



Faculty of Engineering
and Natural Sciences

Understanding the Community Structure of Coalition and Opposition in Parliamentary Democracy on the Example of the Austrian Parliament

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Affidavit

I hereby declare that the following dissertation "Understanding the Community Structure of Coalition and Opposition in Parliamentary Democracy on the Example of the Austrian Parliament" has been written only by the undersigned and without any assistance from third parties.

Furthermore, I confirm that no sources have been used in the preparation of this thesis other than those indicated in the thesis itself.

Linz, on November 22, 2015

Markus Hiesmair

Acknowledgment

Summary

Summary ...

Abstract

Abstract ...

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Abbreviations

ÖVP Austrian People Party (german: Österreichische Volkspartei)

SPÖ Social Democratic Party of Austrian (german: Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreichs)

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Chapter 1

Introduction

One of the most crucial requirements of a democracy is transparency. There are several ways how one can gain information about the current and past political activities in Austria. One of the best possibilities among them are the publicly available protocols of the national council sessions. In these protocols every word said in a session is written down and that makes up the corresponding protocol. Unfortunately, these protocols are very long and it is hard to gain meaning out of it, because of its plain and simple structure and the great amount of data.

To be able to analyze and visualize the activities and relations of the politicians and parties in a better way, and to make the structure of the political system accessible to a broader audience, analysis tools are needed. This thesis documents the methods that can be used to perform automated analysis over the available data. The protocols are being extracted, transformed, analyzed and visualized.

1.1 Research Goals

The protocols are currently available in semi-structured form - through HTML files.¹ To be able to properly persist and analyze the data, the protocols have to be transformed into a fully structured form (e.g. Java Objects). The following elements will be extracted:

- Legislative periods and their sessions
- Politicians and their mandates

¹Until the 19. legislative period, the protocols are only available in PDF-format. These protocols cannot be extracted with reasonable quality. Therefore they won't be used in the further work.

- Parliament clubs
- Discussions and speeches during the sessions

As soon as this is done, the extracted data can be persisted into an arbitrary relational database. Furthermore, some general and network analysis should be done on the data. In the following list some interesting applications on top of the extracted data are presented:

- Create a network graph which shows the relations among politicians and parliament clubs.
- Find groups of politicians (or parliament clubs) with the same attitudes.
- Analyze how homogeneous the attitudes of politicians of the same parliament club are.
- Find the politicians which take part in the most discussions.
- Find the most absent national council members.

In the final step the results should be visualized via a web application. The focus hereby lies in making the results as easy to understand as possible.

1.2 Austrian Parliament

The analysis approaches in this thesis can basically be used for every parliament or other similar political structure, given that data is available in a similar form. As this work is done at an Austrian university and the protocols of the national council are available as open data, the show case is built up on the Austrian parliament.

The Austrian parliament basically consists of two chambers, the national council and the federal council. The national council is elected through federal elections, whereas the federal council consists of delegates of the 9 provinces. Both chambers have different responsibilities and functions, and their goal is to ensure that the decisions are in the best interest for the Austrian people [4].

1.2.1 National Council

The national council consists of 183 members, which can band together to form so called parliamentary clubs. Usually for each political party, which got elected in the national council, there is one parliamentary club, but that is no necessity. The tasks of the national council include law-making, controlling the government, seeking solutions for current problems, determining the budget and much more [4].

After every election one or more parliamentary clubs have to build the government. These parliament clubs have to have in total at least 92 mandates (more than half of the overall mandates of 183). Politicians of the government are then selected to be the federal ministers. All other parliamentary clubs, which are not in the government are in the so called opposition. In most cases the government can make laws without the opposition, but in some special cases there is $\frac{2}{3}$ majority needed [4].

1.2.2 Federal Council

The federal council consists of 61 members. As the members are delegates of the provinces, their main duty is to represent their province and make sure the politics in the parliament are in the interest of the province they represent. To do so, they can raise objections against legislation of the national council, but most of the time the federal council only has the power to delay legislation and not to prevent it [4].

1.2.3 Analysis Scope

In this work only the data of the national council will be analyzed because there are no openly available data sources which could be used to include the federal council in the analysis. Furthermore, the national council has a lot more responsibilities and is of greater importance for the overall democratic process in Austria.

Chapter 2

Related Work

In the context of computer science, there are only a few works on automatically analyzing political structures such as a parliament. In 2013, Renzo Lucioni [2] used publicly available voting data from the Congress of the United States of America to analyze the relationships among politicians and how distinct the two main parties are. To achieve this, he used data from the 101st Congress through the 113th Congress and created network graphs which graphically showed which politicians vote similar. He also showed how the structure of the Congress developed over time. His results showed that the gap between the Republicans and the Democrats - the only two really relevant parties in the USA - became larger and larger over the last decades. This means that both parties vote more and more against each other. In the context of the Austrian parliament, similar analysis can be applied, if data is available in sufficient quality. For example, it can be analyzed which parties vote similar and if there exist relations between parties which are in the government and in the opposition. You can find the results for the Austrian parliament in Section 4.1.

An earlier work was done by Porter and Newman in 2005 [3]. They wrote a paper on network analysis of committees in the U.S. House of Representatives and tried to show the connections between representatives of the House and the committees and subcommittees. In these committees happen a big amount of the American legislation and especially the assignment of politicians and the change of it over time are interesting subjects of analysis. In their work Porter and Newman gain information without specific knowledge of the structure of the committees, using technologies of network analysis. In particular, they tried to find communities and their connections within the network of the committees to get information about strategic assignment of politicians in important committees. Furthermore, Porter and Newman used single-linkage clustering to get clusters of communities and their connections and also visualized that with a dendrogram representing the hierarchical structure of the committees. Similar analysis would also be interesting for the Austrian parliament, but community detection and clustering are not included within the scope of this thesis. In the second part of

Porter and Newman's paper, they also have done some analysis on the relations among politicians in the House of Representatives. The results show the most left, most right and most partisan politicians in the House. This is especially interesting because it shows that all the most left politicians are Democrats and all most right politicians are Republicans, which leads to the same conclusion as the work of Lucioni [2] - the two parties have completely contrary attitudes.

In 2012, Amelio [1] also did a study on the voting behavior in the Italian parliament. One part of her study was analyzing party cohesion (how homogeneous all politicians of a specific party voted in the selected periods). An interesting result was that the cohesion of the parties in the opposition increased over time whereas the cohesion of the governing parties decreased and after the analyzed period the government was not reelected. Another measure taken was the parliamentary similarity. This measure compares the voting behaviors of two parliamentarians and gives a result on how similar they voted. Based on the values obtained, Amelio did hierarchical clustering using single-linked clustering to find communities within the parliament and visualized the results in a dendrogram, similar to the result of Porter and Newman [3].

All three papers, which were discussed in this section, show that through automatic analysis of political structures, information on the structure and clustering of political systems can be gained. Furthermore, through visualizations in graphs the information can be presented in a way everybody understands it easily and therefore the visualizations can be used to improve the general understanding of political systems and the current structures of parties and politicians.

Chapter 3

Design and Implementation

In this chapter the design and implementation of the prototype for the Austrian parliament is described. First of all, in Section 3.1 the overall architecture and the different components are being discussed. The more detailed description of the implementation is divided into four sections: Section 3.2 which shows how the protocols were accessed and transformed into structured data, section 3.3 which discusses the database export, section 3.4 which describes which analysis is done over the available data and section 3.5 which shows how the information gets displayed.

3.1 Architecture

Figure 3.1 shows the general architecture of the prototype which was implemented. The ETL-Application brings the data from the protocols in the database whereas the web server application visualizes the results and shows statistics and graphs for the given data. The ETL-Application is implemented using the ETL pattern. This means that there are three distinct steps: Extract - Transform - Load. First the application reads an RSS feed which contains all the protocols for one legislative period (Extract). The retrieved HTML-files get parsed and are transformed into Java objects (Transform) which get loaded into a relational database¹ (Load). To visualize the then available data, the analysis engine queries the database, performs analysis on it and converts the data in a form which can be displayed (e.g. a graph structure). Furthermore, this data is made available via RESTful web services. The Polymer web application accesses these web services and shows graphs and statistics. All the components will be described in more detailed in the later sections.

¹in the prototype, a PostgreSQL database was used

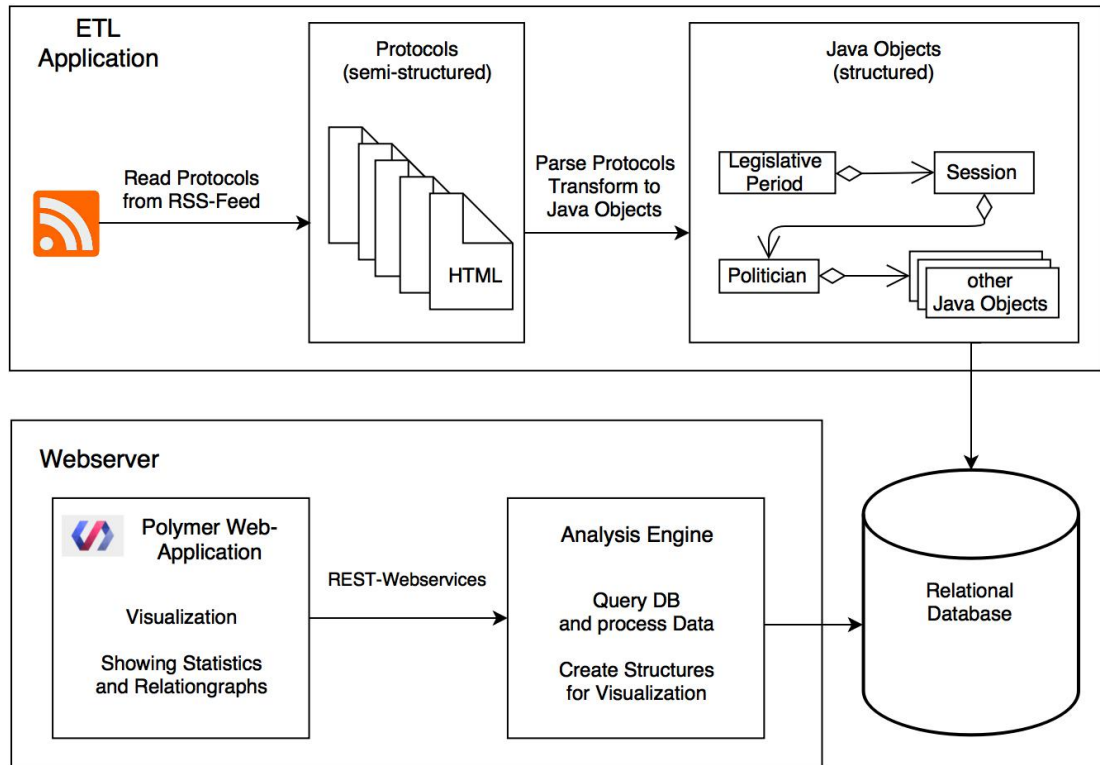


Figure 3.1: General Architecture

3.2 Data Extraction and Transforming

The first step which has to be done in the ETL-Application is the extraction. The data which should be transformed has to be collected and stored. In our case the data is contained in the stenographic protocols of the national council. They are publicly available and can be found at the website of the Austrian parliament (See <https://www.parlament.gv.at/PAKT/STPROT/>). Furthermore, the protocols are available in PDF-format and since the 20th legislative period also in HTML. As the transforming of the PDF-files would not result in sufficient quality, in this thesis only the HTML-files (the data since the 20th legislative period) is being extracted and analyzed.

To collect the protocol files automatically a RSS feed is used. This feed shows a list of the protocols of a specific legislative period. The application reads the feed and downloads all the protocols of the period. Then the content of each of the files get transformed into Java objects. To be able to understand the transformation process the structure of the file has to be clear.

3.3 Export into Database

3.4 Analysis

3.5 Visualization

Chapter 4

Results and Discussion

4.1 Relations of Parliament Clubs

Graph + Explanations

4.2 Relations of Politicians

Graph + Explanations

Chapter 5

Conclusions and Future Work

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