The legislative consequences of internal conflict and inter-party divisions

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Abstract

Governments must respond quickly to pressing economic and societal problems. However, institutional rules, public opinion and unanticipated world events often delay the legislative process. Building on theories of legislative decision-making and intra-party politics, this paper shows that the speed at which bills pass is also driven by the governing party's internal cohesiveness and its ideological distance to the opposition. Governing parties that are internally divided have greater difficulty in forming the legislative majorities necessary to pass laws quickly, especially if their preferences are further away from the opposition. I test these hypotheses using a novel collection of laws passed in the UK Parliament and conference speeches given by Labour and Conservative party members over a 10-year period. I use automated text classification techniques to determine the relative location of actors' preferences and the level of intra-party disagreement. I then predict the duration of lawmaking based on the government's recent internal level of conflict and its distance to the opposition. The results complement mounting evidence that parties' internal policy divisions hold important implications for parties' performance in government.

Keywords

Intra-party preferences, political speeches, legislative politics, WORDFISH

Scholars of legislative politics have typically analysed legislative productivity by looking at the number of successful parliamentary policy proposals (e.g. Binder, 2003; Howell et al., 2000). Recently, legislative works have shifted their focus towards understanding the timing of legislative decisions. They yield important insights into the determinants of legislative delay by showing that factors such as public opinion, the coalition bargaining process and various institutions directly influence the duration of policy-making (Golub, 2008; Golub and Steunenberg, 2007; Klüver and Sagarzazu, 2013; Schulz and König, 2000; Taylor, 2014; Woon and Anderson, 2012). Despite substantial theoretical and empirical development, few scholars consider the role of intra-party conflict. This absence is striking as numerous studies show that intra-party preferences hold implications for a large range of political processes such as election campaigns, coalition bargaining and issue selection (Carey, 2009; Ceron, 2012; Debus and Bräuninger, 2008; Greene and Haber, 2014; Kam, 2009; Laver, 1999). Moreover, the studies that take into account actors' ideological diversity (Klüver and Sagarzazu, 2013; Taylor, 2014; Woon and Anderson, 2012) mostly use indirect preference measures,

which are endogenous to the parliamentary processes that they are intended to predict.

This paper presents and tests a theory of legislative decision-making speed by considering disagreements within the governing party and its distance to the parliamentary opposition. I argue that intra-party conflict makes it more difficult for the government to form the legislative majorities necessary to pass laws quickly, especially if its preferences are further away from the opposition. Until recently, measuring intra-party preferences has been a challenging task because of limited data availability and the lack of adequate methods. This paper introduces a direct way of gauging parliamentary actors' ideological preferences by analysing speeches given at party national congresses in the UK over a 10-year period. I follow recent research on

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political documents (Ceron, 2012; Greene and Haber, 2014) and derive preference estimates using the scaling method WORDFISH, which uses word frequencies to generate actors' ideological positions (Slapin and Proksch, 2008). I then use these estimates to study the relationship between intra-governmental disagreement and legislative decision-making speed.

In the next section, I present the paper's underlying theoretical framework about the effects of intra-party conflict on the timing of legislative decisions. I then introduce the novel dataset and present evidence that conflict within the governing party leads to longer bill durations. This research holds important implications for broad theories of parliamentary politics and further advances our understanding of the influence of intra-party conflict on legislative processes.

Internal cohesion and legislative activity

Governments seeking re-election usually have large incentives to pass their bills quickly. They must fulfil their electoral promises within a finite time frame and often face additional societal and economic pressure to enact reform on salient issues. Nevertheless, governments sometimes cannot avoid legislative delay (Döring, 2003). Spatial theories generally assume that government leaders will hold preferences that approximate their party's median position (Laver and Shepsle, 1996; Tsebelis, 2002). When a government initiates policy proposals they are likely to be close to the party median. However, the government's preferences often arise from internal debates over the best approach to implementing policy goals, as well as real differences in the preferences of each coalition partner. Moreover, governments must reconcile their statements with a broad party membership (Harmel and Janda, 1994) and therefore require intra-party unity to govern effectively.

In parliament, MPs of the governmental majority not only try to appeal to their constituents but often also represent the preferences of specific intra-party factions (Spirling and Quinn, 2010). Although the government has substantial power to initiate legislation, MPs have several ways of influencing the speed of legislative proposals. They can ask parliamentary questions, call for public hearings and introduce amendments. Most importantly, MPs can directly influence the proceeding of a bill in the committee stage, especially if they chair a committee. The more diverse the preferences within the governmental party, the larger the likelihood that MPs represent factional interests that deviate from the party's median position. Proposals approximating the preferences of the party median gain less support from MPs with more extreme preferences. Intra-party conflict does not necessarily lead to legislative gridlock. Strong party leaders, internal party rules and characteristics of the parliamentary system can lessen the effect of internal disagreement on legislative policies (Ceron, 2012). Nevertheless,

intra-party conflict is likely to increase the time it takes to reach policy agreements, particularly in systems where party leaders have fewer incentives to prevent dissidents from expressing their views in parliament (Proksch and Slapin, 2012).

Assuming that individual MPs represent the interest of intra-party factions, and that they mainly support proposals that are closest to their own preferences, I therefore predict that bills take longer to pass when there is a greater variation of preferences within the governing party.

> H1 (Conflict): When conflict within the governing party increases, governmental legislative proposals take longer to pass.

The duration of legislative proposals not only depends on support from the governmental majority but also on support from the opposition. Although the opposition often cannot block legislation when the government has a stable majority, they can still directly influence the speed by which a bill passes through parliament using the institutional tools available to them. Although members of the opposition generally seek to delay governmental proposals, they will put more effort into delaying legislation when the proposals are further away from their own preferences. I therefore predict that the mean ideological distance of the government party from the opposition influences the speed of legislative proposals.

> H2 (Distance): When the government party's mean position moves away from the mean position of the opposition, governmental legislative proposals take longer to pass.

Data and methods

To test these hypotheses, I collected information on the legislative activity in the UK Parliament and speeches given at the Labour and Conservative parties' annual national conferences between 1999 and 2009. The UK's party system makes the country an interesting case to study the effects of intra-party divisions on the timing of legislative decisions. The country was governed by a stable, single-party Labour government from 1997 to 2010 when the Conservative Party and Liberal Democrats formed the first coalition government in the UK since the Second World War. This is important as coalition governments make it difficult to isolate the effect of intra-party conflict on legislative decisions. The UK's party system is also characterized by a large degree of intra-party fractionalization, particularly within the two main parties Labour and Conservatives (Turner, 2000). Conflict between different party factions, for example, was one of main reasons for the emergence of the Liberal Democrats party. Believing that Labour had
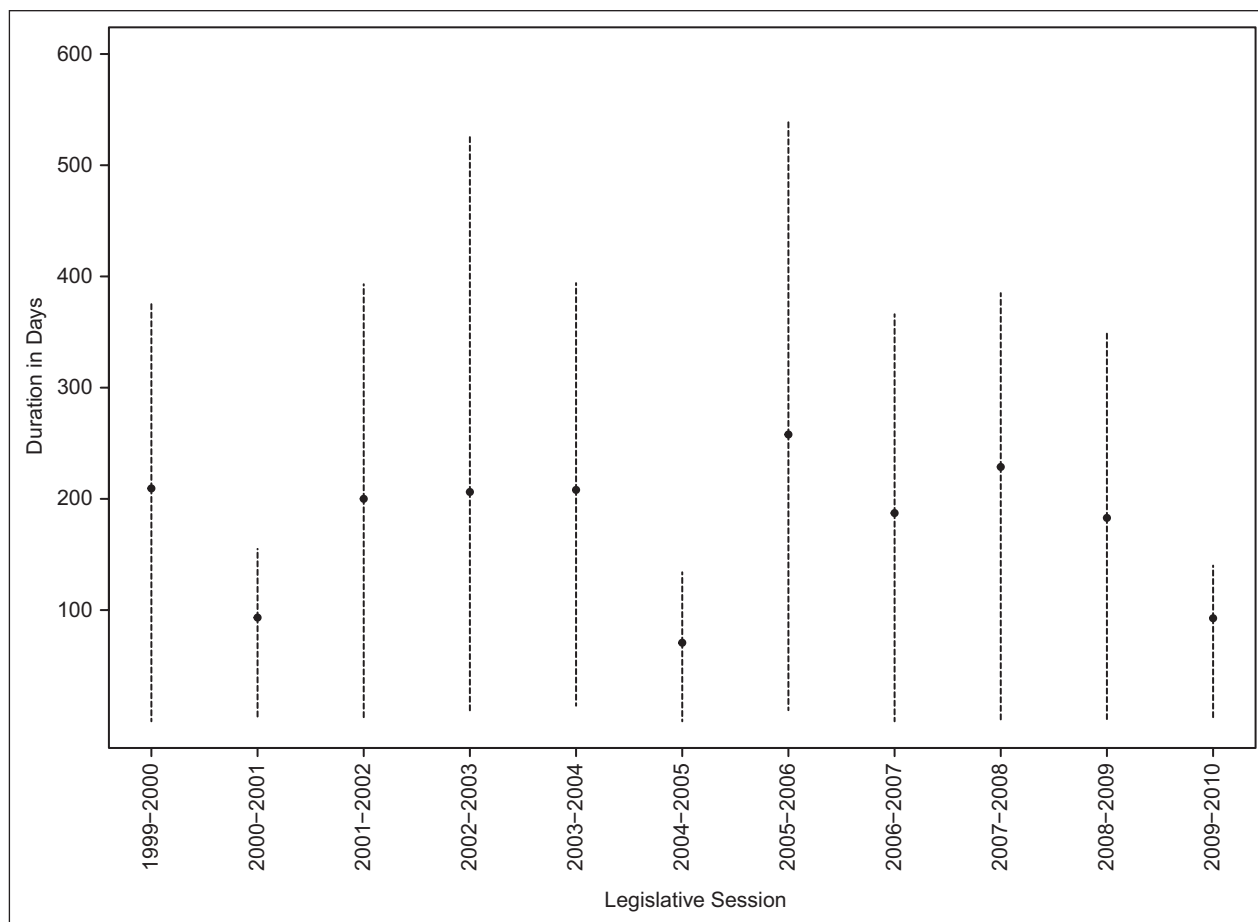
Figure 1. Law-making duration in the UK Parliament.

become too left-wing, a group of four Labour members left the party in 1981 to create the Social Democratic Party that later merged with the Liberals to form the Liberal Democrats. If evidence from the UK confirms the theory, then we may see similar processes underway in other advanced industrial democracies.

Measuring the legislative decision-making speed

To measure the duration of legislative decisions, I collected all bills introduced in the UK Parliament from the beginning of the legislative term in 1997 until the end of the Labour government in 2010. I extracted the information from the House of Common's Sessional Information Digest, which provides an overview of the legislative activity for each session of the UK Parliament.[1] In the UK Parliament, bills are introduced in either the House of Commons or the House of Lords by the government, individual MPs or Lords and private individuals. Bills can be public, private or hybrid, depending on whether they apply to the general population or specific groups of individuals. They have to pass both Houses before they are presented to the monarch for approval. The final data set includes all

public bills introduced by the government or members of the governmental majority (private members' bills) that succeeded in becoming law. I measure the duration of the legislative process for each bill by calculating the number of calendar days from the date the bill was first introduced in either the House of Commons or the House of Lords until the date that bill received Royal Assent and became an Act of Parliament. Figure 1 shows the average bill duration and the respective range for each legislative session. The graph illustrates that it takes about 200 days for a bill to become a law. Bills introduced in a session preceding a general election receive Royal Assent much more quickly.

Measuring disagreement and distance

Capturing the government party's internal disagreement and the distance to the opposition requires information about the location of actors' ideological preferences. Although scholars have employed numerous ways of measuring parties' internal cohesiveness using, for example, roll call votes (Poole and Rosenthal, 1997) and legislative speeches (Proksch and Slapin, 2008), most of these methods are endogenous to the parliamentary processes that they seek to
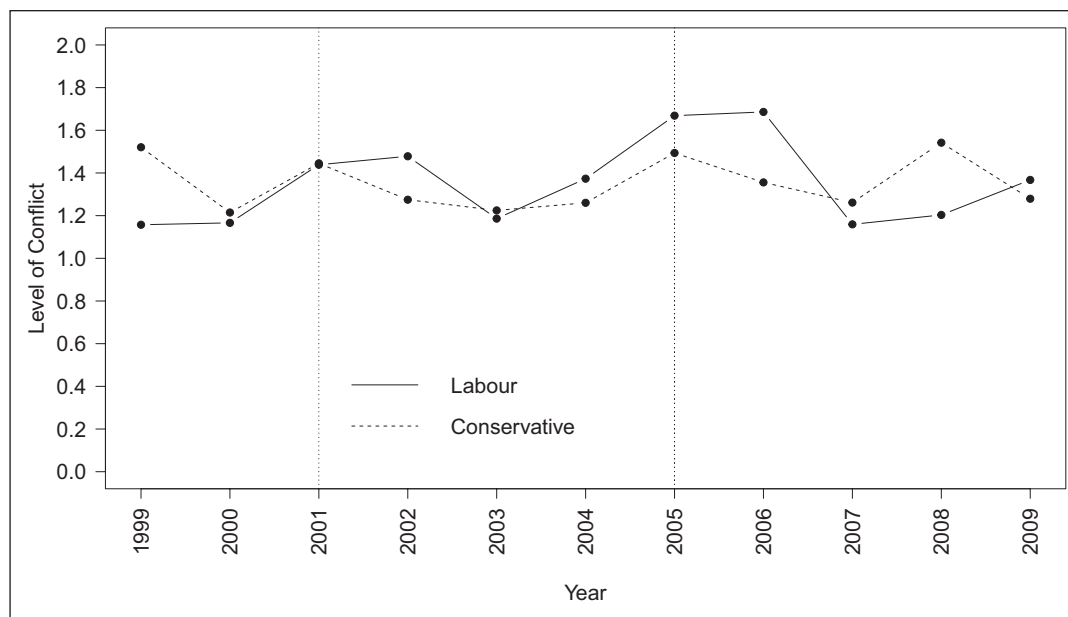
Figure 2. The Labour and Conservative intra-party disagreement.

study (Loewenberg, 2008). Similar to recent studies of intra-party politics (Greene and Haber, 2014), I estimate the parties' ideological preferences by analysing speeches given at the parties' national conferences. Party congresses are usually held once a year and offer MPS and other delegates a relatively unconstrained platform to voice their opinions. Specifically, I collected all available conference speeches given by Labour and Conservative party members after the 1997 general election and before the general election in 2010.[2] Unfortunately, the speeches are not readily available online as both parties have deleted their speech archive over time. However, using the Wayback Machine, a website that captures historical snapshots of webpages, and a self-programmed web crawler, I managed to collect almost all previously listed conference speeches. In total, I compiled complete sets of conference speeches for both parties from 1999 to 2009. Speeches from previous conferences are either incomplete or could not be recovered and are not included in the analysis. The average number of yearly conference speeches for both parties is 35 and varies very little over time (see Figure 2). The final dataset includes 211 Labour speeches and 179 Conservative speeches.

I use the statistical scaling method WORDFISH (Slapin and Proksch, 2008) to estimate positions from these documents. WORDFISH uses word frequencies to estimate actors' positions on a single dimensional scale and does not require reference documents, in contrast to other scaling approaches such as WORDSCORES (Laver et al., 2003).[3] The model assumes that the words in a document reflect the author's ideological position on an underlying dimension. I estimate separate WORDFISH models for each party's conference and year. Before applying the WORDFISH model I

transform the documents to plain text, delete headers and footers and everything that is not part of the author's speech. I also remove stop words, numbers and punctuation, and apply the Porter stemming algorithm to reduce words to their word stems.[4] The processed documents are then converted into a term document matrix with word counts for all documents.

The model returns position estimates for each document, which indicate if individual speakers or the party as a whole changed their ideological positions over time. I measure the parties' internal level of conflict by calculating the total variance of estimated position for each conference and year. To measure the absolute distance between Labour and Conservative I use each party's yearly mean position. Figure 2 displays how both parties' internal disagreement changed over a period of 10 years and in relation to the general elections in 2001 and 2005. It also displays the number of conference speeches for both parties in each year. Figure 2 illustrates that both parties' level of conflict has varied greatly over time. Labour's level of internal disagreement, for example, decreased by almost 50% after Gordon Brown replaced Tony Blair as Prime Minister and party leader. Both parties became increasing more divided in the run-up to the general elections, and. in the case of Labour, showed higher levels of disagreement even after the elections.

Additional control variables

In addition to the main independent variables, I also account for other factors that might influence the duration of legislative decisions. To control for the size of the governmental majority, I measure the number of 'Seats' that the government

Table 1. Cox model estimations of the duration of bills in the UK Parliament.

	Final model
Internal disagreement	−1.699**
	(0.606)
Distance to opposition	−3.685*
	(2.205)
Seats	12.014***
	(2.254)
Days until the end of session	−0.009***
	(0.000)
Days until the end of term	0.002***
	(0.000)
Public agenda	0.023***
	(0.006)
Financial bills	3.655***
	(0.637)
Financial bills × ln (t)	−0.583***
	(0.163)
Log likelihood	−1342.724
Observations	310

Standard errors in parentheses.
*$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$.

has in the House of Commons. I also include the 'Days until the end of session' and 'Days until the end of term' to account for parliamentary and legislative cycles, particularly the increase in legislative activity at the end of each session. Finally, I match the parliamentary data set with the data collection of the UK Comparative Agendas Project (CAP) (Bevan et al., 2011; John et al., 2013) to control for the impact of the 'Public agenda' and 'Financial bills'.[5] I expect that the government will try to pass bills more quickly if the public believes them to be salient and if the bill is introduced annually and authorizes government spending, such as the Consolidated Fund and Appropriation Bills.

Estimation

Similar to other recent studies on the duration of legislative decisions (Klüver and Sagarzazu, 2013; Taylor, 2014; Woon and Anderson, 2012), I use survival analysis and estimate a semi-parametric Cox proportional hazard model (Box-Steffensmeier and Zorn, 2001). The Cox model describes how the covariates affect the risk that a bill will become a law in relation to a baseline hazard rate. The model assumes hazard functions that are proportional (i.e. constant) over time and I use Schoenfeld residuals to test proportionality of the data. The test indicates that the 'Financial bills' variable violates the proportionality assumption. I follow Box-Steffensmeier and Zorn's (2001) suggestion and account for this by including the variable as a time variant coefficient and by interacting it with the natural logarithm of time (ln (*t*)).

Results

Using the estimates of the parties' ideological preferences and level of disagreement, I test the hypotheses on the duration of legislative decisions. Table 1 reports the effects of each covariate as raw coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. Negative coefficients indicate that the risk that a bill will become a law decreases while positive coefficients indicate that the risk increases.

The results largely support the hypotheses. I predict in the 'Conflict' hypothesis (H1) that internal disagreement within the governing party will increase the duration of legislative decisions. The coefficient for internal disagreement is in the predicted direction and statistically significant: the larger Labour's internal disagreement, the lower the likelihood of a bill passing. The second hypothesis, 'Distance' (H2), predicts that bill duration gets larger as the mean distance between Labour and Conservative increases. The coefficient is also negative and statistically different from zero, which supports the theoretical expectations: Bills pass parliament more quickly when the distance between the Labour and Conservative parties' ideological preferences decreases.

To illustrate the effects of the two main predictors, Figure 3 graphically shows the risk of a bill becoming a law when intra-governmental disagreement changes from its minimum to the maximum values.[6] The solid line is the predicted percentage change (with 95% confidence intervals) in the risk of a bill passing as Labour's internal disagreement increases. The figure illustrates that the likelihood that a bill is passed strongly decreases with higher levels of intra-party conflict.

Figure 4 shows how the absolute distance between the Labour and Conservative mean positions impacts the likelihood that a bill will pass. The effect is similar to the change in intra-governmental disagreement. The risk of a bill passing strongly decreases as the mean distance between the two parties increases. The predicted probabilities are consistent with the expectation from the two hypotheses. High levels of internal disagreement and a large distance to the main opposition party make it more difficult for the government to pass laws quickly.

The coefficients for the other covariates are also in the expected direction and statistically significant. Bills pass more quickly when the government controls a large majority of 'Seats', when the involved issue is salient on the 'Public agenda' and when the proposals are 'Financial bills'. The number of 'Days until the end of session' and the legislative 'term' show that bills receive Royal Assent more quickly if they are introduced at the beginning of the legislative term or at the end of the legislative session. The reason is that bills are usually dropped if they fail to pass before prorogation.

Conclusions

Altogether, the findings are consistent with the theoretical expectations. Based on the analysis of 380 speeches by
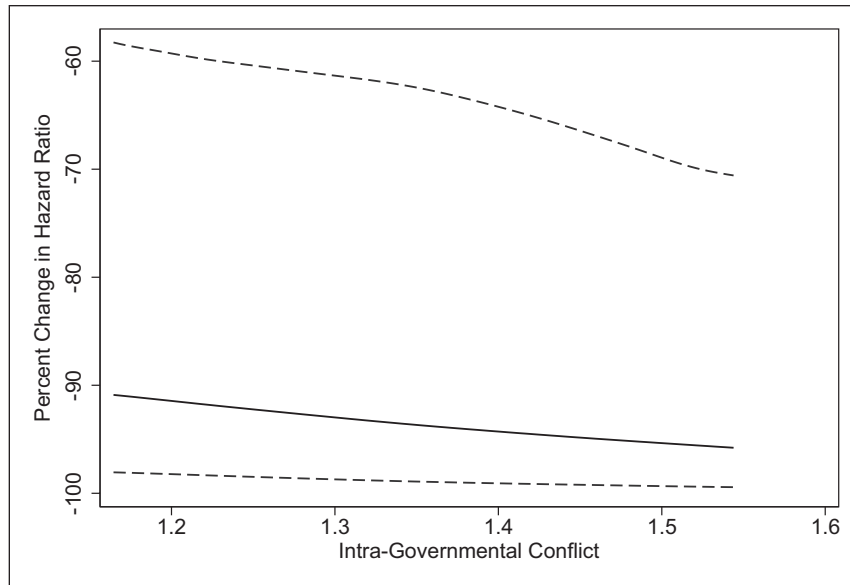
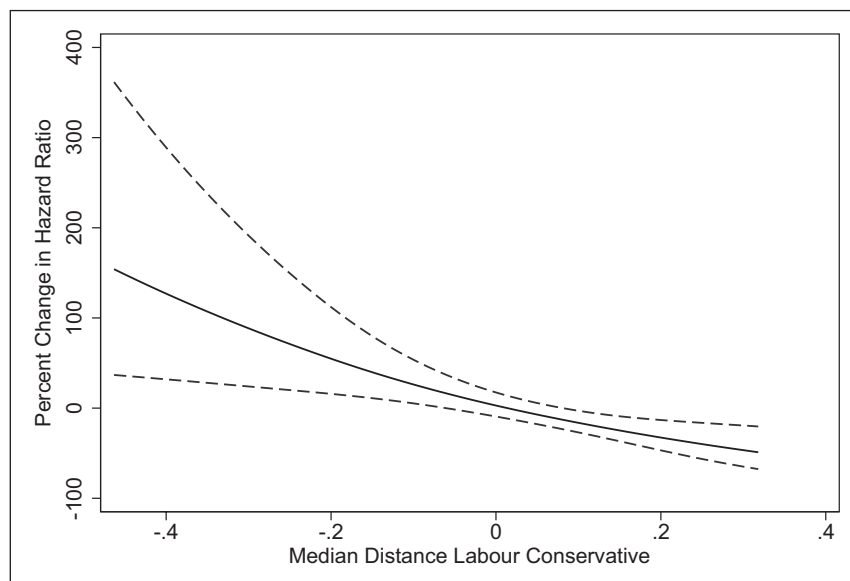**Figure 3.** Effect of intra-governmental conflict on bill duration.

Figure 4. Effect of distance to opposition on bill duration.

Labour and the Conservatives, and over 300 Acts of Parliament from 1999 to 2010, I find that conflict within the governmental party and distance to the opposition lengthen the duration of legislative proposals. The results help to tell a compelling story of parliamentary behaviour in the UK and provide a clear first test of the impact of intra-party disagreement on legislative politics. Future analyses would benefit from comparative analysis across parliamentary systems and different electoral institutions to better explain this approach's broader applicability to other advanced democracies.

These results complement recent studies on policy duration (Klüver and Sagarzazu, 2013; Taylor, 2014; Woon and

Anderson, 2012), which show that the speed of legislative decisions depends on the ideological distance between different veto players. I add that bills take longer to adopt with increasing distance between the government and the opposition party's mean positions. Moreover, by showing the existence and the consequences of distinct intra-party preferences, the results support recent research on intra-party politics from political documents (Ceron, 2012; Greene and Haber, 2014). Finally, this research holds important implications for broad theories of legislative politics and parties' performance in government. Understanding the causes of legislative delay helps us to understand better the causes of legislative

productivity. Governments require intra-party unity to govern effectively. Parties that are internally divided make it more difficult for governments to respond quickly to external events and enact necessary reforms.

Declaration of conflicting interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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Supplementary Material

The replication files are available at: http://thedata.harvard.edu/dvn/dv/researchandpolitics

Notes

1. The reports are available at: www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm/cmsid.htm.
2. I was not able to find complete sets of conference speeches for the Liberal Democrats before 2006. However, this should not bias the results too much as the party controlled only about 8% of the seats in the House of Commons from 1997–2010.
3. For a detailed discussion about the underlying assumptions of the WORDFISH technique and how to apply the model to party member speeches, see Greene and Haber, 2014.
4. The preparatory steps mostly follow Grimmer and Stewart's suggestions on how to prepare documents for automatic text classification (Grimmer and Stewart, 2013).
5. To do this, I first matched each law to the CAP's topic categories. I then added the public attention to each issue. The CAP data can be accessed on the project's website: http://policyagendasuk.wordpress.com/datasets/
6. The solid black line indicates the predicted change in the relative risk that a bill will become a law as the level of intra-governmental conflict increases. The primary independent variables are held at their means. The dashed lines around the solid line represent 95% confidence intervals based on simulations using 1000 draws from the estimated variance–covariance matrix from the results presented in Table 1. For more information on how to estimate predicted probabilities from Cox models, see Licht (2011).

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