their colleagues, whether friend or foe. Our research provides an ideal setting in which to utilize social network methods in a way that not only offers insights into the role of LMOs in legislative politics, but also highlights an appropriate application of these methods to new and important questions.

Third, we make a contribution to the study of political institutions by focusing attention on the interaction between formal institutions (like parties and committees) and less formalized, voluntary institutions (like LMOs). LMOs, as voluntary organizations that play no official role in the legislative process, help overcome an important institutional collective action dilemma in legislative politics, namely the great demand and insufficient supply of information. Indeed, LMOs help address informational constraints (inadvertently) imposed by formal legislative institutions. Legislators require a great deal of both political and policy information to make good policy choices, but
some of the basic features of both parties and committees stand in the way of efficient information exchange. LMOs, because of their voluntary and low-cost nature, are an inexpensive but effective means to mitigate some of the informational constraints legislators commonly face.

A Comparative Research Design

To test our expectations about the existence and roles of LMOs in legislatures, we rely on a comparative research design that has two primary components. First, we collect data on the existence of LMOs in the legislatures of 45 advanced industrial democracies by relying on findings from an expert survey. Second, we provide in-depth case studies of two legislatures: the European Parliament and the United States Congress. These cases provide us with complimentary and contrasting perspectives that allow us to test the robustness of our theoretical claims. While both legislatures share similar institutional structures, such as strong committee systems and party-based politics, they vary significantly in the number of parties at play, the role of party leadership in the legislative process, floor procedures, the electoral systems by which members are chosen, and the resources available to legislators in pursuing their policy objectives. Our cases allow us to model similarities and differences across the two legislatures and thus to reap the benefits of systematic comparison. We can therefore draw specific expectations about how LMO systems should differ across these cases. For instance, given the nature of the single member district, plurality vote electoral system in the U.S., which provides incentives for legislators to cater to the preferences of particular constituencies, we expect the Congress
to have more LMOs than the European Parliament, for individual legislators to join more LMOs, and for signaling to be relatively more prevalent in the Congress.

Our comparative research design also offers intriguing findings about systematic differences between our cases. While respondents in both EP and Congress highlight the importance and value of cross-partisanship in LMOs, for example, we find the nature of cross-partisanship to differ between the two chambers. In the European Parliament, where multiparty policy coalitions are needed for legislation to pass, intergroups serve as arenas for contestation, bargaining, political coordination, and the exchange of political information across party groups. Cross-partisanship in intergroups is, in other words, explicitly political. This stands in contrast to the Congress, where the majority party does not require support from across the aisle to pass legislation (at least in the House of Representatives). In this context, many caucuses seek to protect their bipartisan nature by consciously eschewing divisive issues, making LMOs almost apolitical forums for the exchange of substantive information.

In our case studies, we will rely on three types of data. First, we collect complete LMO membership information for at least six years (2-3 legislative terms) for each legislature. Analyzed using quantitative methods, these data allow us to predict the factors that determine membership in LMOs.

Second, we use this membership information as relational data that are analyzed in a social network analysis framework. This allows us to investigate the structure of LMO networks, to establish which legislative actors hold influential positions within the LMO network, and to determine how LMOs relate to more formal legislative institutions, such as parties and committees. Social network analysis constitutes a critical part of our
analysis, since our argument emphasizes the importance of LMOs as venues that allow legislators to establish social connections with colleagues who share their policy priorities, and that facilitate information exchange throughout the legislature. Social network analysis has been a mainstay in sociology for many years, and in recent decades has become more frequently used in economics, anthropology, physics, computer science, political science, policy analysis, and other fields.

Social network analysis focuses on investigating social relationship, or ties, between individuals, or nodes, and how these connections impact social and political interactions, processes, and outcomes. The basic unit of analysis is thus not the individual, but dyads (or pairs) of individual actors. As such, social network analysis seeks to identify and demonstrate "aspects of social organization that are not captured by the study of individual attributes or characteristics" (Ward, Stovel, and Sacks 2011, 246).

The study of social relations between political actors is not new to Political Science (e.g., Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1944; Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954; Patterson 1959; Galtung 1971; Wallerstein 1974; Baumgartner and Burns 1976; Knoke 1976; Laumann and Pappi 1976), but the approach has seen a notable resurgence in the recent past. Until the turn of the century, social network analysis in the social sciences was dominated by sociologists, with Robert Huckfeldt standing out as a notable exception and early proponent of formal network analysis in the Political Science field (see Huckfeldt 1979, 1983; Huckfeldt and Sprague 1987; Huckfeldt et al. 1995). Between the late 1970s and today, Huckfeldt has been investigating the relationships between social networks and political change, vote choice, party loyalty, race and class politics, participation, and communication. Also notable as earlier examples of the application of a
formal network approach are Lauman and Knoke (1987) and Heinz et al. (1990), both studies of organizational networks in the context of interest groups and lobbying.

It was not until the late 1990s, however (see especially Watts and Strogatz 1998; Barabasi and Albert 1999), that social network analysis gained an increasingly prominent position in Political Science. We have since seen a plethora of social network studies across a variety of areas of study, including political communication and participation (e.g., Lake and Huckfeldt 1998; Huckfeldt 2001, 2007; Huckfeldt and Sprague 2004; McClurg 2003, 2006; Mutz 2002a, 2002b, 2006; Klofstad 2011), elections and vote choice (e.g., Gimpel, Lee and Pearson-Werkowitz 2008; Houghton 2000; Fowler 2006c, Nickerson 2008), party networks (e.g., Heaney and Rojas 2007; Koger, Maskel, and Noel 2009), legal precedent and court decisions (e.g., Fowler et al. 2007; Fowler and Jeon 2008), interest group networks (e.g., Carpenter, Esterling, and Lazer 1998, 2003, 2004; Heaney 2006; Grossman and Dominguez 2009), networks between policy actors (Schneider et al. 2003; Scholz and Wang 2006; Scholz, Berado, and Kile 2008), international relations (e.g., Lazer 1999; Maoz 2010), and legislative politics (e.g., Fowler 2006a, 2006b; Maskel 2008; Victor and Ringe 2009; Cho and Fowler 2010; Bratton and Rouse 2011; Kirkland 2011; Ringe, Victor, and Gross, forthcoming). The field has also seen important methodological advances, especially in dealing with missing data in network sampling and in addressing the problem of non-independence of observations in network data (e.g., Frank 2005; Gile and Handcock 2006; Handcock and Gile 2007; Cranmer and Desmarais 2011; Ringe, Victor, and Gross, forthcoming).

Social network theory, we believe, has great appeal when applied to political questions. It is natural to seek to explain politics in terms of the relationships between
individuals, and it builds organically from game theory, which frequently focuses on the interdependent behavior of political actors (e.g., Jackson 2010; Knoke and Yang 2008). Despite this intuitive appeal, however, advances in technology have only recently made the application of network methods in Political Science more commonplace. Computers and software have in recent years advanced to the point that even lay-people have the power to generate and estimate large networks on home computers. Since network datasets tend to be very large, and sampling is not typical or even appropriate in a network setting, the combination of parametric statistics and network data requires vast computer memory and sophisticated software, which are become more readily available and accessible.

The third type of data we rely on is qualitative. We conducted 86 in-depth interviews with legislators, their staffs, and outside interest groups to examine the activities of LMOs, how they operate, and how they relate to actors outside of the legislative arena. Given the dearth of previous research on LMOs, especially in a comparative perspective, these interview data are of special importance because they provide first-hand accounts of the roles that LMOs play in legislative processes, and how their benefits have contributed to legislative outcomes.

In sum, this mixed-method approach provides for significant analytical purchase on the question of why legislatures create LMOs, why members join and choose to be active in these organizations, and what role LMOs play in legislative politics.

**Plan of the Book**
This book is organized into 7 chapters, including this introduction. The argument that we briefly introduced above is more fully developed in Chapter 2, which makes the theoretical case for the relational and informational benefits we ascribe to LMOs. In Chapter 3, we present the results of an expert survey we conducted to determine where LMOs exist across a sample of 45 advanced industrial democracies. We find LMOs in 25 countries, provide descriptive information about them, and use statistical methods to determine what factors predict the existence of LMOs. We conclude that the electoral system, the number of legislative parties, and the size of the legislature are the principal determinants of the presence or absence of LMOs in a national legislature.

Having broadly set the stage in this comparative chapter, we narrow our focus to LMOs in two legislatures to test our theoretical propositions about the role of LMOs for the establishment of social relationships that cut across party and committee lines, and about the informational function of LMOs. Specifically, we investigate intergroups in the European Parliament and caucuses in the U.S. Congress in three empirical chapters. Chapter 4 introduces the cases studies, outlines our research design, and describes the data we rely on for testing our theoretical propositions. We then trace the development of intergroups in the EP and provide basic descriptive information about these organizations, which have thus far been neglected in the growing literature on EP politics. The chapter also provides similar information for the U.S. Congress, whose caucuses have received more attention in previous research. Unlike existing studies, however, we differentiate between single-party groups that resemble LMOs (and, in some cases, are confusingly also called “caucuses”), like the Blue Dog Democrats or the Republican Study Committee, and the bipartisan, voluntary organizations that are the
focus of this book, such as the Congressional Human Rights Caucus, the Congressional Coalition on Adoption, or the Congressional Steel Caucus. The former, while important and worthy of scholarly attention, operate more like party factions or voting coalitions and thus fall outside the scope of our theoretical approach to LMOs. Finally, Chapter 4 examines what factors drive legislators to join LMOs in both EP and Congress, relying on both qualitative and quantitative methods and data.

Chapter 5 focuses on the relational functions of LMOs. We present evidence for our proposition that LMOs allow legislators to build social relationships with one another using our interview data. Then, Chapter 5 moves on to a careful examination of LMO network structures using a variety of social network analysis tools. These analyses confirm one of our key theoretical propositions: that LMO ties are bridging ties that connect legislators who would not otherwise be connected to each other. Hence, the structure of LMO networks is such that it ought to facilitate the flow of policy-relevant information throughout the legislature.

Having made this case, Chapter 6 investigates if this potential for efficient information flow is realized, and confirms that LMOs are important arenas for the exchange of both policy and political information. Information exchange takes place both inside the legislature, between LMO members and their offices, but also between insiders and outside advocates that are associated with particular LMOs. These outside organizations, we show, supply legislative subsidies to LMOs and their members by providing policy-relevant information, and also by bearing many of the costs associated with creating and running LMOs.
Finally, Chapter 7 reflects on how exactly LMOs might matter in legislative politics; it also concludes this volume. We consider two types of impact LMOs might have on legislative processes and outcomes: direct and indirect. Having provided evidence from both EP and Congress that demonstrates how LMOs sometimes influence legislative processes and outcomes directly, however, we come to the conclusion that, most of the time, the impact of LMOs is indirect and diffuse. LMOs influence the legislative process during its early stages, when legislators are gathering information and communicating with the various stakeholders who share a common interest in an issue or cause. They affect discourse, attention, and priorities, and help disseminate otherwise unavailable, policy-relevant information through social networks composed of political actors who share common policy priorities. This is how LMOs matter, and why legislators choose to expend valuable time and resources on them.
Throughout the text we use the term “legislator” to refer to members of any legislative assembly. It is an inclusive term akin to “lawmaker.”

When describing relationships between "legislators" or "lawmakers" throughout this book, we include relationships between personal staff. We thus conceive of legislative staff in the U.S. Congress and parliamentary assistants in the European Parliament as extensions of the legislators themselves. In this sense, "legislator" may refer to all members of a legislative office, or what Whiteman (1995) refers to as "congressional enterprises" in the U.S. context.

Legislators may face an informational deficit either because they do not have enough information to successfully engage in their activities, or because they face an informational overload, if they are barraged with information from a wide variety of sources and do not have the time and resources to efficiently process the information they receive (Ringe 2010).

It is important to note that voluntary participation does not necessarily entail that ties will be weak. In fact, membership in voluntary organizations, like churches or social clubs, tends to promote homophilous ties (Feld 1982; McPherson 1983; McPherson and Smith-Lovin 1986, 1987; Marsden 1990; McPherson and Ranger-Moore 1991; McPherson, Popielarz, and Drobnic 1992; Popielarz and McPherson 1995). Such connections between similar people tend to be strong ties (e.g., Marsden 1990; Zenger and Lawrence 1989; Ibarra 1992, 1995; Brass 1995; Perry-Smith and Shalley 2003; Krackhardt 1992). In the case at hand, however, legislators face strong strategic incentives to regularly interact with dissimilar others, rather than limit their interactions.
to colleagues with whom they share many similarities (a point to which we return in
Chapter 2). These non-homophilous ties are more likely to be weak. Moreover, where
voluntary institutions exist parallel to formal non-voluntary ones, voluntariness implies a
greater likelihood of sporadic involvement for most (but not all) LMO participants, and
thus an overall greater incidence of weak ties.

5 Most LMOs are cross-partisan organizations; in fact, in some legislatures (such as
Westminster and the European Parliament) LMOs are required to include members from
multiple parties. In the European Parliament, for example, formally recognized
intergroups must have the support of at least three party groups.

6 Personal interview with congressional staffer, Washington, D.C., May 19, 2009. In a
sense, we have found through our interviews that the relative ‘success’ of an LMO relies
on what some literatures call “policy entrepreneurs” (whether collective or individuals).

7 This literature also includes a typology of caucuses in the U.S. Congress (see also
Dilger 2009), including the following types: intraparty, personal interest, industry,
regional, state/district, national constituency, and diplomacy. We have found the
categorization of LMOs to be sufficiently subjective and ad hoc that it not useful beyond
providing a description of the population.

8 See Ward, Stovel, and Sacks (2011) and Lazer (2011) for recent overviews of the study
of social networks in Political Science. Heaney and McClurg (2009) review the literature
on social networks in American Politics, Siegel (2011) discusses social networks research
in Comparative Politics, and Hafner-Burton, Kahler, and Montgomery (2009) provide an
overview of network analysis for International Relations.