

Majoritarianism reinterpreted: why Parliament is more influential than often thought

*Though Westminster is often seen as lacking the teeth to affect government policy, this is not the case, writes **Felicity Matthews**. She argues that reforms to shift the balance between government and parliament have served to offset the declining vote basis of government, and have ensured that Westminster remains responsive to a majority of the electorate through the legislative process.*



House of Commons, 2016. Picture: [UK Parliament/Jessica Taylor](#), via [Parliamentary Copyright](#)

In the Hansard Society's latest [Audit of Political Engagement](#), a record 73% of respondents agree that Westminster's Parliament is 'essential to democracy'. Yet within the very same survey, only 32% are satisfied with the way Parliament works and only 28% believe that it encourages public involvement in politics. A number of academic commentators have also cast doubt upon Parliament's credentials, with some regarding it as '[either peripheral or totally irrelevant](#)'; and within [comparative scholarship](#), the House of Commons is frequently derided as lacking the clout of its continental counterparts.

Yet, this is one side of the story, and a number of studies have challenged the image of parliamentarians as mere lobby fodder within an executive-dominated chamber. Within the Commons, the increased rate of parliamentary rebellions has been [cited as evidence](#) of the loosening bonds of party discipline; and within the Lords, the way in which votes have become increasingly closely fought has been seen as evidence of '[a revival of bicameralism](#)'. Other studies have challenged the portrayal of select committees as toothless entities by drawing attention to their [direct impact and indirect influence](#) upon government and its legislation. Similarly, [bill committees have been shown](#) to provide a range of opportunities for members to debate with ministers and influence policy.

It is therefore clear that Parliament matters: on the floor of the House and along the corridors of committee rooms, parliamentarians have at their disposal a range of means through which they can affect the outcomes of the legislative process. Yet by focusing solely on the dispersal of *office payoffs*, and the disproportional benefits enjoyed by an election's plurality winners, much existing scholarship has overlooked the alternative means through which non-government parliamentarians can achieve *policy payoffs*.

My [recent article in Parliamentary Affairs](#) responds to this lacuna, to correct the way in which Westminster's Parliament has been misunderstood within comparative political science. To do so, I draw upon the path-breaking work of [G. Bingham Powell](#), who sought to systematically identify the institutional opportunities for opposition influence via an 'index of effective representation'. Underpinning this index is a distinction between 'proportional' and 'effective' representation, which dovetails with the distinction between office payoffs and policy payoffs detailed above.

Yet, according to Powell's analysis, the UK remains an exemplar of executive dominance. This is because by associating committee strength with 'the ability of a committee to modify legislation, perhaps even introduce legislation of its own', Powell's analysis does not account for the many different ways in which committees can exert influence upon the actions of government. Indeed, in his analysis, the UK is criticised for its 'weak, rubberstamp committees'.

To address this, my article adopts a broader understanding of legislative capacity and develops a series of alternative measures. This includes a new scoring scheme to capture the institutional dynamics of a committee system, focusing on features such as correspondence with the functions of the executive, the proportional distribution of chairs *and* members, independent selection procedures, and commonly agreed core functions. Together, these modifications enable a more nuanced analysis of the quality of Westminster democracy that not only moves beyond binary distinctions between 'government' and 'opposition', but also acknowledges the importance of executive oversight as a form of opposition influence.

Applied to Westminster, this refined index demonstrates that reforms to 'shift the balance' between government and parliament have significantly expanded the opportunities for opposition influence within the legislature. In particular, the strengthening of the institutional basis of select committees has been critical in providing partial redress to the concentration of office payoffs. Yet, whilst tempering the assumption that the allocation of electoral spoils is zero-sum and exclusionary, these findings show that both office and policy payoffs are still disproportionately dispersed.

[My analysis](#) therefore moderates the (implicitly negative) portrayal of Westminster as an exemplar of majoritarianism. Comparative scholarship has cast Westminster's Parliament as feeble, lacking the teeth to affect the activities of the executive. However, the primacy given to the function of legislative scrutiny has resulted in an inherent misunderstanding of Parliament's role as a chamber of executive oversight, which in turn neglects the ways in which the structures of Westminster have been configured to realise this function. My analysis also challenges the assumption that the election is the 'decisive stage' in majority formation, as it is clear that these structures provide the conditions for ongoing negotiation and trade-off between the two branches of government: features typically associated with the '[consensus version of democracy](#)'. Finally, and in the context of the democratic dissatisfaction detailed above, my analysis underlines the potential of electoral reform *and* institutional reform to enhance both the proportionality *and* quality of democratic representation.

The article gives the views of the author and not Democratic Audit. It first appeared on the [LSE's British Politics and Policy blog](#) It draws on the [author's work published](#) in Parliamentary Affairs.

About the author



[Felicity Matthews](#) is Senior Lecturer in the Department of Politics at the University of Sheffield.

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