

Electoral Security as a Determinant of Legislator Activity, 1832–1918

New Data and Methods for Analyzing British Political Development*

Andrew C. Eggers[†] Arthur Spirling[‡]

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Abstract

We consider the relationship between a Member of Parliament (MP)'s electoral environment and his strategic choice of legislative activities for the period between the First and Fourth Reform Acts in Britain. We argue that voters and party institutions put cross-cutting pressures on members during this time, and that legislators calibrated their behavior in accordance with the marginality of their seat. We gather a massive new dataset documenting MPs' basic biographical information, electoral records, roll call votes, and speeches. We then show in panel data analysis that the extent of MPs' speechmaking and voting (our key measures of legislative activity) vary with electoral security in ways that are consistent with our theoretical priors: safer members appear to cater to the interests of their party leadership, while more marginal representatives behave in ways likely to appeal to their constituents directly. We also document changes in these relationships over time.

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[†]London School of Economics. email: a.c.egg@lse.ac.uk

[‡]Department of Government, Harvard University. email: aspirling@gov.harvard.edu

1 Introduction

Like all rational actors, legislators respond to the incentives they face; because the pressures on them vary over time and space, we observe different patterns of representation in practice (e.g. [Lijphart, 1999](#); [Powell, 2000](#)). Thus, House members in the United States are primarily concerned with delivering (federal spending) ‘pork’ to their constituents (e.g. [Levitt and Snyder, 1997](#); [Stein and Bickers, 1997](#)), vote and speak in a way that is ideologically congruent with their district ([Canes-Wrone, Brady and Cogan, 2002](#)), and work to develop a distinctive ‘Home Style’ for their voters ([Fenno, 1978](#)). By contrast, members of parliament (MPs) in the British House of Commons are elected on a party ticket, are thought to have a negligible ‘personal’ vote (though see [Cain, Ferejohn and Fiorina, 1987](#); [Pattie, Fieldhouse and Johnson, 1994](#)), and have strong career reasons to obey their whips ([Benedetto and Hix, 2007](#); [Kam, 2009](#)) on roll calls. In this light, explaining the way in which a particular system of governance emerged is an exercise in determining how and why parliamentarians’ incentives changed, and the associated implications for their activity choices—particularly their speeches and voting—in the legislature.

Scholars have been especially interested in applying this logic to the development of the British parliament during the mass suffrage era (e.g. [Cox, 1987](#); [McLean, 2001](#)) for at least two reasons. First, because the organizational principles embodied in the (original) ‘Westminster’ system have been so influential for other polities (e.g. [Rhodes, Wanna and Weller, 2009](#)). Second, because the history of this period—from the First (1832) to the Fourth (1918) Reform Acts—represents a rapidly changing structural environment for MPs. In essence, legislators went from operating almost independently of party machinery (e.g. [Gash, 1952, 1977](#)) to living in the ‘modern’ period of whips, cohesion ([Lowell, 1902](#); [Berrington, 1968](#)), national (rather than local) election forces ([Hanham, 1978](#)), and a ‘triumph of partisan pol-

itics' (Jenkins, 1996). Precisely because the extent of change was of such magnitude, there is an obvious interest in documenting, at a micro level, how MPs adjusted their activity in terms of division voting, or speech-making, in response to new incentives. This is especially true for episodes in which the party leadership, local organizations and constituency voters did not place congruent pressures on their members (e.g. Ostrogorski, 1902; Hanham, 1978; Jenkins, 1996), and where those members varied in their need and opportunity to respond to the demands of different actors. Put differently, to the extent that MPs in the Victorian era could calibrate their behavior in parliament in response to the security of their electoral district, we wish to know how they did so when faced with simultaneous—though possibly conflicting—demands from other actors. With some important exceptions (Cox, 1987; Rush, 2001; Schonhardt-Bailey, 2003) however, such fine-grained work on trade-offs in the strategic choice of legislative action has been largely missing from accounts of British political development.

This absence is unfortunate since, as implied above, understanding how individual actors negotiated the cross-pressures they found themselves under is at least as important to refining theory as descriptive work on changes to parliamentary life at an aggregate level. It is unsurprising though, for reasons of data availability: obtaining data to systematically compare MPs' action choices under different electoral circumstances, and at different times, has been problematic. Here we seek to solve this problem; in particular, we introduce a new data set that dwarfs all previous efforts in the field. We construct a relational database of over 5000 Members of Parliament serving between the beginning of the 19th century and the Great War. We include background covariate information, and results from every election (and by-election) occurring between 1803 and 1918. We match this data to one million legislative speech records and twenty thousand roll calls, along with service dates and promotion information. We are thus in a position to provide much more definitive answers to

questions regarding the relationship between legislative activity and electoral environment. Because this data is itself a contribution, below we spend some time discussing its compilation and possible future uses. In this way we see our paper as contributing not simply to our understanding of how MPs and their constituents interacted, but also to the development of more comprehensive data resources in political science.

Using our data, we demonstrate that there is indeed an association between the electoral climate an MP faces in his home district and his legislative activity, and that it changes over time. Though observational data such as ours means that causal statements are more difficult to make with certainty, we can nonetheless do a thorough job of laying out the relationships between the key variables we consider. In a ‘pooled’ analysis, where we do not control for ‘fixed effects’ pertaining to individual MPs, we demonstrate that unopposed MPs vote and speak significantly less than their colleagues in more competitive seats. Meanwhile, for those who faced opposition, more secure MPs tended to vote and speak slightly more. Once we focus on ‘within’ variation (i.e. include member fixed effects), a somewhat different picture emerges: now, more secure MPs (including those who are unopposed) speak less, but vote more than the most marginal category of member. Below, we relate these patterns to the possible cross-pressures between the expectations of the electorate and the demands of party chiefs, and the notion that MPs chose actions strategically to increase their chances of staying in office even if it meant acting at loggerheads with their leaders. Our fixed effects estimates suggest that, by the end of the century, safer MPs faced increasingly congruent incentives to ‘behave’ in the Commons—by speaking less, and voting more—with presumably little cost to their re-election prospects.

We proceed as follows: in Section 2 we give the substantive background for our study, and report on previous efforts in the literature. In Section 3, we describe our database: its ori-

gins, contents and possible uses. In Section 4 we explain our measurement of constituency ‘marginality’ and the various measures of legislative activity we use. We then report our results, and conclude in Section 6.

2 Marginality and Activity in Westminster Systems

Party voting by the electorate, either based on national Cabinet—i.e. executive—policy positions and performance (see [Budge, 1999](#); [Crewe, 1983](#); [Norris, 2001](#)) or on cruder partisan loyalties (see [Butler and Stokes, 1974](#)) is thought to be the norm for contemporary Westminster systems like Britain. Congruent with this principle, almost all legislative business is directly controlled by the executive, and party pressure or ‘whipping’ is commonly used by the government to herd its ‘backbench’ MPs into supporting the Cabinet’s programmatic agenda when required (e.g. [Cowley, 2002](#), 3–7).¹ By conventional wisdom then, since voters do not care about parliamentary behavior (and have no reason to), there is little an individual backbencher has to offer his or her constituents aside from a party label at election time.

To the extent that scholars of contemporary Westminster systems have sought to unpack the relationship between legislator activity and popularity, unlike our study here, they have tended to focus on the former as a causal factor for the latter. Within this rubric, scholars have considered the effects of various actions on election performance: constituency service (see [Cain, Ferejohn and Fiorina, 1987](#); [Norton and Wood, 1993](#); [Searing, 1994](#); [Gaines, 1998](#)), local campaigning activity (e.g. [Denver and Hands, 1997](#); [Pattie, Johnston and Fieldhouse, 1995](#)), roll call behavior (e.g. [Pattie, Fieldhouse and Johnson, 1994](#)), private members’ bills ([Bowler, 2010](#)) and other related legislative work ([Loewen et al., Forthcoming](#)).

¹Whipping typically includes offers or threats related to ministerial promotion: see [Kam \(2009\)](#) for a discussion of the Canadian case.

For the nineteenth century, [Cox \(1987, 51–67\)](#), building on earlier data gathering efforts by [Lowell \(1902\)](#) and [Adyelotte \(1954\)](#), investigates the relationship between participation in roll calls, speech making and district size (i.e. the number of electors in the constituency). He finds that, broadly speaking, for the early and middle years of the Victorian era, MPs from more populous seats tended to be more active in the legislature. [Schonhardt-Bailey \(2003\)](#), along with earlier work by [McLean \(2001\)](#), considers the role of constituency ‘interests’ (as opposed to ideology) in parliamentary voting during the Corn Laws period. [Stephens and Brady \(1976\)](#) consider the relationship between constituency types and party cohesion for the 1880s, and find little evidence that district characteristics affected roll call behavior at that time.

2.1 Competing pressures, ambiguous predictions

Because we are focussing on such a long period during which so much changes, it is unsurprising that multiple elements addressed by previous scholarship—for historical and contemporary periods—enter our account of MP behavior. In particular, we see MPs as strategic actors under pressure from three main sources: the voters themselves in a given constituency; local party organizations, who recruit candidates and assist in electioneering attempts, and a central party apparatus that, with certain periods excepted (see, e.g., [Hanham, 1978](#), on the rise of the ‘Fourth Party’ in organizational terms), is synonymous with the party’s parliamentary leadership. In the current period, in which ‘nationalized’ party appeals and campaigns are considered the norm, these three pressures broadly push candidates and members towards the same action choices: MPs follow the party whip and fall in line behind their leader at and between elections, since there is relatively little return or opportunity (and much cost) to refusing to follow party directives in terms of roll call voting or speech making. What makes the 19th century interesting is precisely the notion that these pressures did not pull in

the same direction at the same time. As a result, different types of MPs—distinguished at a minimum by the safety of their electoral situation—may have faced different incentives. Our central task below is to see if MPs facing different electoral situations behaved differently in the House of Commons and how this relationship between electoral context and legislative behavior may have changed over time.

Although we assume that all MPs, whatever their electoral background, could affect their future success via their actions, we focus our theoretical account on those that faced competition. That is, we assume that those who were unopposed (literally, faced no alternative candidates) at election time are qualitatively different to those who were in competitive races—in particular, as regards pressures from voters, local or central organizations to behave in certain ways. At the opposite end of the spectrum, it is interesting to consider the plight of an MP in a very marginal—that is, competitive—seat. On heading to the House of Commons, such an MP has strong reasons to wish to connect to his voters, perhaps by mentioning them in speeches in the way that [Cox \(1987\)](#) describes for the period immediately following the Great Reform Act.² Alternatively, in the period when voters are not particularly party orientated, MPs would need to spend time in their districts wooing them with local goods and local appeals. Clearly, there is an opportunity cost for those seeking to please party elites: marginal MPs will find it hard to be continually at Westminster to vote for bills that leaders wish to pass. Moreover, these members might seek to curry local favor by enacting private bills, actively clogging up the Commons agenda at the expense of debate time for the (more public and partisan) interests of those further up in the party hierarchy. As the century progressed, the executive comes to dominate proceedings, and such opportunities for private action and legislation become rarer ([Cox, 1987](#); [Rush, 2001](#)) leaving MPs

²Exactly what MPs in more marginal seats thought about the relationship between legislative activities and their electoral security is not obvious, but members certainly seem to have desired newspaper coverage of their efforts for the earlier part of the period under study ([Cox, 1987](#), 54–55).

with a reduced strategy set. Later on, when the electorate becomes more party-orientated, such an MP is presumably required to be more responsive to his local association (as warned by [Ostrogorski 1902](#), though see [Judge 1993](#), 79 for discussion), in order to garner help at election time ([Hanham, 1978](#)). To the extent that he does this, he may find himself ‘out of step’ with his party leadership in a different way, since they require his obedience on roll calls ([Jenkins, 1996](#), 59–63) for their survival as a (potential) government. Moreover, for an MP seeking promotion to cabinet ([Cox, 1987](#), 75–79) or access to honors and sinecures ([Jenkins, 1996](#), 64), following orders in the House of Commons is a wise course of action. Exactly what an MP from a very insecure district ought to do—whom he ought to please, and how to do it—is not obvious for much of the 19th century. It is more obvious for those in safer districts: voters already like them, re-election is relatively more certain, and thus such MPs are freer to respond to career incentives.³

2.2 Empirical Task

It is the implications of this ambiguity that we seek to resolve below. Before doing so, we note that the efforts of previous scholars notwithstanding, making causal statements from observational data about actor decisions and outcomes is very difficult. While we can readily establish associations between certain behaviors, it is helpful and intellectually honest to be ecumenical in our interpretation of these results—at least in terms of plausible mechanisms by which they have arisen. At the most basic level, for example, we cannot be entirely sure why an MP finds himself in a more or less competitive district in the first place, and we presumably think the factors that determine this data generating process are not independent

³We do not mean to suggest that ‘party pressures’ and ‘constituency pressures’ are always at odds: we discuss other possibilities in our interpretation of the findings in Section ??.

of other (latent) factors pertaining to the MP in question or his subsequent actions. Yet while the possibilities are many, they are not boundless: below, we will assess our evidence in light of other scholars’ findings, and general plausibility. We see our efforts as ‘benchmarks’ for a new dataset that concerns an important period in Westminster development: a first step in establishing descriptive patterns upon which further work can be based.

To summarize then, while the complex relationship between individual election outcomes and legislative activities has generated interest among scholars—especially historically—there has been no attempt to comprehensively map the (possibly) changing relationship between these two variables over the entire course of Britain’s political development. Below, we attempt to do just that, paying special attention to the period between the first (‘Great’) reform act (Representation of the People Act, 1832) and the fourth reform act (Representation of the People Act, 1918). This will require that we obtain information on electoral success on the one hand, and ministerial service, speech making and legislative voting on the other. The next section explains how we went about this task.

3 A Massive Database

We assembled a database representing electoral records and legislative activity by bringing together data from a variety of sources. In this section we describe these sources as well as the process we used to connect disparate sources in a single relational database.⁴

⁴We fully acknowledge that other sources, such as the House of Commons Parliamentary Papers (part of the Chadwyck-Healy collection), provide much of the information we do below. However, they do so in a way that is less immediately helpful to those studying MP activity. In particular, notice that we link our unique MP identities to their parliamentary behavior in the senses included in the Parliamentary Papers, *as well as* their constituency election results and roll calls, in a way that has not been done before.

3.1 Members of parliament

The core of the database is a list of MPs along with their basic biographical information such as dates of birth and death. We obtained this information through a website connected to the Hansard Digitisation Project,⁵ combined with data collected by an independent researcher, Leigh Rayment. We used this data to construct an initial database of MPs. With the addition of a few MPs who were missing from these sources (sometimes due to short stints in parliament), we located 5,599 MPs who served between 1832 and 1918.

3.2 Electoral records and parties

The next step was to link MPs to their electoral records. Aside from the direct uses of electoral data for research purposes (such as studying the relationship between electoral context and legislative activity, as we do in this paper), bringing in electoral records had indirect benefits for building our database, in that it helped link MPs to parties and allowed us to establish definitively when particular MPs served in parliament.

We began by transcribing the information (candidate names, parties and vote results) for every electoral return from [Craig \(1989a\)](#), [Craig \(1989b\)](#) and [Craig \(1983\)](#) into our database; these collectively cover British constituencies for the period 1832–1949. We supplemented these records with [Walker \(1978\)](#) for the Irish constituencies, and we used [Thorne \(1986\)](#) and [Fisher \(2009\)](#) to cover the period 1803 to the 1831 general election. In total, we recorded 25,726 election returns between 1832 and 1918, of which 16,005 were successful. (Note that successful returns were those in which the MP won the seat; in cases where the election result was overturned following a petition, successful returns were not always those that won the most votes.)

⁵<http://hansard.millbanksystems.com>.

We collect each set of returns into a “race”, which we stored along with information such as the date, number of electors, and whether it was a general election or by-election. In total, 12,734 races took place between 1832 and 1918, of which 2,737 were by-elections.

Each race was also linked to a constituency; we obtained a list of constituencies from the UK Parliamentary Service website. We follow the conventional approach to identifying constituencies, by which a constituency disappears when it is divided or undergoes extensive boundary changes (as happened to several constituencies in 1867 and 1884). In all we have 867 constituencies in the period from 1832 to 1918.

After extensive checks of these electoral records, we then linked the winning candidates in each contest to MPs in our database. This allowed us to construct, for every MP, an exhaustive list of spells in which the MP served in the House of Commons; we could later use these spells to identify MPs from debate records and division lists. We record 7,027 distinct spells of service in parliament.

Linking MPs to electoral records also allowed us to assign party labels to MPs using the labels that appear in the electoral sources listed above. Note that we assign a party to an MP at a particular time based on the party label that appears in his most recent election return; when an MP switches parties mid-parliament, we do not register the switch.⁶

⁶Such party switches were very uncommon. Focusing on Liberals and Conservatives, we find only 90 cases in which an MP standing in subsequent elections changed party from Liberal to Conservative or the reverse, out of 9913 total cases in which a Liberal or Conservative stood in subsequent elections.

3.3 Ministerial office

To obtain information on the MPs' ministerial careers, we used [Cook and Keith \(1975\)](#) and [Butler and Butler \(1994\)](#) which covers our period for Cabinet offices, and other ranks on the government payroll (some of which are relatively minor officials that disappear over time). For each spell of officeholding, we record (based on these sources) whether the office was considered at the time to be part of the cabinet. We record a total of 243 distinct offices and 4,739 spells of officeholding in all. Currently absent from our work is a list of MPs serving in the *Shadow* Cabinet, including the Leader of the Opposition: that is, the opposition front bench officials who would become ministers should their party be in government. For the period under study, we do not have 'official' records on these matters since such terms were not generally used until after the Victorian era ([Jenkins, 1996](#), 118).⁷

3.4 Speeches

In 2005, the House of Commons Library and the House of Lords Library undertook a joint digitization campaign in which the entire set of Hansard debate records from 1803 to 2004 were eventually converted to machine-readable text.⁸ These records are marked up in XML format with tags identifying speeches, speaker names, debate titles, and so on. Due to the extensive markup, parsing the data into speeches and debates was quite straightforward. Between 1832 and 1918 we record 1,191,723 speeches organized into 218,174 debates.

The main difficulty in integrating this information into our database was the linking of speaker names to actual MPs.⁹ The same issues arise to various extents in matching elec-

⁷'Leader of the Opposition' is first defined, for salary reasons, in statute form via the 1937 Ministers of the Crown Act ([Brazier, 1997](#), 90).

⁸<http://www.hansard-archive.parliament.uk/>

⁹A group within the UK Parliamentary Service (see <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/>) made a preliminary attempt to identify MPs in debates and link those MPs to offices and constituencies. Although we made use of some of their data as noted above, we decided to match speeches to MPs ourselves given

toral records (noted above) and in votes (addressed below) to MPs, but because linking speakers to MPs proved to be such a major challenge in assembling the database we pause to explain our approach here.

Whether it be speeches, roll calls, election returns or other sources of data, MPs are not referred to in consistent ways in historical materials. There are various reasons why a given individual may be referred to differently in different instances. Some of the variation is simply due to misspellings or OCR errors; some of it is due to changes in an MP's official name over time as he acquired different honorific titles or even changed his surname due to a marriage or inheritance; some of it is due to changes in who *else* was in the House of Commons, as an MP may be referred to as "Mr. Jones" until another "Mr. Jones" enters, after which time his identity is recorded as "Mr. J. Jones". The way an MP is referred to can even change within a given debate: an MP may be referred to as "Mr. J. Jones" the first time he speaks in a debate and simply "Mr. Jones" the second time. Sometimes MPs are referred to by both their name and their constituency (particularly when another MP with a similar name is serving at the same time); in this case the variation can come from varying conventions in how to abbreviate county and borough names. Finally, MPs who hold offices of state, such as the Chancellor of the Exchequer, will often be referred to as such—rather than by their given name. To a human reader, it is often quite clear that two recorded speaker names refer to the same person; for example, a person would probably quickly identify that two speakers recorded in 1840 as "Acland,Tho. Dyke (Somersets.)" and "Acland,Tho. Dyke (Somersetsh.)" were the same person, and by looking up MPs serving in 1840 could identify this speaker as Thomas Dyke Acland, MP for Somerset West (distinct from his father, also named Thomas Dyke Acland, who represented Devon Northern at the same time). Given over a million speeches to process, however, having a human match each

clear omissions and errors in the existing data.

speech to a speaker is obviously impractical.

As suggested by this example, in linking speeches to MPs we want to be able to make use of the speaker's name, office, and/or title (which may change over time) as recorded by Hansard, we want to make use of constituency information (when available), which similarly is not recorded in standardized ways, and we want to take account of who was in parliament at a given time. Given unique features of the problem, our approach was to write our own custom software that used a variety of raw information about the speaker, voter, or candidate and returned a ranked list of possible MP matches, along with a score reflecting the closeness of the match. The scores we used to characterize a match are based partly on name similarity (addressing complexities such as the use of initials, aristocratic titles, and the name of offices (e.g. "The Solicitor General")) but also rely heavily on the information in our database (gleaned from MP biographies and electoral records) about which MPs were serving at what time. For cases in which one MP received a sufficiently high match score, and no other MP was close, we accepted the match; for other cases we output spreadsheets of potential matches and asked research assistants to determine (if possible) which MP was the correct one, focusing on cases where resolving an ambiguity would lead to several speeches being matched. All told, it took hundreds of hours of manual checking to link speeches, votes, and electoral records to MPs, even after the work necessary to design and run the automatic matching procedures.

The number of speeches given per year increases throughout the period we examine, from about 5,000 in the 1830s to about 30,000 in the 1910s. Overall we matched about 95% of the total of 1.2 million speeches to MPs, a proportion that was fairly steady throughout the period we examine.

3.5 Roll calls

As part of a recent collaboration with the *History of Parliament Trust*, we were able to obtain digitized roll call records (‘divisions’ in House of Commons terms) for the period 1836 to 1910. As far as we are aware, there is no similar collection in terms of size or detail. In particular, we have some 20,258 divisions, with 4,790,548 voting decisions (that is, ‘ayes’ and ‘noes’) in total. Using the methods described above, we were able to match 99% of these votes to an MP (with the proportion missing being similar throughout the entire period). For every division we know the identity of the tellers, and whether or not they were a Chief Whip for the Conservatives or Liberals. (This allows us to identify divisions in which the whip was applied, using the approach of [Cox \(1992\)](#).) We also have the description of the roll call under consideration as it appeared in the original division lists, which in many cases gives a rough idea of the substance; roll calls can also be linked to the surrounding debate.¹⁰

4 Measures and descriptive statistics

Since we are interested in the relationship between electoral margins and legislative behavior, it is helpful to first summarize the measurement strategy and basic descriptive statistics of each of our key variables. We begin with the competitiveness of seat contests. Due to a variety of legal, economic, and social changes that took place during the period under study here, the House of Commons became much more competitive as the Victorian era wore on. Compared to the situation in the early 19th century, by the end of the First World War MPs were far more likely to face an actual election campaign (rather than winning without opposition), and those who faced campaigns were more likely to face close races (for an aggregate overview, see, [Cox, 1987](#)). In order to document these changes over time we must

¹⁰Our roll call records do not contain lists of ‘pairs’—MPs committed to voting on opposite sides of the issue, who choose to stay away on the basis that their mutual absence makes no difference to the majority outcome of the division.

decide on measures of electoral competition.

The central task here is to measure electoral margins in a period in which a large proportion of MPs were elected in multimember constituencies. In a single-member district, a natural way to summarize the safeness of an MP's seat is to measure the margin between that MP and his closest competitor in the previous election. We adopt a straightforward generalization of this for multi-member seats: the difference in vote share between the MP and the most successful losing candidate in the race. To be more specific, denote by v_i the vote share¹¹ of the candidate who finished in i th place; for a constituency with district magnitude M , all candidates with $i \leq M$ win a seat. We define the margin for candidate i in parliament t as

$$m_{it} = v_{it} - v_{M+1,t}.$$

For robustness we also use an alternative measure of marginality employed in other multi-member contexts (e.g. [Cox and Rosenbluth, 1995](#)), which measures the difference between the candidate's vote result and the Droop quota for the race. The two measures produce essentially identical results.

Figures 1 and 2 use these measures to highlight the changes in competition that MPs faced.

For expositional purposes we divide MPs into four categories, which we also use in the panel

¹¹By vote share, we mean the number of votes received by the candidate divided by the estimated number of voters. We estimate the number of voters by dividing the total number of votes cast by the number of seats up for election, under the assumption that e.g. voters in a two-member constituency cast both ballots.

analysis below. For MP i in parliament t , define the margin category C_{it} as follows:

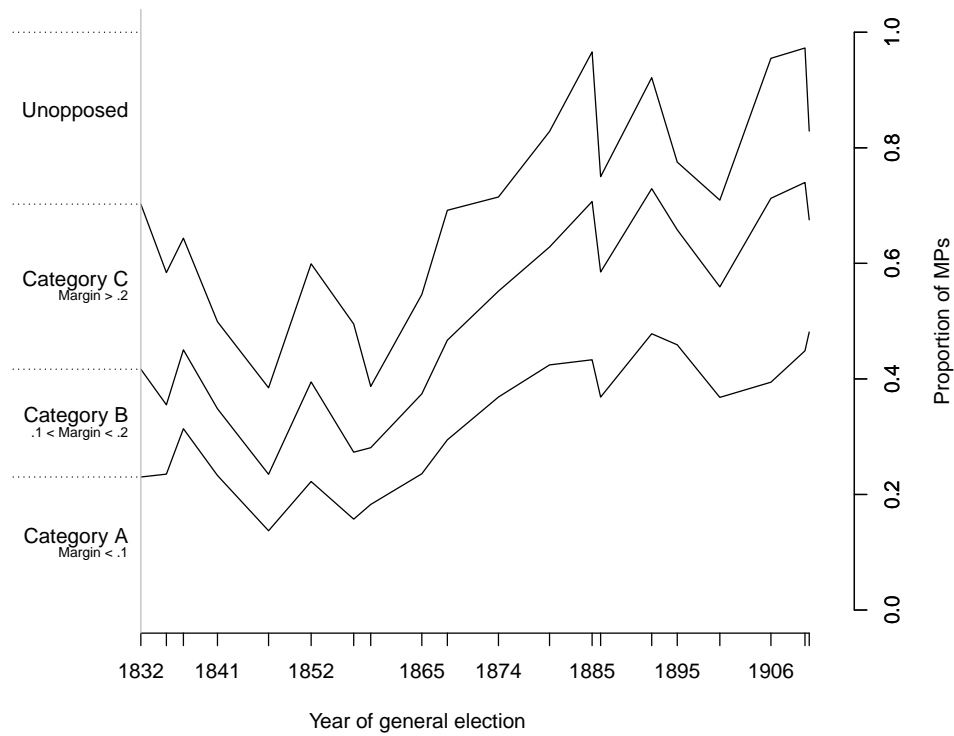
$$C_{it} = \begin{cases} A & \text{if } m_{it} \leq .1 \\ B & \text{if } .1 < m_{it} \leq .2 \\ C & \text{if } m_{it} > .2 \\ \text{UN} & \text{if unopposed.} \end{cases}$$

Putting MPs into these categories allows us to describe the relationship between MPs' electoral context and their legislative behavior in an easily interpretable way without making assumptions about the functional form (e.g. linearity) of the relationship between margin and behavior. It also allows us to include unopposed MPs in analysis along with other MPs, despite the fact that we do not have a directly comparable measure of electoral margin in for the types of MPs.

The increase in competitiveness of elections to the House of Commons has been noted by others. Figures 1 and 2 confirm the pattern using the complete set of election results. Strikingly, about half of MPs were elected without opposition in the early part of the nineteenth century; by the early 20th century, almost half were elected by a margin under .1. The evolution of electoral marginality (and its relationship with legislative activity, analyzed below) is similar if we use finer-grained categories or document changes in the continuous distribution of margins.

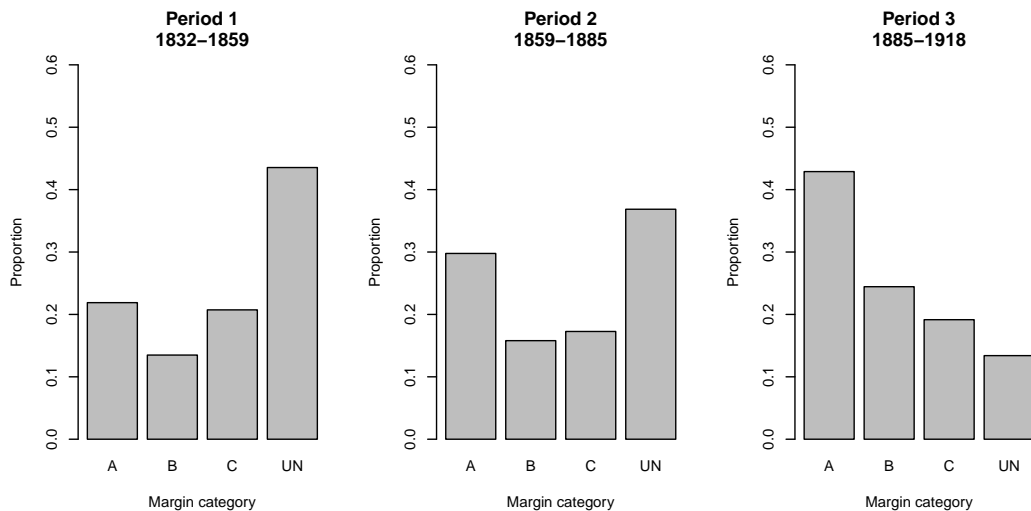
We now turn to our measures of legislative activity: voting and speaking. We focus on the sheer amount of voting and speaking in which an MP engages. Our measure of voting activity is quite simple and straightforward: for each MP in each parliament, we record the proportion of divisions on which the MP cast a vote. Our measure of speaking activity is based on the number of speeches the MP made in each parliament, divided by the length of

Figure 1: Electoral margins by general election, 1832-1910



NOTE: Margin category A refers to MPs elected by a margin under .1, category B refers to MPs elected by a margin between .1 and .2, and margin category C refers to MPs elected by a margin of .2 or larger; MPs not facing opposition are categories as “unopposed”. Proportions in each category are plotted by parliament and parliaments are indicated by the year in which the parliament first sat.

Figure 2: Electoral margins by period



NOTE: Margin category A refers to MPs elected by a margin under .1, category B refers to MPs elected by a margin between .1 and .2, margin category C refers to MPs elected by a margin of .2 or larger, and margin category “UN” refers to MPs who were elected without opposition.

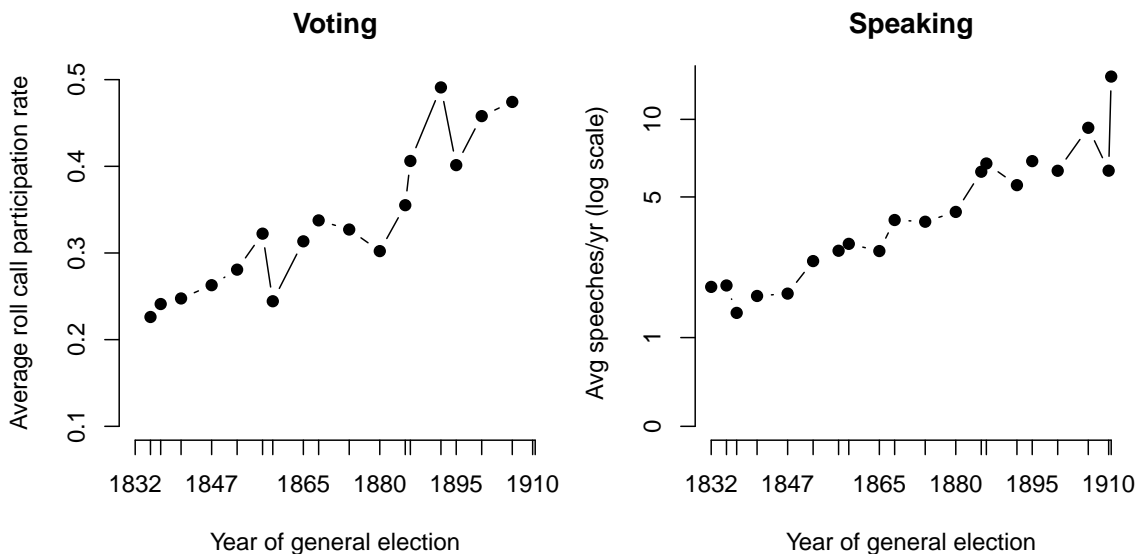
the parliament (in years). Because of the substantial right skew of this variable (call it s_{it}) and the large number of zeros, we carry out analysis on $\log(1 + s_{it})$. It is certainly possible to use more nuanced measures, such as the varying length of speeches, or their content. We would encourage future work in the area to just that, but here we concentrate on establishing relationships for more basic measures.

Using data for select years in this period, Cox (1987) noted that the rate of voting and speaking in parliament increased substantially over the 19th century (pp. 53-54). Figure 3 documents this pattern for the universe of divisions and debates. The left panel shows that MPs voted on a steadily larger proportion of divisions as the century progressed: the average MP voted on just one-quarter of divisions in the 1830s and almost half of divisions by the 1910s. Similarly, as shown by the right panel of Figure 3 the average number of speeches per year made by the average MP increased steadily as well. Additional analysis confirms

that the increase in speaking is not simply a few individuals appearing more, but rather an increase in the number of speakers *and* an across-the-board increase in the number of times each MP participated.

We organize our data as a panel with the unit of analysis being the MP-parliament.

Figure 3: Increasing participation by MPs over time



NOTE: The left panel shows the average proportion of divisions voted on by MPs in each parliament. The right panel shows the average number of speeches per year by MPs in each parliament (transformed as described in the text).

We omit cases where an MP was not serving throughout (the life of) a parliament, on the basis that these MPs are often elected in by-elections (whose electoral marginality may not be indicative of likely future contests) and in any case do not have the opportunity to vote or speak on the same matters as those who serve throughout the parliament.

5 Results

How were the electoral pressures facing MPs reflected in their legislative activity? Does the increase in competitiveness over the 19th century help explain why MPs became more active in voting and speaking? We begin to address these question by regressing our outcomes (roll call participation rate and (log) speeches per year) on indicators for MPs' electoral security and a set of covariates that one might think would be related to legislative activity (and possibly electoral competitiveness).

The main regression results appear in Table 1. Recall that the omitted competitiveness category (category A) indicates MPs elected in the most competitive races; the coefficients shown thus test for differences between observations in which an MP was elected in less competitive races or was unopposed and observations in which the MP was elected rather narrowly. All regressions include a dummy for each parliament, which should control for most of the over-time variation in legislator activity; the regressions also include indicators for whether the MP held cabinet office, another office, or no office during the parliament in question, as well as other covariates describing an MP – an indicator for party (Liberal or Conservative), indicators for where the MP's constituency is located (Ireland, Scotland, Wales, Home Counties, or rest of England), and a measure of the MP's experience at the start of the parliament. For each outcome we show the results of a regression without member fixed effects (columns 1 and 3) and with member fixed effects (columns 2 and 4).

Looking at columns (1) and (3), which do not include MP fixed effects, the clearest finding is that MPs who were unopposed both voted less and spoke less than MPs who faced competition. It does not seem to be the case that, among MPs who face an opponent, those who win more easily participate less; in fact, we find evidence in column 3 that MPs who

Table 1: Legislative activity as a function of electoral marginality: regression analysis

Dependent variable: Model:	Roll call participation		(Log) speeches	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Margin category: B	0.002 (0.005)	0.015** (0.005)	0.061 (0.038)	-0.029 (0.031)
Margin category: C	0.004 (0.005)	0.022*** (0.005)	0.094* (0.038)	-0.049 (0.032)
Unopposed	-0.023*** (0.005)	0.009† (0.005)	-0.144*** (0.036)	-0.09** (0.031)
Parliament dummies	✓	✓	✓	✓
Officeholding dummies	✓	✓	✓	✓
Region, party, experience	✓	✓	✓	✓
MP fixed effects		✓		✓
Obs.	8435	8435	9852	9852
R^2	0.296	0.117	0.265	0.093

Note: See text for information about covariates. Guide to significance codes: *** indicates $p < .001$; ** indicates $.001 < p < .01$; * indicates $.01 < p < .05$; and † indicates $.05 < p < .1$.

faced competition but were easily elected (those in categories B and C) spoke *more* than MPs elected narrowly. How much less active were unopposed MPs? The coefficient on “Unopposed” in column (1) indicates that average roll call participation rate for MPs who were elected to parliament without opposition was about 0.025 lower than that for MPs who were elected by narrow margins; given that the average turnout rate for MPs in margin category A was about .36, this works out to a difference in turnout rates of about 7%. In the case of speeches, the coefficient for unopposed MPs (-0.14) indicates that MPs who were unopposed spoke about 15% less than MPs who faced close contests.¹² Both differences between closely-contested and unopposed MPs are strongly statistically significant.

Figure 4 puts these results in context by depicting point estimates and 95% confidence

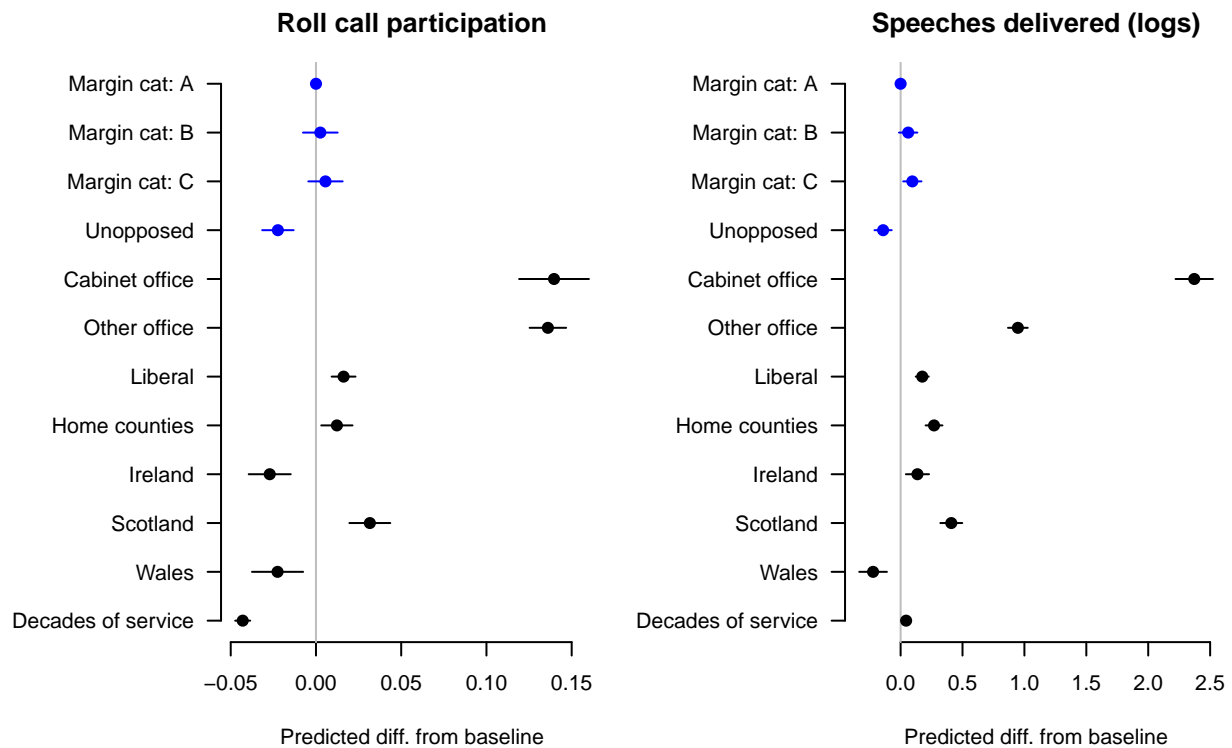
¹²The average of our speech outcome (which is $\log(1 + s_{ij})$) for MPs in margin category A is about 1.63, implying an average of 4.1 speeches per year; the coefficient for unopposed MPs implies an average of 3.44 speeches a year.

intervals for the coefficients in the regressions in columns (1) and (3) of Table 1 not just for the marginality categories but for all coefficients (aside from the intercept and the parliament dummies). Coefficients are plotted as “predicted differences from baseline”; for expositional clarity we plot a 0 for margin category A, the omitted margin category in the regression. Again we see that unopposed MPs were less active, but we also see that electoral context is a relatively weak predictor: the difference between officeholders and non-officeholders, for example, is much larger than that between MPs elected in competitive contexts and those elected unopposed.¹³

To this point we have focused on the results from Table 1 that do not include member fixed effects (i.e. those in columns 1 and 3). The difference between unopposed MPs and those in competitive races that these regressions highlight is of course likely to be the result of both incentives and selection. That is, the coefficients on the margin categories and “Unopposed” in columns 1 and 3 of Table 1 do not reflect just the effect of competition on MPs’ legislative activity (incentive effects); rather, they also reflect the underlying differences between MPs elected from different kinds of contexts, as well as differences between the kinds of contexts in which different types of elections occur (selection effects). Both kinds of effects may be important for understanding how changes in electoral marginality may explain legislative behavior over time. The regressions that include MP fixed effects in Table 1 (columns 2 and 4) control for some of the selection effects by focusing on how electoral marginality and legislative behavior are correlated within MPs’ careers. Controlling for each MP’s average level of voting or speaking (as well as the particularly parliaments in which he served, as well as other covariates), how does an MP’s inclination to vote and speak depend on the nature

¹³Additional analysis indicates that the margin categories contribute little to explaining the long-term increase in legislator activity. For example, if we multiply the long-term change in the proportion of MPs who were unopposed by the estimated difference in activity between unopposed MPs and those in margin category A, we find that the reduction in unopposed MPs accounts (in a descriptive sense) for less than 5% of the overall increase in voting and speaking in parliament.

Figure 4: Electoral margin and other correlates of legislative activity, 1832-1918



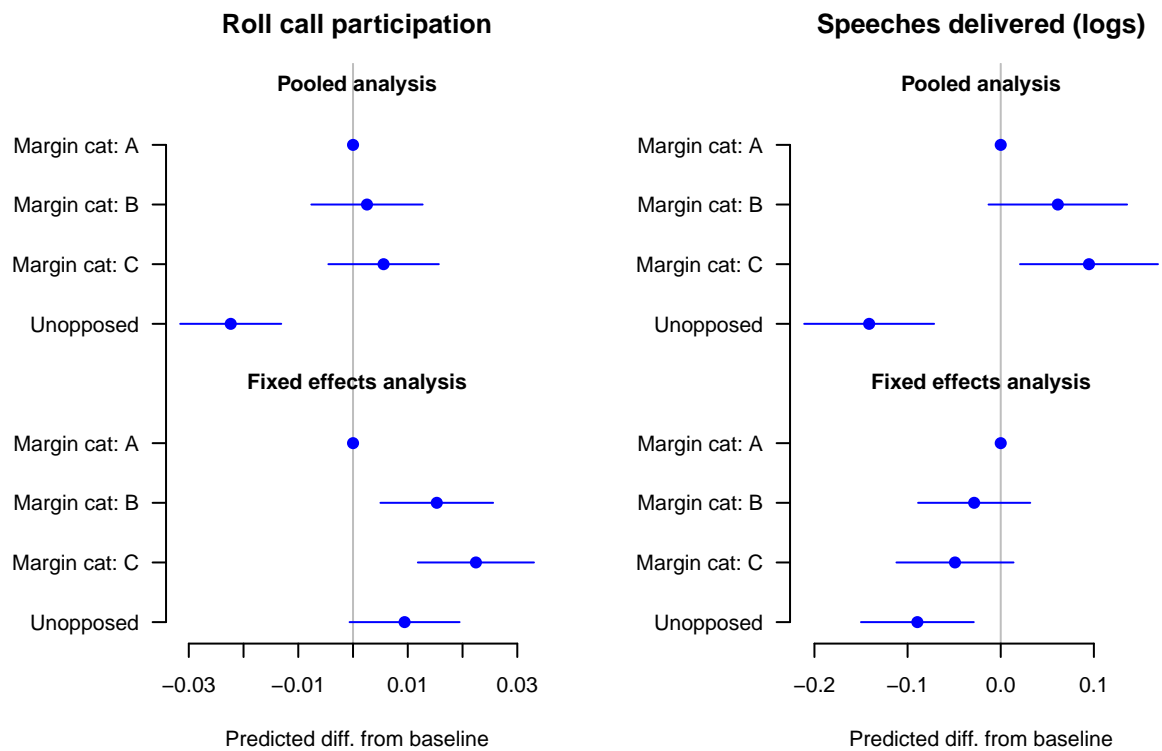
NOTE: Regression coefficients and .95 confidence intervals shown for pooled regressions in which the dependent variable is an MP's legislative activity (voting rates or speaking rates) in a parliament. These regressions do not include member fixed effects; the results can thus be interpreted as a characterization of how variation in legislative activity both within and across MPs relates to MPs' electoral context and other factors. Coefficients for parliament dummies not shown.

of his most recent constituency race?

For clarity of exposition, Figure 5 graphically depicts the coefficients from the fixed effect analysis from columns (2) and (4) of Table 1 (those with member fixed effects) along with the comparable coefficients from columns (1) and (3) (those without member fixed effects). With member fixed effects, we see quite a distinct pattern for the two legislative outcomes: as an MP's electoral context gets safer he appears to vote more but speak less. The differences from the analysis without member fixed effects are striking. Comparing across MPs (i.e. in the analysis without fixed effects) electoral margin does not appear to matter much and unopposed MPs vote less; comparing within MPs' careers (i.e. in the analysis with fixed effects), MPs vote less when they are elected by a narrow margin than when they are elected by a larger margin or are unopposed.

The pattern we find in the fixed effects analysis (roughly, comfortable MPs vote more and speak less) is consistent with a situation in which MPs who do not face electoral pressures are loyal backbenchers, regularly turning up to vote and not ruffling feathers as speakers. In line with our theoretical comments above, MPs who are elected by narrower margins may feel less secure in their seats and thus less inclined to invest in pleasing party leaders; instead, they speak in parliament in order to represent their constituencies; they skip votes in order to remain active in the constituency or maintain and develop ties outside of parliament that will advance their non-political careers (which may be especially important if they expect to lose). Additional analysis is necessary to determine whether this is consistent with the *content* of MPs' votes and speaking contributions. We note that party leaders may well have given (implicit) 'permission' for such activity. That is, elites may have preferred MPs from their own party to return to the Commons, despite their obstreperousness, rather than MPs from opposing parties who would be more consistently unhelpful. Even if such a logic

Figure 5: Electoral margin and legislative activity with and without member fixed effects



NOTE: The left panel plots the coefficients on marginality categories from column 1 (top) and column 2 (bottom) of Table 1. The right panel plots the coefficients from column 3 (top) and column 4 (bottom) of Table 1.

holds however, notice that our maintained assumption is that promotion-minded MPs would *prefer* to not have to spend time away from their colleagues dealing with fickle voters at home and that thus a conflict continues to exist.

Finally, we divide the data up into three periods and examine how the relationship between electoral context and legislative activity may have changed over time. We use the same periods for which we depicted the distribution of electoral security in Figure 2 above, i.e. three roughly equally-sized periods in which competition was low (pre-1859), rising (1859-1885), and high (1885-1918). We focus on fixed effect analysis and report the results graphically in Figure 6.

Figure 6 indicates that the relationship between marginality and legislative activity that we documented above (roughly, “safe MPs vote more and speak less”) emerges over time: it is completely absent in the early period, strongly evident in the late period, and intermediate in between. This is consistent with the idea that, as party organization developed and the electorate became more party-oriented (Cox, 1987), MPs sought favor with party leaders rather than by attempting to please the electorate. The timing of this shift is somewhat later than one might expect, however, given that this process is thought to have begun in the 1840s. Put otherwise, to the extent that ‘speaking more’ helped one be reelected, it was presumably a strategy that had non-constant returns over time: there were periods when it helped, and periods when it may have hurt. Going further, the period in which ‘modern’ incentives seem to have come to the fore is after the passing of the Third Reform Act (1884) and the Redistribution Act (1885). This is intriguing, and suggests that the equalization of constituency sizes and their representation (i.e. one seat per district), had some effect on the way that MPs behaved. One possibility here is that because MPs increasingly faced similar incentives (insofar as their districts were increasingly homogenous in terms of size

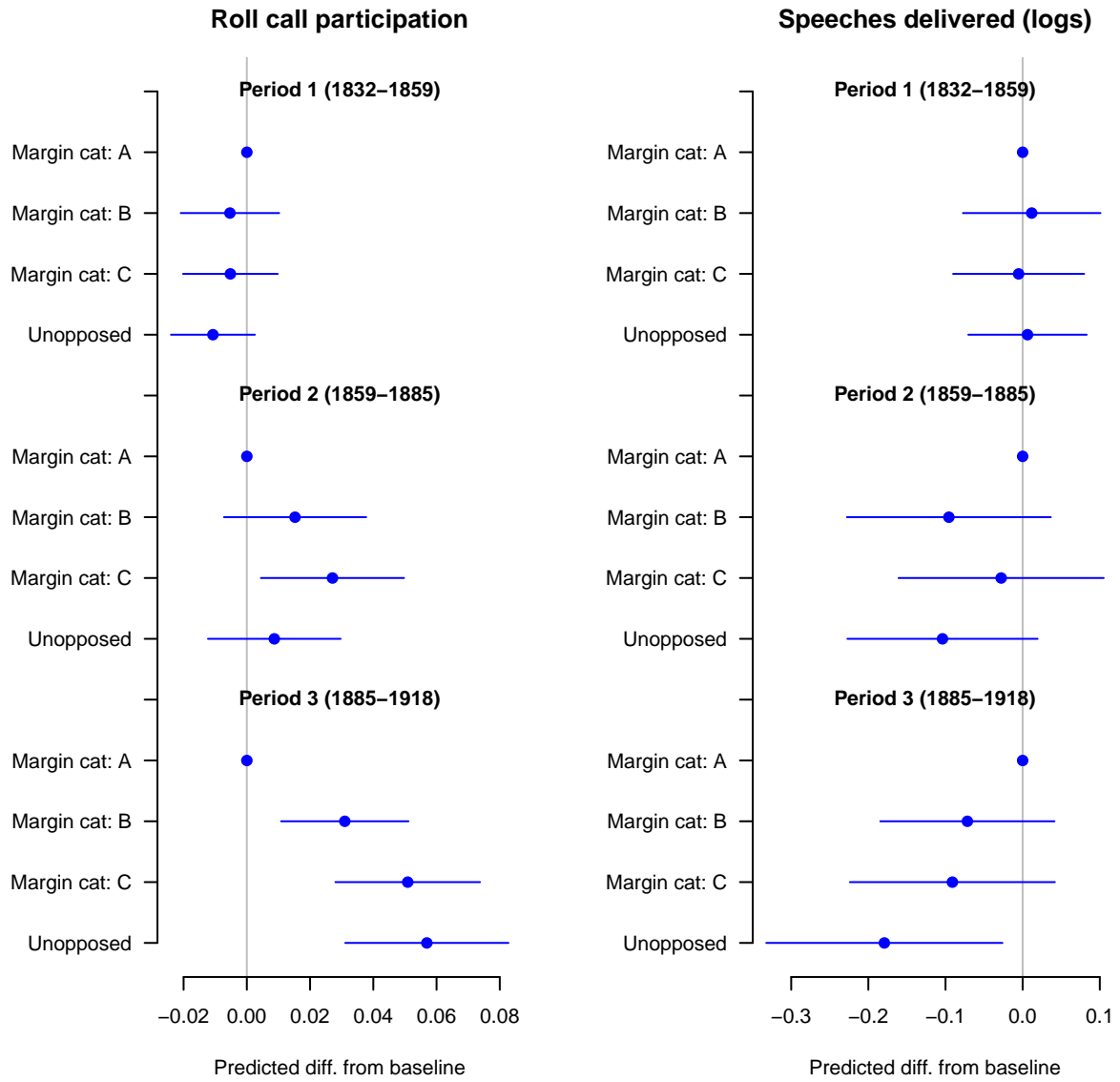
and representation), their strategies also converged and we see this via the (suddenly) clear pattern in the last row of Figure 6.

6 Discussion

At least since the time of Burke and his *Speech to the Electors of Bristol* (1774/1975), scholars of politics have debated the ‘proper’ role of legislators in representative democracy. While much of the debate has been normative in nature, Britain’s historical experience with mass suffrage made the transition from ‘delegate’ to ‘trustee’ a descriptive reality.¹⁴ This sweeping transformation is ultimately composed of thousands of actors making rational decisions to comport with new incentives arising through institutional innovations—be they an expanded franchise or a Cabinet as agenda setter. Here, we set out to document the way that one important set of such actors—MPs between the First and Fourth Reform Acts—dealt with their changing environment in terms of their legislative activities of speech making and voting. We argued that MPs with different electoral backgrounds would face different pressures, and have different priorities, as they balanced party and voter demands during an inchoate period from which the modern Westminster system ultimately emerged. We showed that competition affected choices in ways predicted by theory: for example, in our fixed effects analysis, we demonstrated that MPs in safer seats tended to attend divisions more often, and speak less frequently as time wore on. This is commensurate with the notion that they, relative to their least secure colleagues, prioritized supporting their party’s agenda: keeping their ‘head down’ in debate, and doing as they were told by their whips. Notwithstanding our comments about the possibility of implicit ‘permission’ to misbehave in Section ??, this strategy made more sense for MPs with secure seats, whose political futures depended on

¹⁴By ‘trustee’ we do not mean ‘independent’ in a non-partisan sense, but rather members as representatives of national parties with national (as opposed to hyper-local) policy platforms executed via parliamentary actions.

Figure 6: Electoral margin and legislative activity over time: fixed effect analysis



NOTE: Coefficients on marginality categories shown for panel analysis including member fixed effects carried out separately for each of three time periods.

pleasing party leaders and not the electorate.

Quite apart from the historical question we set out above, there may be interesting policy implications of our work. At the time of writing, MPs seem to believe that their activities *within* parliament might matter for reelection (Cowley and Stuart, 2005), and that they face trade-offs between pleasing party bosses and constituents, at least in terms of their service commitments (Johnston et al., 2002). Whether this is true or not, it implies that legislators perceive cross-cutting pressures and are acting in ways that challenge core components of the Westminster system as traditionally considered. In this way, increasingly conflicting incentives may endanger both the normative justification for, and mechanical functioning of, the future working of this traditional method of governance (e.g. Powell, 2000)—an issue already of concern to psephologists (see Blau, 2004). Though it seems unlikely that Westminster systems will find themselves adopting American parliamentary practices, moves in that direction have obvious consequences for ‘national’ party mandates.

To be clear, we are aware that our findings are commensurate with interpretations other than the ones we asserted here: we make no claims to have (uniquely) causally identified a particular story here. Instead, we view our work as a first cut at using a new database to ‘fill in’ gaps in our knowledge on British Political Development—a topic of long-standing and general interest to political scientists (e.g. Cox, 1987; Judge, 1993; McLean, 2001; Schonhardt-Bailey, 2003), historians (e.g. Bagehot, 1873/2011; Lowell, 1902; Redlich, 1908; O’Leary, 1962; Canadine, 1990), economists (e.g. Acemoglu and Robinson, 2000; Lizzeri and Persico, 2004) and others (e.g. Crossman, 1964). As we hope is clear, with this new data, scholars have numerous possibilities for future research, whether it be the contents of speeches (in the sense of e.g. Quinn et al., 2010), the nature of (any) incumbency advantage in electoral races, the ideological cohesion of parties (MacRae, 1970, e.g.) and the role of promotion opportunities

therein ([Benedetto and Hix, 2007](#)), the effect of the changing sociological makeup of members of parliament (e.g. [Rush, 2001](#)) and so on. We leave such efforts for future work.

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