Incentives for Non-Participation

Absence in the United Kingdom House of Commons, 1997-2015

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Abstract

The ability to hold MPs accountable for their actions is one of the cornerstones of modern representative democracy. While it is important for MPs to send signals to both their constituents and to their party, a large number of MPs remain absent from votes. These absences are an important part of the MP's toolbox, however, their use comes with some limitations, rooted in electoral and political constraints. We investigate how—conditional on the electoral cycle—some well established political constraints along the government and opposition lines vary in strength. We analyze the absence probability of MPs in the United Kingdom from 1997 to 2015 and find that as the next elections are approaching, political constraints somewhat weaken and electoral ones take over, but there are marked differences between legislatures.

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Many bills are passed with a high proportion of legislators absent, which can limit constituents' ability to make informed accountability judgments (Arnold, 1992). While public service motivations of legislative activity suggest that representatives should be mostly present (Staats, 1988), absence becomes a tool to prioritize tasks and manage workload (Cain et al., 1979; Fenno, 1977). However, decisions to be absent are not free of limitations. Legislators need to ensure they do enough for their party to get re-selected as candidates (in terms of supporting legislation), but not so much that it might interfere with their service to their constituents as they are needed for reelection.

Constituency work often means obligations and presence outside of parliament (Cain et al., 1984) and such work might contribute to favorable evaluations (Vivyan & Wagner, 2016). At the same time, MPs in parliamentary systems are governed by strong parties, where the most important goal for the governing party is to pass its policies (Johnston et al., 2002). This is especially the case in the Westminster system, where a strong government-opposition divide structures voting behavior and the government has very strong legislative agenda setting power (Döring, 1995; Hix & Noury, 2016). Overall, this two principal setup results in political and electoral constraints (for party unity see Carey, 2007).

We ask in this paper how do political and electoral constraints impact MPs' decision to be absent and how might MPs resolve the tension between these constraints. We use voting data from four parliaments (1997 to 2015) in the UK House of Commons (HoC), which allows us to examine the topic over a longer period of time in a non-U.S. setting with strong parties and a strongly individualized electoral system, and with changing government-opposition composition. Thus, we also extend the discussion on how institutionally dependent our general absence conceptualization is. We show that government MPs face stronger political constraints compared to opposition MPs, but as the next elections are approaching these constraints weaken and electoral constraints take over. However, we also find substantial heterogeneity between legislatures, further highlighting the role of political context and parliamentary reality. Our insights also contribute to better understanding governmental agenda control in the House of Commons.

Political and electoral constraints of absence

Absence refers to the situation when an MP or representative is not present for a vote in the legislative body. Kam (2009) distinguishes between 'simple' and 'deliberate' absence, where the latter is similar to position avoidance. In such cases absence is non-random and non-ignorable for roll call analysis (Rosas & Shomer, 2008; Rosas et al., 2015) and can be a lower cost alternative to dissent, if MPs want to avoid position taking.[1]

Analogous to questions of party unity (Carey, 2007), the decision to be absent is framed as a 'competing principals' question. This framework can be extended even for cases where absence is not used for avoiding unattractive positions on a bill, by regarding principals more generally. This is especially important, because only few parliaments allow researchers to outright distinguish between absence and abstention (see for example the Swedish Riksdag in Willumsen & Öhberg, 2017). Indeed, there is no way to officially record an abstention in the HoC, thus abstention becomes an available option for British MPs in the form of absence.[2]

Most previous research focuses on electoral and political constraints[3], since these map well to the idea of constituents and political parties (or legislative party groups) as principals, although sometimes both principals affect electoral or political constraints. When studying different constraints or principals, we need to highlight context specific characteristics. Given the strength of political parties in the United Kingdom, an MP cannot necessarily choose her position on bills and votes independently of the party. This has two implications.

First, the parties use party whips to control the voting, specifically the pairing tool for absences. Pairing is an informal tool which in effect allows a member from the government and one from the opposition to be absent simultaneously, i.e. not changing the power balance between government and opposition (see Crewe, 2015, pp. 69–72). Given the informal nature of pairing there is no way of a priori knowing which absent members are paired to be absent and who are not (Crewe,

[1]Despite the rare-event nature of rebellions much more attention has been given to those situations where MPs vote against their party (Benedetto & Hix, 2007; Cowley, 2002; Slapin et al., 2018). While evidence from the US suggests that there is little effect of rebelling (Donnelly, 2019), survey evidence from the UK suggests some electoral benefits to be gained by rebelling (Campbell et al., 2019).

[2]A possibility is to vote in both the Aye and No lobbies, although this is extremely infrequent in use, and also used if a member has voted in the wrong lobby to nullify their original vote (Divisions in the House of Commons: House of Commons Background Paper, Standard Note: SN/PC/06401, Last updated: 2 August 2013).

[3]For the potential role of institutional constraints see Fortunato and Provins (2017).

2015). Second, it is also challenging to establish ideal positions of individual MPs, whether from candidate studies with weak response rates (Benedetto & Hix, 2007) or from actual parliament votes (Spirling & McLean, 2007; Spirling & Quinn, 2010). These features point to the presence of *political constraints* associated with the party as principal, however these might vary in strength.

On the one hand, political constraints are weaker for more senior MPs who tend to be absent more frequently (Longley, 2003), potentially because they are more familiar with formal and informal rules that govern parliamentary behavior or their personal status. On the other hand, from the literature on dissent we know that political constraints are stronger if one's own party or committee proposed the bill (Willumsen & Goetz, 2017). From studies of absence we do know that the political constraints are stronger when a vote is more salient for the party (Forgette & Sala, 1999). Furthermore, according to Cohen and Noll (1991), those few who decide not to turn out for such salient votes use their absences purposely in order to enhance influence and pay off, especially when they perceive the result to be very close. However, the generalization of the findings by Cohen and Noll are critiqued by Rothenberg and Sanders (1999, p. 314) who argue that since Cohen and Noll (1991) only look at one issue and one point in time they are excluding the possibility of variation across the election cycle, the findings must be treated with caution.

Members of the UK HoC are elected in single-member districts with the candidate achieving the most votes winning. This generates a strong link between representatives and the electorate who can reward or punish their representative more directly. This feature gives rise to a set of *electoral constraints* associated with the constituent(s) as principal. Research from the British context has shown that targeting in constituencies and general activism is important for the overall results (Fisher et al., 2016; Fisher et al., 2014), therefore making constituency activity by the MP important for reelection chances (Whiteley & Seyd, 1994, 2003). Ultimately, in terms of voter preferences in Britain, a moderate balance of legislative and constituency work is preferred (Vivyan & Wagner, 2016). Prior research documents a consistent "last-term effect" across different systems as retiring MPs decrease their presence in the legislature (Bailer & Ohmura, 2018; Geys & Mause, 2016; Jones, 2003; Lott, 1987, 1990; Willumsen & Goetz, 2017).

Furthermore, absence is influenced by other constituency features, such as transactional costs. In the U.S. setting, one such transactional cost is related to geographical distance to the capitol (Hart

& Munger, 1989; Rothenberg & Sanders, 1999), which is positively associated with absence rates. While earlier studies of HoC found no relationship between distance and absence (only expenses and costs) (Besley & Larcinese, 2011), a recent study indicated very similar effects of distance to those found in the U.S. in the U.K. as well (Willumsen, 2019). Overall, less is known about how MPs use absence as a tool in Westminster systems. We have seen that considerations from dissent might be useful as a broader framework, but institutional specificity stemming from the role of parties and the electoral system requires more detailed theoretical and empirical research.

Balancing constraints

Strong political constraints would indicate more time spent in the parliament, whereas electoral or constituency focus would result in more time away from the parliament, in relative terms. For example, Zupan (1991) found that Democrats turned out less for votes than Republicans due to a greater focus by Democrats on constituency services. This then creates some tension (Norris, 1997), where the role or strength of these constraints might be changing. We develop this juxtaposition and focus here on government *vs* opposition related political constraints on the one hand, and changing electoral constrains depending on the electoral cycle on the other hand.

First, we argue that government MPs face stronger political constraints than opposition MPs. This is not a novel proposition (see below) and it should result in lower absence likelihood for government MPs. Theoretically, this is due to the fact that the government is responsible for keeping the chamber quorate (granted, a minor form of constraint) and for safeguarding the passage of the government initiatives, translating into less freedom in terms of absence for government MPs. Empirically, prior research in parliamentary systems found that the government-opposition dimension matters for dissent: being a member of the government side reduces dissent, even overriding policy differences (Willumsen & Öhberg, 2017). For absence, the results are similar in a non-parliamentary system: Brown and Goodliffe (2017) studied absence in U.S. state legislatures and found evidence that being part of the majority party decreases absence. Overall, government-opposition absence differences were documented in a non-parliamentary system, and dissent related differences were documented in a parliamentary system, we expand by testing the government-opposition absence difference in a parliamentary system across multiple legislatures.

We test the following hypothesis:

(H_1) Government MPs are less likely to be absent than opposition MPs.

Second, as documented by Rothenberg and Sanders (1999, p. 314), MPs will face different electoral situations and this translates into systematic variation in absence across the election cycle. This would be consistent with multiple mechanisms. Strengthening electoral constraints should influence especially the MPs standing for re-election who return to their constituents as incumbents. Previously, this incumbency advantage has been shown to be rather small in the UK (Gaines, 1998), but varying among parties (Smith, 2013). Overall, this first component would suggest that, in comparison to early stages of the term, absence rates should increase as we approach the next elections.

In addition, political constraints can weaken as well. There is an acknowledgment that MPs will at times be required to be elsewhere than Westminster either for political or personal reasons (Cain et al., 1979, 1984; Heitshusen et al., 2005; Searing, 1985). End of term electoral obligations are known to the party, and the party itself benefits from allowing MPs to maximize their reelection chances, and they do have some tools at their disposal. Thus, we test the following hypothesis:

(H_2) The likelihood of being absent increases as the next elections approach.

However, we do not know whether these electoral constraints influence government and opposition MPs in the same way, or, put it differently, stronger political constraints persist throughout the full electoral cycle for the government MPs. There are several reasons for considering this heterogeneity, as it can also help us better understand government agenda control and internal party discipline. We thus ask the following research question:

(RQ) Are government MP absences affected more by the electoral considerations in comparison to opposition MP absences?

On the one hand, the government has full control over the parliamentary agenda (Döring, 1995), hence it is usually able to control when divisions are called, and thus planning can be easier for the government.[4] To reduce the conflict between having to be present and engage in campaigning,

[4]Given the presence of Opposition days, they have yet another advantage in terms of planning and concentrated discussion of proposals from the opposition side, which they might want to avoid.

the government can schedule less important and less conflictual divisions towards the end of the legislative term. This consideration is important because it stipulates that, while government MPs are more constrained, their party can accommodate the constraints if needed, especially when electoral needs require this. Essentially, with the agenda control, the government can coordinate in a way that important legislation will be discussed on days where most of their MPs do not have to be absent for different reasons and make sure that once they have to be absent, the legislation in question is less important. This would imply that government MPs can be freed up once their presence is needed elsewhere, as we approach the upcoming elections.

On the other hand, the literature on legislative business cycles (Brechler & Geršl, 2014; Lagona & Padovano, 2008; Padovano & Gavoille, 2017) suggests that legislative activity (in terms of bills) traditionally increases towards the end of the legislative period to prepare for an election. While a legislative business cycle is present in the UK, the number of bills introduced and passed declines towards the end of the parliaments.[5] Furthermore, there are shared electoral constraints, and thus there should be an increase in the absences among opposition MPs as we are approaching the end of the term, because more information about when the election is coming, which generally translates into some increase of absence generated by crystallized electoral constraints. Similarly, there is no systematic evidence that differences in time spent in the constituency provides advantages for opposition *vs* government MPs. Overall, these components would suggest that, in comparison to early stages of the term, absence rates should increase as we approach the next elections, and this increase should not depend on the MP's government or opposition status.

We will explore these competing possibilities. Overall, we aim to explain absence patterns as a product of constraints related to maximizing the chances of reelection while serving one's party under certain institutional functioning rules. Hence, the strategic use of absence is a set of decisions that aims at balancing these different pressures (or principals), while respecting the day-to-day structure and schedule imposed through institutional rules. We now introduce our data and the modeling approach that captures these different aspects in a comparative manner.

[5]Acts and Statutory Instruments: The volume of UK legislation 1950 to 2016. House of Commons Briefing Paper CBP 7438, 21 April 2017.

Data and method

Variables

Our analysis includes all divisions voted on in the HoC during four parliaments covering the time period 1997 to 2015. The votes were centralized and made available by The Public Whip project (ThePublicWhip, 2015) and our outcome variable is coded as 1 if a particular MP was absent for the vote on a particular division.[6] When present, independent of the vote choice, the variable is coded to be 0, and thus for each MP × division combination we have a valid data entry.

We apply four exclusions based on MP features. First, we omit MPs from Northern Ireland, as we are looking at a subset of MPs who have extremely high absence rates and Northern Ireland has an entirely different party system whose actors did not play a significant role during the period covered in this paper. Second, we exclude MPs who changed parties within one legislature. those MPs who change parties are suspected of having very different motivations and parliamentary behavior, and this could add an unobserved layer of constraint dynamics specific to these cases. This group is quite small and not enough to test some specific expectations or aid a potentially stronger design.[7] Furthermore, in terms of behavior, the exact date of switching registered is likely not a strict discontinuity, behavior prior to switching likely reflects some of the considerations behind the switch.

Similarly, we exclude MPs who left the HoC for various reasons, and subsequently there were by-elections held in their constituency, and those MPs who joined instead of them. Some by-election cases are due to long-term illness and death, hence prolonged absence is already observed. Some other MPs end up resigning due to various scandals, but in this case as well, the moment the by-election comes as an end-result or solution we cannot ascertain from which time-point this should influence participatory motivations and behaviors. Finally, we limit our analysis to MPs who were not ministers, also excluding members of the shadow cabinet.[8] It is expected that they

[6]While the literature on selection effects in using parliamentary voting is important (see Carrubba et al., 2006; Hug, 2010) this is primarily the case when wishing to estimate a latent dimension through some form of ideal point estimation. In this respect, our aim is to capture who is absent and under what circumstances they are absent and as such the problem of potential bias in the votes becomes less of an issue.

[7]In total, we have 25 MPs who changed parties within one legislature, which includes also those who went independent or first independent and then to another party, or any trajectory essentially. Some of these would have been excluded for other reasons as well, such as 2001 David Burnside and Jeffrey Donaldson who were from Northern Ireland, or 2010 Mark Reckless and Douglas Carswell who triggered a by-election (see next data reduction point).

[8]We ascertained ministerial roles based on official records of governmental composition and parliamentary records.

will generally be absent for votes, with clear activities outside the division lobbies.

To test our hypotheses and evaluate our research question, we have two core predictors. First, defined at the division cross-section level, we measure the electoral cycle related differences through the number of (calendar) days remaining until the next election and we reverse this, so that larger numbers reflect more proximity to the upcoming elections. As the four legislatures differ in length, with the two most recent legislatures in our data being five, rather than four years long, in order to remedy potential biases in the estimates of proximity, we apply a minimum-to-maximum rescaling *within* each legislature for our temporal proximity measure.[9] Second, defined at the MP level, we code government (1) and opposition (0) status for MPs. As described below, we include a multiplicative interaction term of these two variables in our final models to evaluate our research question.

Based on previous findings reviewed above, we include a set of control variables. In order to account for the effects of week days (Noury, 2004), we use a nominal variable for the day of the week the division was voted on, with Wednesday as the baseline category. Furthermore, we differentiate between bills proposed by different sides, i.e. government (1) *vs* opposition (0). At the MP level, we code retirement as a dichotomous variable (1 for retiring next election, 0 otherwise). Those MPs who re-ran for office but lost are not coded as retiring.[10] Constituency majority reflects the winning margin in the elections preceding the current legislature, expressed in terms of the difference in the percentage of popular votes between the winner and the runner-up in a constituency.[11] Seniority has been coded as the time elapsed (in years) from the first year an MP entered Parliament based on official MP biographies and the start of the actual legislature analyzed. In most cases, MP seniority entails an unbroken length of service. Where there was a break of service, the first year of entry is used as the basis of the seniority calculation.[12] Constituency distance from Westminster is driving

Ministers are defined as Cabinet Ministers and Ministers of State who are allowed to attend Cabinet. We refitted our models by including a control for ministers and for by-election entries and exits, and our results do not change. Unsurprisingly, for example, the minister dummy is associated with a large positive effect on absence probability.

[9]Our results are unchanged if we count remaining days with sessions held.

[10]We are not concerned with when an MP announces her retirement (see Willumsen & Goetz, 2017), but the notion that they do not run for reelection and have entered a potentially disengaging career stage (Bailer & Ohmura, 2018), no longer suffering from an electoral constraint. It is also likely that the timing of announcement of retirement is not equal to when the actual decision was made and when the potential impact began.

[11]Constituency majority figures are from "The British Parliamentary Constituency Database, 1992-2005, Release 1.3" (Norris, 2005) and the "May 6th 2010 British General Election Constituency Results Release 5.0" (Norris, 2010).

[12]For example, Sir Peter Tapsell represented Nottingham West from 1959 until losing his seat at the 1964 election. He re-entered parliament at the 1966 election for what is now Louth and Horncastle. In this case, his seniority would be

distance measured in kilometers (through the Google Maps API), with largest local authority in a particular constituency as a starting point and Westminster as an endpoint.[13]

We list descriptive statistics for our predictors in Appendix **A1**. As with our core predictor of election proximity, for the multivariate models we rescale all continuous predictors (constituency majority, seniority and distance) to range from their minimum (0) to their maximum (1) and these are carried out as within-legislature rescaling. While for seniority and distance this should matter less, for constituency majority this could be more important as the electoral results and margins varied quite a lot between the elections analyzed here.

Modeling

In total, we analyze 5033 divisions and the behavior of 1035 MPs. As many MPs are present in multiple legislatures, but there are context and potentially role related differences, we will treat them as separate instances across different legislatures. This step also assures that we are not conflating within- and between-MP differences when it comes to MP specific features. We will return to alternative grouping, within-MP models, and legislature specific models later on. This results in 2173 observations at the MP level; detailed sample size breakdowns are reported in Appendix **A1**.

Since we observe the same MPs behavior across many divisions, we treat absence as a division specific quantity that is nested within MPs. As our outcome variable is dichotomous, we fit binomial models with a logit link function estimated via Restricted Maximum Likelihood, modeling directly the probability of absence *vs* presence. In the first step, we fit the models to all four legislatures, and thus we include legislature fixed effects.

Prior to our final, most complex model, we report several more reduced models in order to compare model fit and also show the robustness of our core findings. In our final model, we model the between-MP variation of the electoral cycle effect as a function of the government *vs* opposition status, resulting in a cross-level interaction. In this case, rather than change in predicted absence or presence, we aim at systematically reducing the unexplained variation in why for some

calculated from taking his first year of entry as 1959.

[13]We chose the starting point because even if MPs take the train, it is likely that they will do it from the larger towns or cities. It is not known how MPs get to Westminster, but even if there are minor differences between driving distance and distance for the train or plane for that matter, we believe there is no systematic bias given by constituency.

MPs the electoral cycle could matter more for their decisions.

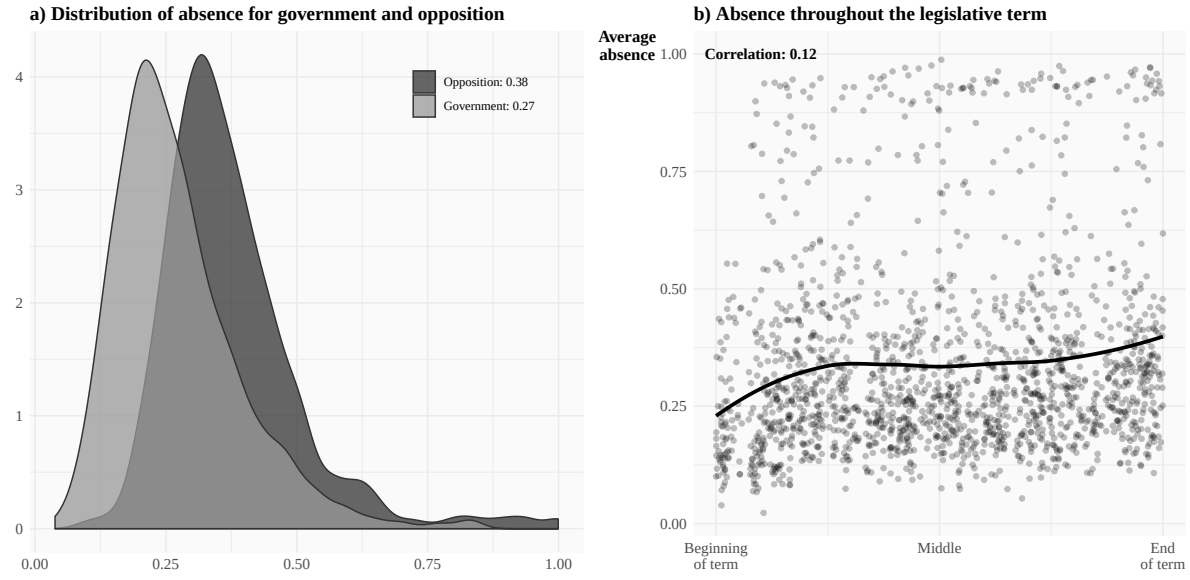
We extend our core analysis with a set of robustness checks and then discuss legislature specific models and within-MP trajectories for the subset of cases where there was a change in opposition-government status at the 2010 elections. These models will be reviewed when discussing the findings in the next section.

Results

Absence in the 1997-2015 period

The first step in our analysis is to have a descriptive look at the absence patterns in our data. To this end, we display MP level absences Figure 1. On average, most MPs are more likely to be present than absent (0.31 overall absence proportion), and on most days, the average presence is well above 50%, with substantial variation. The between-MP variation amounts to 13% of the total variation (on average), which suggests that while division specific variation is still the largest component in all legislatures covered here, it can only tell a partial story of absences in the HoC.

Figure 1: Descriptive summary



Notes: Panel a) is a density plot, with averages for each type of MP displayed as well. Panel b) is a scatter plot with LOESS line overlaid and bivariate Pearson's correlation displayed.

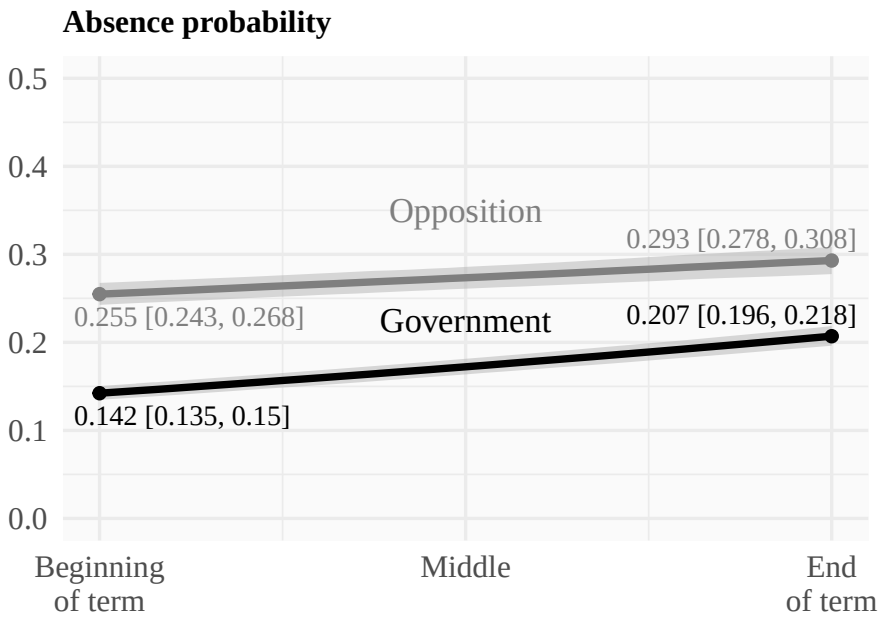
Table 1: Hierarchical models of absence probability

	Baseline	Core predictors	Varying slope	With interaction	Legislature fixed effects	All controls
Intercept	−0.861 (0.014)*	−0.744 (0.022)*	−0.741 (0.025)*	−0.674 (0.027)*	−0.375 (0.032)*	−0.871 (0.039)*
Elect. cycle		0.428 (0.005)*	0.456 (0.019)*	0.299 (0.030)*	0.299 (0.030)*	0.191 (0.032)*
Gvt. MP		−0.546 (0.028)*	−0.579 (0.029)*	−0.684 (0.034)*	−0.713 (0.031)*	−0.725 (0.033)*
Gvt. MP × cycle				0.250 (0.038)*	0.249 (0.038)*	0.262 (0.041)*
AIC	3163349	3155000	3131408	3131371	3131188	2936443
BIC	3163374	3155052	3131485	3131461	3131316	2936687
Division × MP	2734621	2734621	2734621	2734621	2734621	2734621
MPs	2173	2173	2173	2173	2173	2173
(Var) MPs	0.488	0.417	0.558	0.557	0.495	0.496
(Var) Slope			0.756	0.741	0.741	0.844
(Cov) (Int, Slope)			−0.315	−0.310	−0.279	−0.313

Notes: (Restricted) Maximum Likelihood estimates of logit coefficients. Standard errors in parentheses, $^*p < 0.05$.

Moving beyond descriptive analyses, Table 1 lists the core model results. There are two main takeaways from this table. Considering both the AIC and BIC we observe a decrease in model misfit as we increase the complexity of our model.[14] In this regard, while not included in this table, we also compared our final model to one with all components except the interaction and we see that our model fits best and significantly better.[15] Second, we see overall consistency of the effect sizes across specifications. While the electoral cycle's effect decreases with additional controls, the difference between government and opposition members is estimated to be larger as we control for the set of covariates indicated by the literature.

Figure 2: Absence probability as a function of electoral cycle for opposition and government MPs



Notes: The figure displays predicted absence probability for government and opposition MPs as we get closer to the next elections (all other predictors held constant at their means or most frequent nominal category). Predicted values (with 95% confidence intervals) at the beginning and end of term are highlighted. The legislature variable is fixed for 2005-2010, hence the difference from the 0.31 average absence rates across all legislatures. We will return to these differences below.

We concentrate on the the findings pertaining our hypotheses and research question, with full model results reported in Appendix **A2**. All the control variables indicate effects in the directions expected based on the previous literature. One potential exception is that we find no significant

[14] Likelihood based model fit comparisons indicate significant model misfit reduction at each step.

[15] AIC is 2936480 and BIC is 2936711 for a model with all controls, but without the interaction between electoral cycle and government. This is significantly worse fitting than our full model, including the interaction ($\chi^2 = 38.236$, $p < 0.001$).

effect for constituency majority, i.e. those with a larger majority behind them are not necessarily more absent. It could be that the measurement is too crude, and information regarding standing in the polling for example might be more suitable to evaluate this electoral motivation better, although this would be at party level and not for each individual MP.

Our general understanding of the government-opposition divide in parliamentary systems with governments being the agenda setters is in line with our finding that government MPs are much less likely to be absent than those from the opposition benches (H_1). We also see that once the election is approaching absences become more frequent, consistent with the explanations introduced earlier focusing on the campaign efforts needed and the potentially lower salience legislation left towards the end of the cycle (H_2). However, the overall magnitude of this is effect is comparatively smaller.

In Figure 2 we display how these constraints interact and how these are balanced (RQ). The difference between opposition and government MP absence likelihood is decreasing as we get closer and closer to the upcoming elections. The effect is statistically significant and in substantive terms we go from a difference in absence probability of 0.113 to 0.086, which is a 23% reduction. Both opposition and government MPs are more absent as elections get closer, but this change is close to 50% larger for government MPs. The differences between the start and the end of legislature are 0.038 and 0.065 on the probability scale, which are quite small.

Robustness checks

We present results from four models in Table 2, with full list of coefficients reported in Appendix Table **A2**.2. In the first two models, we zoom in at potential specificity regarding whether the MPs stood for reelection. Instead of a more complex three-way interaction, we fit our models separately for retiring and non-retiring MPs. MPs standing for reelection are those MPs who are expected to be influenced most by electoral constraints and campaign work. Indeed, our findings indicate that the electoral cycle is much more influential for these MPs, in comparison to those who will retire. Most importantly, our core results and opposition-government differences in the electoral cycle effect are consistent with our main results.

We argued that, especially in Westminster systems, government MPs face stronger political

Table 2: Summary of robustness checks

	Retiring only	Non-retiring only	Three main parties	MPs across legs.
Intercept	−0.866 (0.041)*	−0.623 (0.132)*	−0.893 (0.038)*	−1.088 (0.022)*
Elect. cycle	0.113 (0.032)*	0.586 (0.105)*	0.177 (0.032)*	0.269 (0.026)*
Gvt. MP	−0.690 (0.035)*	−0.866 (0.087)*	−0.685 (0.032)*	−0.611 (0.010)*
Govt. × cycle	0.265 (0.040)*	0.278 (0.134)*	0.276 (0.040)*	0.265 (0.016)*
Legislature FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
All controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
AIC	2438321	497791	2877844	2983550
BIC	2438549	497989	2878087	2983794
Division × MP	2286514	448107	2681668	2734621
MPs	1818	355	2131	1035
(Var) MPs	0.476	0.561	0.466	0.335
(Var) Cycle slope	0.678	1.529	0.828	0.593
(Cov) (Int, slope)	−0.296	−0.328	−0.305	−0.152

Notes: (Restricted) Maximum Likelihood estimates of logit coefficients. Standard errors in parentheses, $^*p < 0.05$.

constraints, hence their absence rates will be lower. However, the opposition is usually a more heterogeneous block and there might be within-block differences in how parties control their MPs. Looking at our data, we see that MPs of smaller parties are more frequently absent in comparison to their opposition colleagues who are members of either of the three larger parties. The third model shows though that this has no influence on our results: focusing on Labour, Conservative, and Liberal Democrat MPs only, our substantive findings are unchanged.

Finally, the fourth model relaxes the assumption of independence of MPs as grouping units between legislatures, i.e. an MP in multiple legislatures will stay the same grouping unit, reducing our second level sample size to 1035, the number of unique MPs across all four legislatures. This means that many predictors previously considered second-level predictors (invariant within nesting unit) will vary now, however our core results are unchanged.[16]

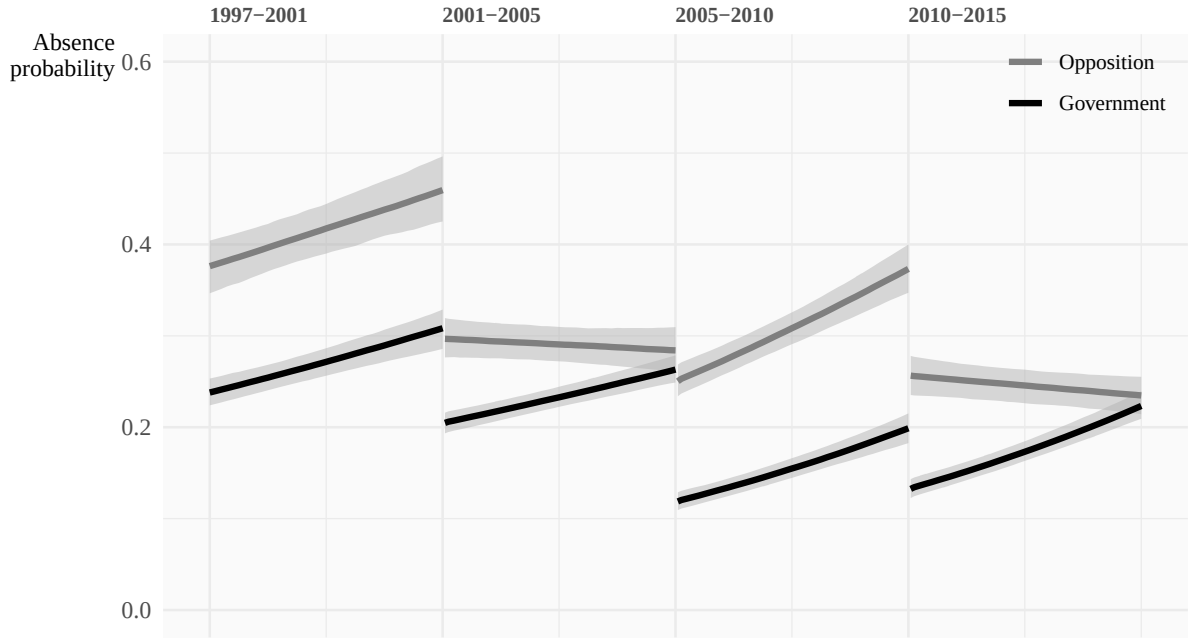
Separate legislatures

So far, we have seen consistent evidence for some heterogeneity in the effect of political constraints throughout the electoral cycle. However, there are systematic differences in average absence rates

[16]Regarding the control variables, in this specification the effect of seniority is substantially larger and the previously not significant constituency majority positive effect is now significant, but still quite small.

between legislatures, with 1997-2001 having the highest average absence rates and 2005 to 2015 period seeing more MPs being present. While we account for these differences through the inclusion of legislature fixed effects, the legislatures themselves come with different political realities and power balances. Hence, we refit our main model (sans legislature fixed effects) for each legislature separately.[17]

Figure 3: Absence probability as a function of electoral cycle for opposition and government MPs



Notes: Full model results reported in Appendix **A3** (all other predictors held constant at their means or most frequent nominal category).

Figure 3 summarizes our results while full model results are reported in Appendix Table **A2**.3. In the 2001-2005 and 2010-2015 sessions the government to opposition convergence operates in the direction of government MPs catching up to the opposition MP absence rates. We can fit a straight line within the uncertainty bounds for opposition MPs, thus their behavior seems to be mostly unchanged throughout these legislatures. These are results from two legislatures that had governments of different political persuasions (1) and there was institutional change in between them (2), as in the second legislature MPs could be certain when the end of parliament would be after the introduction of the Fixed-term Parliaments Act.

[17]Alternatively, we can add the legislature identifier variables to the interaction, generating a three-way interaction and some additional two-way interactions. Fitting that model, our results are identical.

On the other hand, the 1997-2001 and 2005-2010 legislatures support a scenario with parallel opposition and government absence development: strengthening electoral constraints, acted uniformly, both opposition and government MPs being more absent towards the end of the term. It is noteworthy that opposition MPs are still more likely to be absent than their government counterparts. In both legislatures, the starting differences (beginning of term) are quite large and stay constant, accumulating absences over time.

We found no readily available common features shared by both of these legislatures that could explain why the government agenda setting asymmetry (second facet of constraints) does not appear to be a factor here. We have looked at non-linearity, but we did not identify major break points or strong non-linearity in most of the cases analyzed here. Including this level of complexity in the hierarchical models will not come with significant increase in fit.[18]

The 1997-2001 legislature saw a government with a very large majority and with the largest proportion of new MPs since 1945. It could be possible that this meant these new MPs were in the exploring phase of their parliamentary life (Bailer & Ohmura, 2018). While we do not have pre-1997 data in our analysis, we looked at opposition MPs in the 1997-2001 legislature and compared new MPs with those who have had been in the HoC before. If anything, we have found a steeper slope for opposition MPs who were not newcomers in the 1997-2001 legislature, although the difference compared to newcomers was not statistically significant. Furthermore, we analyzed opposition MPs present both in the 2001-2005 and 2005-2010 legislatures, and indeed, their absence trajectories change from no electoral cycle sensitivity to large increases in absence. Furthermore, in the 2005-2010 legislature, new opposition MPs and those who have been in the HoC for the 2005-2010 legislature have very similar absence behavior.

Thus, our overall findings indicating some interaction between political and electoral constrains are composed of two markedly different patterns: in two of the legislatures we see that opposition absence rates are mostly unchanged while government absence rates increase, whereas in the remaining two legislatures these trajectories are parallel. Combined, these result in an overall smaller increase of absence for opposition MPs than for government MPs, who are always increasing their absences with the new elections approaching.

[18]Noteworthy, for the 1997-2001 legislature, accounting for the non-linearity indicates a flattening out of opposition absence increase towards the end of the session, but this is not something that we see in the other legislature.

Within-MP trajectories

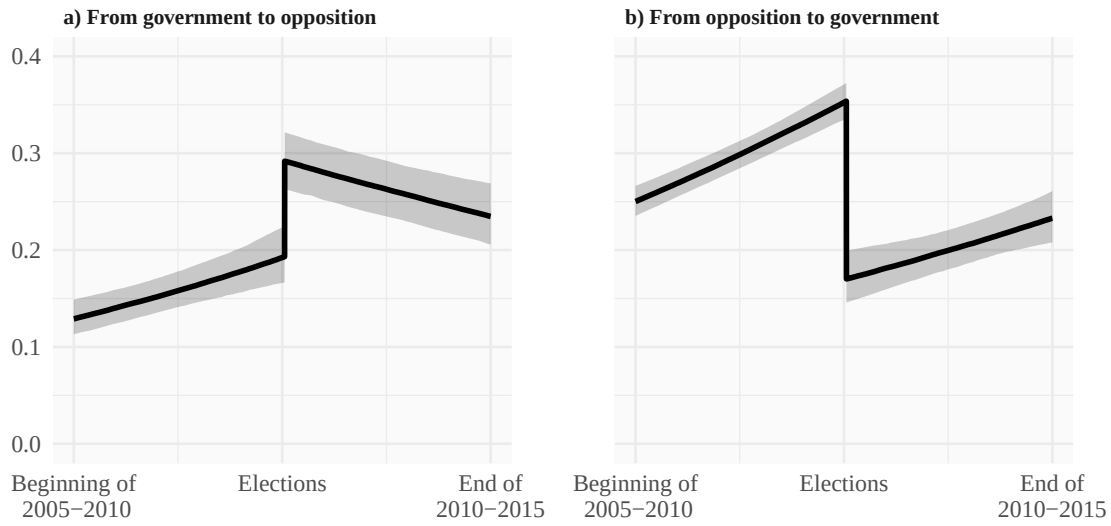
In order to gain additional insights, we look at MPs who changed status in between legislatures, specifically 2005-2010 and 2010-2015 legislatures, which went from a Labour government to a Conservative & Liberal Democrat government. We subset our data to all MPs who were part of both legislatures, did not hold any ministerial positions and did not retire after either of the legislatures, MPs standing for re-election in 2015 as well. We exclude retiring MPs from this analysis to be consistent with the presence of potential electoral incentives. Thus, we have two groups of MPs: the Labour MPs who went from a government side to the opposition (103), and Conservative & Liberal Democrat MPs who went from opposition side to government (113).

We combine the two parliaments for each of these groups and fit a hierarchical model of absence where, as before, divisions are nested within MPs. However, the difference is that we are interested in the trajectories throughout time including the switch between the parliaments. We follow Singer and Willett (2003) in terms of parametrization and model building. For both groups of MPs, the best fitting final models estimate a varying starting point for absence probability at the beginning of the 2005-2010 parliament, varying change in the elevation when transitioning to the 2010-2015 legislation, and two varying trajectories.[19] We report the summary of the average trajectories in Figure 4.

We largely reproduce the substantive findings from the cross-sectional time related analysis. Going from government to opposition we see that MPs (Labour MPs in both parliaments) were on average much less absent when they were in government and there is a sharp increase in their absence rates once they start their tenure as opposition members. This is very much in line with the notion that it is the government of the day who is responsible for having a majority in the HoC and the opposition MPs can therefore be more absent. Most importantly, however, we see that while they were in government the absence rates increased towards the end of the parliamentary term, but this is not the case for when the same MPs were in opposition. Going from opposition to government, we see a very substantial drop in absence likelihood, however no change trajectory differences: Conservative and Liberal Democrat MPs in the 2005-2010 opposition were quite sensitive to the electoral cycle as well. They essentially reach the same absence probability at

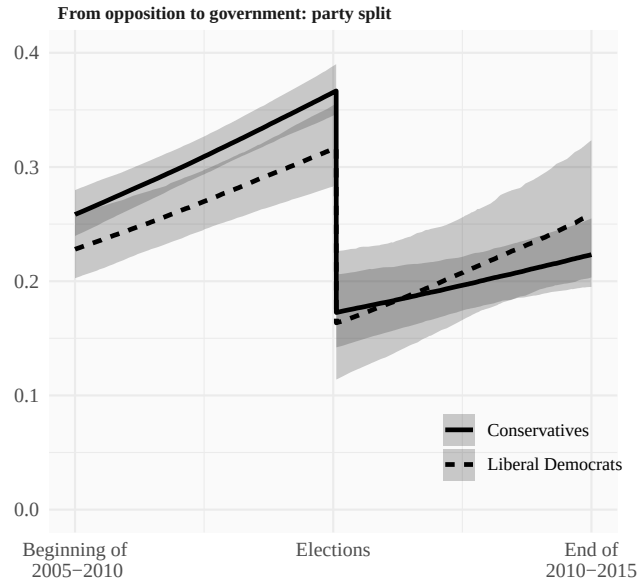
[19] More precisely, we estimate a general trajectory and change in the slope in the second parliament.

Figure 4: Absence probability as a function of electoral cycle for opposition and government MPs



Notes: Full model results reported in Appendix **A3** (all other predictors held constant at their means or most frequent nominal category).

Figure 5: Absence probability as a function of electoral cycle for opposition MPs (party split, within-MP analysis)



Notes: Full model results reported in Appendix **A3** (all other predictors held constant at their means or most frequent nominal category).

the end of the electoral cycle of their government tenure as they had at the beginning of their opposition period.

In Figure 5 we summarize an extended version of the "From opposition to government" model, where each time related varying slope (including the switch to second legislature) has one predictor, namely the party the MP was a member of. In other words, we estimated three cross-level interactions. Once uncertainty is incorporated, we find no statistically significant differences between Conservative and Liberal Democrat MP behaviour. This also indicates that our results are not driven by one of these parties, when focusing on the "From opposition to government" transition. However, in opposition, Liberal Democrats were less likely to be absent in comparison to Conservatives, but this changes in government, especially as the 2015 elections are getting closer. Furthermore, the electoral constraints appear to be stronger (steeper slope) for Liberal Democrats in government when compared to the Conservative MPs. It is, however, important to keep in mind that for the Liberal Democrats government participation has so far been a one-off experience. Although if coalition government is to occur again, then the experience of the Liberal Democrats as a junior coalition partner is relevant for understanding the behavior of their MPs.

Discussion and conclusions

In the four parliaments between 1997 and 2015, we have looked at absences across 5033 divisions for over 500 individual MPs in each parliament. The average share of absences is 31%, indicating that while MPs are mostly present, a non-trivial share of parliamentary vote participation is avoided. More importantly, this ranges from 5% to 99% between MPs, revealing substantial variation of absenteeism. These raw numbers suggest that absence is part of the parliamentary reality, and systematic differences depending on when the vote is being held, and who is participating need to be considered if we want to understand accountability, parliamentary work, and functioning of parliaments in democratic parliamentary systems.

The inherent assumption, at times clearly stated, is that absence for the most part is not relevant for position-taking and is just a matter of "simple" absences. We have shown though that there are systematic factors that can account for why MPs decide not to participate in a division, and these are in line with broader theories of legislator behavior. Thus, absences might be "simple", but they

are quite systematic. Furthermore, changing patterns of absence or the use of this tool can help us better understand some broader dynamics of legislative activity.

It is important to stress that the decision to be absent from vote is taken by the individual MPs. Unfortunately, we have no way of monitoring their decision-making process of being present or absent. However, we believe that by examining the various constraints that MPs face and how they might balance these it is possible to establish part of the process that makes or allows MPs to decide to absent themselves from divisions. The impact of some of these constraints are exactly as one would expect or has been documented in other systems.

Most importantly, our findings speak to how the government carries out its responsibility to ensure they have a majority in a division and how this influences what their MPs can do, especially when reelection pressures are looming. Overall, we show that the absence probabilities among government MPs are lower than opposition MPs throughout the life cycle of the particular parliament. Furthermore, as the next elections are getting closer, absences are on the rise, on average. However, this rise happens at different rates for government and opposition MPs. This is likely due to a mixture of loosening political constraints associated with the type of legislation the government proposes and electoral constraints the MPs are facing. On average, these conditions have a stronger influence on government MPs who are usually present at a high rate in the beginning of the term.

However, this general, overall result is driven by somewhat divergent results once we focus on each legislature separately. In 2001-2005 and 2010-2015, opposition MPs have constant absence rates, with government MPs catching up by the end of the legislature. In the remaining two legislatures, government and opposition MPs absence rates increase hand-in-hand. Accordingly, the answer to our research question is mixed, which highlights the need to consider more specific political realities and political power constellation when we study absences. A possible explanation for this relates to the strength of majority and belief in electoral success. While the 1997-2001 parliament was characterized by Labour having won their strongest mandate, there had been political developments during the term which meant that the government did not take another victory for granted (Harrop, 2001, p. 295) and with the majority had the possibility of allowing more MPs to be absent for campaigning. This should lead to a reaction from opposition MPs to

focus on the campaign earlier and therefore also increase their absence. Some of the systematic differences might be party related, and further research should consider those aspects more in detail. Overall, more studies of these two legislatures will be needed in order to better understand why the opposition behavior was different and how this can be related to pairing, party discipline, or various other factors.

Conceptualizing absence as part of the parliamentary toolbox also means that informal, or not measurable, parliamentary practices can underlie or overwrite the use of this tool. Most notably, the possibility that pairing can render a different picture of absence. While paired absence would still result in limited information that voters can acquire regarding position taking of their MP, the potential push back against political constraints is less worrisome. Tolerated and calculated paired absence, or the possibility to be paired and find a pair, would be a function of expected division related features.

Finally, we do not know whether MPs actually spend the time in their constituency when they are not present. We conceptualized the absence decision as weighing some costs and benefits between presence at these two places, which is also in line with self-reported MP experiences (Crewe, 2015), and with previous work by Norris (1997) and Rush and Giddings (2011). But we do not have a strict test for this dichotomy. Accordingly, future research is needed to devise more precise measures of the MP activities outside of the parliament, linking public appearances and scheduled activities to the parliamentary agenda to explore how MPs balance the constraints more in detail.

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Appendices

Online Supplementary materials for "Incentives for Non-Participation: Absence in the United Kingdom House of Commons, 1997-2015".

A1 Data and descriptives

Table A1.1: Number of divisions and MPs

	1997-2001	2001-2005	2005-2010	2010-2015
Divisions	1273	1246	1288	1226
Government MPs	426/381	416/381	359/300	364/313
Opposition MPs	243/192	243/168	291/226	298/212
Total MPs	678/573	672/549	657/526	664/526

Notes: First entry is all data, second entry after all exclusions described in the text. The number of divisions does not decrease when excluding MPs from our analysis.

Table A1.2: Descriptive statistics

	Statistic
Gvt bill division	0.48
Vote majority	0.41 (0.27)
Government MP	0.63
Retiring	0.16
Seniority	8.54 (8.89)
Constituency majority	21 (14)
Constituency distance (in km)	255 (202)

Notes: Mean and standard deviation of continuous variables; proportions for dichotomous variables (on the scale of long data format).

A2 Full model results and detailed robustness checks

Table A2.1: Full model output. (Restricted) Maximum Likelihood estimates of logit coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.

	Legislature fixed effects	All controls
Intercept	−0.375 (0.032)*	−0.871 (0.039)*
Elect. cycle	0.299 (0.030)*	0.191 (0.032)*
Government MP	−0.713 (0.031)*	−0.725 (0.033)*
2001-2005	−0.240 (0.036)*	−0.292 (0.037)*
2005-2010	−0.403 (0.037)*	−0.597 (0.037)*
2010-2015	−0.508 (0.037)*	−0.649 (0.038)*
Govt. × cycle	0.249 (0.038)*	0.262 (0.041)*
Government bill		0.140 (0.003)*
Thursday		0.649 (0.005)*
Friday		2.983 (0.008)*
Monday		0.125 (0.004)*
Tuesday		−0.011 (0.004)*
Retiring		0.298 (0.039)*
Constituency majority		0.028 (0.059)
Distance		0.455 (0.070)*
Seniority		0.939 (0.070)*
AIC	3131188.166	2936443.953
BIC	3131316.381	2936687.561
Division × MP	2734621	2734621
MPs	2173	2173
(Var) MPs	0.495	0.496
(Var) Cycle slope	0.741	0.844
(Cov) (Int, slope)	−0.279	−0.313

Table A2.2: Robustness checks. (Restricted) Maximum Likelihood estimates of logit coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.

	Retiring only	Non-retiring only	Three main parties	MPs across legs.
Intercept	−0.866 (0.041)*	−0.623 (0.132)*	−0.893 (0.038)*	−1.088 (0.022)*
Elect. cycle	0.113 (0.032)*	0.586 (0.105)*	0.177 (0.032)*	0.269 (0.026)*
Gvt. MP	−0.690 (0.035)*	−0.866 (0.087)*	−0.685 (0.032)*	−0.611 (0.010)*
2001-2005	−0.263 (0.038)*	−0.384 (0.120)*	−0.270 (0.036)*	−0.257 (0.008)*
2005-2010	−0.547 (0.041)*	−0.642 (0.107)*	−0.594 (0.037)*	−0.505 (0.012)*
2010-2015	−0.640 (0.039)*	−0.583 (0.118)*	−0.615 (0.036)*	−0.586 (0.017)*
Gvt. bill	0.135 (0.003)*	0.161 (0.007)*	0.143 (0.003)*	0.139 (0.003)*
Thursday	0.633 (0.005)*	0.736 (0.012)*	0.643 (0.005)*	0.637 (0.005)*
Friday	2.960 (0.009)*	3.114 (0.023)*	2.983 (0.009)*	2.909 (0.008)*
Monday	0.119 (0.004)*	0.151 (0.009)*	0.119 (0.004)*	0.121 (0.004)*
Tuesday	−0.009 (0.004)*	−0.023 (0.009)*	−0.009 (0.004)*	−0.011 (0.004)*
Const. maj.	−0.039 (0.065)	0.298 (0.188)	0.048 (0.059)	0.104 (0.018)*
Distance	0.449 (0.075)*	0.259 (0.202)	0.279 (0.065)*	0.463 (0.051)*
Seniority	0.993 (0.078)*	0.748 (0.179)*	0.950 (0.066)*	1.488 (0.062)*
Govt. × cycle	0.265 (0.040)*	0.278 (0.134)*	0.276 (0.040)*	0.265 (0.016)*
Retiring			0.274 (0.038)*	0.207 (0.006)*
AIC	2438321.782	497791.060	2877844.346	2983550.713
BIC	2438549.348	497989.291	2878087.583	2983794.322
Division × MP	2286514	448107	2681668	2734621
MPs	1818	355	2131	1035
(Var) MPs	0.476	0.561	0.466	0.335
(Var) Cycle slope	0.678	1.529	0.828	0.593
(Cov) (Int, slope)	−0.296	−0.328	−0.305	−0.152

Table A2.3: Legislature models. (Restricted) Maximum Likelihood estimates of logit coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.

	1997-2001 legis.	2001-2005 legis.	2005-2010 legis.	2010-2015 legis.
Intercept	−0.843 (0.065)*	−1.208 (0.066)*	−1.464 (0.066)*	−1.587 (0.083)*
Elect. cycle	0.346 (0.073)*	−0.061 (0.065)	0.579 (0.063)*	−0.118 (0.058)*
Gvt. MP	−0.654 (0.073)*	−0.499 (0.066)*	−0.902 (0.064)*	−0.812 (0.070)*
Gvt. bill	0.119 (0.005)*	0.107 (0.006)*	0.143 (0.006)*	0.206 (0.006)*
Thursday	0.413 (0.009)*	0.538 (0.009)*	0.837 (0.011)*	1.085 (0.012)*
Friday	2.344 (0.020)*	3.497 (0.027)*	3.613 (0.017)*	2.669 (0.013)*
Monday	0.159 (0.007)*	0.169 (0.008)*	0.105 (0.008)*	0.025 (0.008)*
Tuesday	−0.043 (0.007)*	0.008 (0.007)	−0.026 (0.007)*	0.025 (0.008)*
Retiring	0.361 (0.096)*	0.169 (0.077)*	0.317 (0.065)*	0.362 (0.079)*
Const. maj.	−0.168 (0.136)	0.030 (0.131)	0.064 (0.144)	0.095 (0.131)
Distance	0.782 (0.162)*	0.322 (0.146)*	0.218 (0.166)	0.571 (0.129)*
Seniority	0.770 (0.156)*	0.965 (0.135)*	0.849 (0.160)*	1.099 (0.155)*
Govt. × cycle	0.009 (0.090)	0.391 (0.078)*	0.030 (0.083)	0.752 (0.075)*
AIC	844715.595	761597.455	684118.479	638571.869
BIC	844899.595	761780.428	684301.297	638753.868
Division × MP	729429	684054	677488	643650
MPs	573	549	526	525
(Var) MPs	0.514	0.426	0.484	0.551
(Var) Cycle slope	1.024	0.672	0.849	0.678
(Cov) (Int, slope)	−0.304	−0.271	−0.331	−0.349

A3 Detailed within-MP results

Table A3.1: Hierarchical models of absence probability: within-MP models

	From government to opposition	From opposition to government
Intercept	−2.275 (0.140)*	−1.419 (0.069)*
Legislature days (all)	0.947 (0.195)*	0.980 (0.096)*
Legislature days (second)	−1.542 (0.245)*	−0.203 (0.255)
Change to second leg.	0.543 (0.089)*	−0.973 (0.100)*
Government bill	0.221 (0.010)*	0.138 (0.009)*
Thursday	1.063 (0.018)*	0.844 (0.017)*
Friday	3.427 (0.024)*	2.660 (0.021)*
Monday	0.138 (0.014)*	0.006 (0.012)
Tuesday	0.049 (0.013)*	−0.002 (0.011)
Constituency majority	−0.201 (0.243)	0.012 (0.195)
Distance	0.195 (0.281)	0.365 (0.219)
Seniority	0.667 (0.307)*	0.626 (0.211)*
AIC	251788.839	304983.908
BIC	252019.055	305216.162
Division × MP	258942	284082
MPs	103	113
(Var) MPs	0.568	0.166
(Var) (all) Leg. days	4.112	0.859
(Var) (second) Leg. days	6.520	7.223
(Var) Change to second leg.	0.627	1.027
(Cov) Int., Leg. days	−0.747	−0.232
(Cov) Int., (second) Leg. days	0.735	0.237
(Cov) Int., Change to second	−0.044	0.077
(Cov) Leg. days, (second) Leg. days	−4.394	−0.851
(Cov) Leg. days, Change to second	−0.923	−0.277
(Cov) (second) Leg. days, Change to second	0.906	−1.742

(Restricted) Maximum Likelihood estimates of logit coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.
[a] Second legislature refers to 2010-2015.