The Rejected, the Ejected, and the Dejected: Explaining Government Rebels in the 2001-2005 British House of Commons

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The combination of parliamentary government and plurality elections in the British House of Commons is often assumed to produce highly cohesive parliamentary parties. However, the number and magnitude of backbench revolts against the governing party in the British Parliament has increased since the 1960s. The contention of this article is that particular forms of rebellion against the government are the norm rather than the exception in Britain. The reason, the authors contend, is that members of Parliament (MPs) who have been refused ministerial promotion or who are ex-ministers cannot be controlled by the promise of ministerial office and are hence free to vote against the government if they have variant policy preferences from the cabinet. This idea is confirmed in an analysis of Labour MPs' voting behavior in the 2001-2005 House of Commons.

Keywords: parliamentary government; roll-call voting; legislative behavior; House of Commons

By the end of last week, 157 Labour members of Parliament (MPs) had put their names to a motion objecting to the [liberalization of university tuition] fees. . . . The Prime Minister then laid “my authority on the line.” Oh good, some of the rebels licked their lips, now we can chop it off. . . . [Nonetheless]

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one member of the Cabinet scorns them as “the Rejected, the Ejected and the Dejected.”

Andrew Rawnsley, 2003

As Walter Bagehot (1867/2001) famously observed, at the heart of the British parliamentary model is the fusion of the cabinet to a parliamentary majority. As a result of this fusion, voters are strongly party oriented and MPs need effective party leaderships to be reelected (Cox, 1987). So, despite the fact that Britain has plurality elections in single-member districts, agenda control by the cabinet in the legislature produces party-centered elections and cohesive parliamentary parties. The result, allegedly, is a highly responsive form of democracy in which the government is in effect directly accountable to the electorate (Persson & Tabellini, 2003; Powell, 2000).

But what if the cohesion of the governing party breaks down? There have been significant backbench rebellions against governments at several points in the recent history of the House of Commons, such as under the Heath, Wilson, and Callaghan governments in the 1970s (Franklin, Baxter, & Jordan, 1986; Gaines & Garrett, 1993), the Major government in the early 1990s (Cowley, 2002; Cowley & Norton, 1999; Kam, 2001), and more recently, in the second term of the Blair administration. Are these isolated events? If not, what does this mean for our general understanding of the Westminster model of government?

The contention of this article is that backbench rebellions against the governing party in the House of Commons will occur under specific conditions. The patronage of ministerial appointment is only effective in disciplining current ministers and backbenchers who believe that they have a chance of being promoted to ministerial office. These patronage incentives do not work for ex-ministers or for MPs who do not believe that they will be promoted. These “ejected” ex-ministers and “rejected” backbenchers are free to vote with their preferences, and so may rebel if they disagree on a particular policy. Furthermore, the threat of government collapse is not effective against preference-outlier MPs if these “dejected” members expect that a new cabinet will form closer to their preferences.

In this article, we start by reviewing existing research on voting in the House of Commons before developing a theory of government rebellions in parliamentary systems. According to the theory, the likelihood of rebellion increases if the governing party is ideologically heterogeneous, if the government has been in office for some time, if the next cabinet is likely to be closer to the preferences of potential rebels than the current cabinet, and if candidates are deselected locally. All these conditions existed for the Labour
government in the 2001-2005 British House of Commons. In the empirical section of the article, we test these ideas by looking at the voting behavior of Labour MPs in all votes in the 2001-2005 Parliament and in three high-profile votes: on the Iraq War, hospital reforms, and university fees.

**Research on Government Rebellion in the British House of Commons**

Scholars have studied voting in the House of Commons since William Aydelotte’s (1954, 1963) research on the House in the 1840s. Rebellions against the government have been rare because party leaders can use ministerial patronage to enforce discipline, because the electoral success of MPs is dependent on the effectiveness of the party leadership, and because potential rebels expect that government collapse could lead to subsequent electoral defeat. Existing research has also demonstrated that when rebellions have occurred, these have tended to be because of ideological differences between backbenchers and the leadership rather than because of pressures from constituency interests relevant to a vote or set of votes.

Schonhardt-Bailey (2003) showed that constituency interests prevailed over ideology in the battle over the Corn Laws in the 1840s. Most MPs from constituencies that would benefit from free trade voted to repeal the Corn Laws, irrespective of their party affiliation. Cox (1987) argues, however, that national party platforms were not fully developed in the 1840s, so politicians were more beholden at that time to their constituencies than to the electoral promises of their party leaders. Also, ministerial patronage was not a powerful force until later. Looking at roll-call votes in the 1860s to the 1880s, Cox (1987, pp. 77-78) found that Conservative MPs who later became ministers were 6% more likely to following voting instructions than MPs who were not promoted to ministerial office.

The carrot of ministerial promotion plus the national electoral connection prevented major backbench rebellions until the 1960s (Norton, 1975, 1980). Schwartz (1980) attributed the emergence of rebellion after 1960 to the abandonment of the so-called “parliamentary rule,” whereby a government would resign if it lost any vote. Looking at 10 rebellions from 1959 to 1968, Schwartz and Lambert (1971) found that, freed from the threat of new elections if a government was defeated, rebels tended to be Conservative backbenchers who either did not expect to be promoted to ministerial office, who were not mainstream members of the party, or who had strong support from their local party constituency associations. Jackson
(1968) and Mellors (1978) argued that the “new breed” of young politicians who won Westminster seats in the 1964 election were less prepared to support the party than older MPs (cf. Norton, 1978). However, Franklin et al. (1986) found that in the 1970-1974 Parliament, newer members were not significantly more likely to vote against their party than were older members.

Gaines and Garrett (1993) then found that ideological preferences and constituency pressures interacted in the rebellions against the 1974-1979 Labour government. Labour MPs who were members of the left-wing Tribune Group and MPs from left-wing constituency parties were more likely to vote against the government. They also found that the size of an MP’s electoral majority was significant, with the MPs with larger majorities defecting more than the average, although the magnitude of this effect was small.

There were few rebellions against the Thatcher governments from 1979 until 1990. Crowe (1986) primarily attributed this to socialization among MPs, where support for the government resulted from routinized behavior rather than strategic calculation (cf. Mughan, Box-Steefensmeier, & Scully, 1997). Nevertheless, Crowe also pointed to the way that Thatcher used promotion promises and appealed directly to Conservative voters over the heads of more moderate backbenchers. Hence, national party performance and office incentives were also used to enforce party cohesion at a time of relatively high ideological heterogeneity in the parliamentary Conservative Party. Interestingly, Pattie, Fieldhouse, and Johnston (1994) found no constituency-level electoral connection in this period, in that Conservative MPs’ voting behavior in the 1987-1992 Parliament had no effect on their subsequent share of the vote in the 1992 election.

Ideological heterogeneity in the Conservative ranks was more difficult to contain during John Major’s Conservative government in the 1992-1997 Parliament. Looking at this period, Kam (2001) argued that party organizational power is generally a stronger determinant of voting in the House of Commons than MPs’ policy preferences. However, using data from a survey of MPs, he also found that the further to the right that a Conservative MP was in that parliament, the more likely that he or she was to vote against the government (cf. Cowley & Norton, 1999).

Looking at the first Blair government, in 1997-2001, Cowley (2002) found that only two prolific rebels, Tony Banks and Chris Mullin, were appointed to junior ministerial office in 1997, which suggests that MPs with ministerial ambitions are well advised to stay loyal. He also found that ideology
mattered, in that membership of the left-wing Socialist Campaign Group was a significant predictor of voting against the government. Similarly, Garner and Letki (2005) found that the “isolation” of backbenchers was the main cause of rebellion against the Blair government in 1997-1999. This isolation was most prevalent between two types of backbenchers: (a) those who had been in the parliament a long time and had not been promoted to ministerial office and (b) those who were on the left of the parliamentary party.

Hence, even after the abandonment of the norm that a government defeat would automatically trigger new elections, existing research suggests that the carrot of ministerial office, the nationwide electoral appeal of a unified party, and the social norm of loyalty to the party were usually sufficient to ensure highly cohesive governing parties in the House of Commons. Nevertheless, existing research also suggests that when cohesion does break down, rebels tend to be backbenchers who are unlikely to return to, or be promoted to, ministerial office, and/or MPs on the ideological extremes of governing parties rather than in the center. This later finding is particularly significant, as it runs counter to the standard spatial model of legislative behavior, which predicts that centrist MPs are more likely than extremist MPs to be torn between the government’s policy and the policy of an opposition party (e.g., Krehbiel, 1993).

Consequently, existing research has identified which types of MPs tend to rebel in the House of Commons. Nevertheless, the literature has not identified the precise institutional and political conditions that cause these MPs to rebel when, in general, they remain loyal. This is what we try to do in the next section.

**A Rationalist Theory of Government Rebellions in Parliamentary Systems**

In a parliamentary system, the party or parties who form the cabinet control the legislative agenda (e.g., Cox & McCubbins, 2005; Huber, 1996a; Tsebelis, 2002). MPs from nongoverning parties or backbenchers from governing parties can propose legislation or table amendments, but these are unlikely to pass without government support. Hence, an MP is more likely to secure his or her policy preferences if his or her party is in government. If the government falls, another cabinet may not include the MP’s party, and if a new election is held, the MP may not be reelected or his or her party may not be in the government in the new Parliament. Hence, one
of the key mechanisms that enables governing party elites to control their legislative troops is the vote-of-confidence procedure (Diermeier & Feddersen, 1998; Huber, 1996b). If a vote is likely to be close, the government can force its backbenchers to support its positions by attaching the issue to the threat of resignation and/or new parliamentary elections.

However, the threat of government defeat is not effective against particular MPs in particular circumstances. Because the cabinet controls the legislative agenda, MPs who are ideologically distant from a governing party have an incentive to try to change the makeup of a cabinet in their policy direction. If a government defeat will lead to early elections and the possibility that their party will not be in government—and, hence, the next cabinet is further from their preferences—then these MPs will stay loyal to their party in a crucial vote. However, if a government defeat is unlikely to lead to the dissolution of the Parliament, and instead leads to the replacement of the party leadership with a new leadership closer to their policy preferences, then extremist MPs have an incentive to try to provoke a government defeat. Party leaderships tend to be closer to the median voter than the average MP (e.g., Kitschelt, 1989). Hence, the incentives for provoking government defeat are stronger for MPs on the ideological extremes than in the ideological center: for instance, on the right of a center-right government or on the left of a center-left government. This consequently explains why extremist MPs in parliamentary systems are often less loyal to their party leaderships than MPs in the center of a Parliament, contrary to the standard spatial model of legislative bargaining.

Nevertheless, loyalty to the party leadership in government also operates at an individual level, in that MPs are more likely to be able to influence policy as ministers than as backbenchers. Even if one assumes that MPs are primarily motivated by policy, rather than by simply the perks of political office, MPs should want to be promoted to ministerial office. As a result, governing parties can also control their backbenchers through the private incentive of ministerial promotion.

However, the carrot of ministerial promotion is less effective for two types of MPs: (a) ex-ministers and (b) backbenchers who do not believe that they will be promoted. A significant proportion of ex-ministers do not return to the cabinet in most parliamentary systems, and backbenchers who have not been promoted to a ministerial position after their party has been in power for a significant period are unlikely to regard their leaders’ promises of promotion as credible. Some ex-ministers and overlooked backbenchers will be close to the policy positions of the government and so will still vote with the government. However, those ex-ministers and overlooked backbenchers who
are not ideologically close to the government will be less likely to compro-
mise their personal policy preferences and support the government than
MPs who expected to be rewarded for their loyalty.

Whether the party leadership can force ex-ministers, overlooked back-
benchers, and ideological extremists to back the party also depends on the
electoral system and the way that candidates are elected and deselected. For
MPs who do not expect to stand in the next election, these institutions are
irrelevant. However, if MPs want to be reelected, regardless of their subse-
quent career prospects inside the next Parliament, these rules matter.

A party leadership is more able to enforce loyalty in party-centered elec-
toral systems than in candidate-centered systems (Carey & Shugart, 1995;
Hix, 2004; Mitchell, 2000; Samuels, 1999). In the former—such as closed-
list proportional representation—candidates cannot increase their vote
share by developing personal loyalty among the voters independent of their
party. In the latter—such as open-list proportional representation or single-
transferable-vote systems—there are incentives for candidates to gain sup-
port independently of their party leadership, and indeed they might be
rewarded by the voters for doing so.

Single-member-simple-plurality (SMSP, or first-past-the-post) systems
are between these two extremes. Because only one politician is elected in
each district, voters cannot choose between politicians from the same party.
Also, campaigns in SMSP parliamentary systems tend to be fought on
national party platforms rather than local candidate personalities. Hence,
there are often few possibilities for politicians in these systems to increase
their electoral prospects independently of the performance of their party
leadership, as Pattie et al. (1994) have shown in the case of Britain.
However, because voters in SMSP systems are not forced to vote for a slate
of candidates, there are opportunities for politicians to cultivate some per-
sonal support independently of voters’ support for the party they represent.
Also, if politicians have large majorities in their districts (“safe seats”), they
will be protected against the changing nationwide fortunes of their party.

The rules for selecting and deselecting candidates interact with the
design of the electoral system. Politicians are more autonomous from their
leaderships if local party organs, rather than national party organs, select
them (e.g., Bille, 2001; Rahat & Hazan, 2001). Even when candidates are
chosen locally, to restrict local autonomy, parties often draw up a list of
“approved candidates” from which local parties can choose (as in the
British system). Then, once elected, politicians will be more concerned
with deselection rules than rules governing the selection of new candi-
dates. Even if the national party leadership selects candidates or screens
new candidates, local party elites might be able to prevent the removal of incumbents. With national party lists, national party leaderships are usually responsible for determining where new candidates and incumbents will be on the next party list. However, in single-member districts or smaller, multimember districts, incumbents are often protected by local party elites.

This analysis consequently leads to several general propositions about rebellions against governing parties in parliamentary systems, as follows:

1. The greater the ideological heterogeneity of a party, the larger the number of MPs who will have variant preferences from the cabinet;
2. The longer a party is in power, the larger the pool of ex-ministers and not-promoted backbenchers who will be freer to act on their policy preferences;
3. The more likely that a government defeat will lead to a new cabinet rather than new elections, the stronger the incentives for rebellion will be among ideological outliers;
4. The more candidate-centered the electoral system is, the greater the potential for rebels to be rewarded by the voters for their independence from the leadership; and
5. The more decentralized candidate selection and/or deselection is, the more likely that rebels will be protected from sanctions from their leadership.

Each one of the rebellion-facilitating conditions might exist at any one time. However, the greater the number of conditions, the greater the likelihood that rebellion will occur. This does not suggest that rebellion should always be observed. With perfect information, in equilibrium, the cabinet should be able to predict rebellion and thus propose agendas that compromise with potential rebels. However, the greater the number of rebellion-facilitating conditions, the greater the likelihood that the cabinet and the party whips will miscalculate.

Several of these conditions existed in the 2001-2005 House of Commons. Despite the fact that the Labour Party leadership had tried to screen out left-wing members of the party from standing in the 1997 and 2001 elections, there was still significant ideological heterogeneity among the elected Labour members. The party had already been in power for one term, and there was a significant number of ex-ministers by the end of the second term of government. Some ex-ministers left office for alleged incompetence or personal indiscretions (such as Peter Mandelson and David Blunkett) and so did not have variant policy preferences from the government. However, several ex-ministers left office because of policy disagreements (such as Robin Cook and Claire Short) and were now freer to act on their policy preferences than before. There were also
many backbenchers who had not been offered ministerial positions despite their loyalty in the previous Parliament. Some backbenchers also hoped that a crisis in Blair’s leadership might lead to Gordon Brown’s, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, taking over as Prime Minister. Gordon Brown was generally regarded as moderately to the left of Blair, at least on public expenditure and public service reform. The British electoral system is highly party centric, despite single-member districts. However, it is difficult for the party leadership to deselect incumbent candidates, particularly if they have the support of their local party constituency associations.

Data and Method

To test these ideas, we can look at the voting behavior of Labour MPs in the 2001-2005 House of Commons. We use a series of statistical models to estimate the propensity of Labour MPs to vote against the government in all votes in this period. The basic structure of these models is as follows:

\[
Y_m = \beta_1 + \beta_2 \text{OFFICE\_STATUS}_m + \beta_3 \text{POLICY\_PREFERENCES}_m \\
+ \beta_4 \text{CONSTITUENCY\_EFFECTS}_m + \beta_5 \text{CONTROLS}_m \\
+ \beta_6 \text{INTERACTIONS}_m + \epsilon_m
\]

\(m = 1,\ldots,408\), where \(m\) is the number of Labour MPs.

We use two different types of dependent variables and two different methods. The first dependent variable is whether a Labour MP voted against the government position in a vote, pooled for each vote between the start of the Parliament in June 2001 and the end of September 2004 (which is when the Firth and Spirling data finishes). This variable is coded 1 if an MP voted against the majority position of the Parliamentary Labour Party in a vote and 0 otherwise.1

For this dependent variable, we pool all the rebellion decisions in the Parliament and estimate the models using conditional fixed-effects logistic regression, where we include a dummy variable for each vote. Adding a dummy variable for each vote controls for any vote-specific variations in the data, such as the size of the majority, the salience of the issue, or whether it was a whipped or nonwhipped vote.2 As a robustness check, we calculate the number of times that each MP voted against the model and estimate the same model using Poisson regression.3

The second type of dependent variable is whether an MP voted against the government in a particular vote. We look at three high-profile votes:
(a) a vote on March 18, 2003, on an amendment to the motion authorizing military action against Iraq, which stated inter alia that “the case for war against Iraq has not yet been established”; (b) a vote on July 8, 2003, on an amendment to a health care bill that proposed to remove the “foundation trusts” proposals from the bill, which would have prevented hospitals from opting out of local health authority control; and (c) a vote on January 27, 2004, on whether to approve (the second reading) of a higher education bill that proposed to allow universities to charge undergraduate students a “top-up” fee of up to £3,000 per year for tuition (on top of the amount received by universities from the government for each undergraduate student). These three votes cover the most important foreign policy issue of the 2001-2005 government as well as the two most important issues of public service reform proposed by the government. We look at each vote separately and estimate the models using standard logistic regression.

The data for the dependent variables were calculated from David Firth and Arthur Spirling’s (2003) data set on roll-call voting in the House of Commons. Figure 1 shows the general pattern of Labour rebellion against
the government. Most Labour MPs voted against the government in less than 1% of votes in the Parliament. Nevertheless, 89 of the 408 Labour MPs (22%) rebelled more than 15 times in this period.

Table 1 shows the outcome of the three high-profile votes: 138 rebelled in the vote on the Iraq War, 62 rebelled in the vote on foundation hospitals, and 72 rebelled in the vote on university fees. The government won all three votes but in each case was concerned that the rebellion was going to be large enough to lead to a defeat. For example, after intensive lobbying of the potential rebels, the government won the vote on university fees by only 5 votes.

We use five different types of independent variables. First, the term OFFICE_STATUS is a vector of three dummy variables that capture the effects of office incentives on MP voting behavior: (a) whether the MP was a minister, either in the cabinet or a junior minister, at the time of a vote; (b) whether the MP was a former minister at the time of a vote; (c) whether the MP was an MP in the government.
been a cabinet minister or junior minister in the current or a previous Labour government); and (c) whether the MP was not promoted to a ministerial position at the time of the vote. With these three variables, the baseline is the remaining group of Labour MPs who either held or had previously held a backbench office of some kind (such as a parliamentary committee chair) or a nonministerial government position (such as a parliamentary private secretary or party whip). These positions are often seen as steps on the career ladder to a junior or cabinet minister position. MPs who are ministers invariably vote with the majority of the party. The minister variable is included, however, to isolate the comparison between former ministers and not-promoted backbenchers, on one hand, and backbenchers in positions of authority who can expect to be promoted to ministerial office (the baseline category), on the other hand.

The data for these variables were gathered from biographical information about the Labour MPs available on the House of Commons and Labour Party Web sites. Of the 408 Labour MPs in the 2001-2005 Parliament, 19 were cabinet ministers, 109 were junior ministers, 76 were former ministers by the end of the Parliament, and 137 were backbenchers who had not been promoted to a ministerial position or any other position of authority in the Parliament.

Second, the term POLICY_PREFERENCES is a vector of two continuous variables that measure the policy preferences of Labour MPs. The first variable (left-right self-placement) measures the location of the MPs on the left-right scale. The second variable (distance from party mean) measures the absolute distance of each Labour MP on the left-right scale from the average member of the parliamentary party (at 3.21 on the scale). Here, we use the average member of the parliamentary party as a proxy for the position of the cabinet. These two variables test whether absolute policy position on the left-right scale correlates with rebellion or whether relative position (to the left or to the right of the cabinet) correlates with rebellion. Recall that our theory predicts that left-wing outliers should be more likely to rebel than right-wing outliers.

The data for these variables were taken from a survey of prospective parliamentary candidates in the 2001 general election by Pippa Norris (2002a). The survey asked the candidates inter alia to locate themselves on a scale from 0 (left) to 10 (right). A sample of 131 of the 408 elected Labour MPs answered this question, and this sample is a good approximation of the full data set. For example, among the 131 MPs who expressed a left-right self-placement, 3.1% were cabinet ministers, 26.7% were junior ministers, and 13.0% were ex-ministers, which compares with 4.7% of cabinet ministers,
26.7% junior ministers, and 18.6% ex-ministers in the full set of 408 Labour MPs.6

Third, the term CONSTITUENCY_EFFECTS is a vector of several variables that control for a variety of potential constituency pressures on Labour MPs. Two of these variables appear in all the models: (a) the percentage of votes received by the elected Labour MP in his or her constituency minus the percentage of votes received by the second-largest party in the constituency (majority size) and (b) the estimated location of the median voter in the MP’s constituency (constituency median voter). The data on the constituency vote shares were obtained from Pippa Norris’s (2002b) “British Parliamentary Constituency Database, 1992-2001.” The location of the median voter in a district was calculated by multiplying the vote share for a particular party in a constituency by the location of the party on a 20-point left-right scale. For the left-right location of the British parties, we used Benoit and Laver’s (2006) expert judgments data. For example, if the Conservative Party (to the right of Labour) is the second-largest party in the constituency (which Benoit and Laver measured as at 16.39), no other parties received a significant vote share and Labour only has a small majority in the constituency, then the median voter in the constituency will be to the right of the position of the Labour Party (at 10.95). Alternatively, if the liberal Democrats (at 7.91) or the Scottish or Welsh nationalists (at 7.13 and 6.02, respectively) are the second-largest party in the constituency and the Conservative vote share is small, then the median voter will be to the left of the Labour Party. Using this method, the location of the median voter in each Labour-held constituency ranged from 9.11 (in Birmingham Sparkbrook) to 12.82 (in Kettering).

In the models of Labour MPs’ voting behavior on the three separate high-profile votes, we include other constituency interests that might influence MPs’ views in these votes. For the vote on the Iraq War, we include the percentage of Muslims in an MP’s constituency (% Muslim). For the vote on the reform of the National Health Service, we include the percentage of people in an MP’s constituency who describe themselves as having “poor health” (% poor health). And, for the vote on higher education funding, we include the percentage of people in an MP’s constituency who are full-time students older than the age of 16 (% students). The data for these variables were collected from the 2001 census “Key Statistics Databases” of the Office for National Statistics (England and Wales) and the General Register Office for Scotland.7

Fourth, the CONTROLS term is a vector of two variables. First, our theory assumes that MPs are seeking reelection and so are beholden to their party leaders. Hence, we need to control for whether an MP is retiring at
the next election (standing down in 2005). The data for this variable were obtained from the Labour Party’s list of prospective parliamentary candidates for the 2005 general election. Second, the longer that an MP remains in Parliament, the more senior she or he is likely to be in the parliamentary party and the more well-known she or he is likely to be among the voters in her or his constituency. Hence, we also control for the length of time that an MP has been in the House of Commons (years as MP).

Fifth, because our theoretical intuitions suggest several interaction effects, the term INTERACTIONS is a vector of three terms. First, Majority Size × Right-Left captures the combined effect of the marginality of the vote in an MP’s constituency and her location on the left-right dimension, which allows us to see whether an MP is more likely to vote against the government if she has a larger majority size and is on the left of the party. Second, Former Minister × Right-Left captures the combined effect of being an ex-minister and being on the left of the party. Third, Not Promoted × Years as MP captures the combined effect of being an overlooked back-bencher and the length of time that the MP has been in Parliament, on the assumption that the longer an MP is not promoted, the more frustrated he or she will become.

Descriptive statistics for the dependent and independent variables are listed in the appendix.

Results

General Propensity to Rebel Against the Government

Table 2 presents the results of five models of the general propensity of Labour MPs to rebel against the government, pooled for all votes. Model 1 contains estimates from the full data set of 408 Labour MPs. The main result here is that a Labour MP was more likely to vote against the government if he or she was either an ex-minister or had not yet been promoted to any position in the government or the party. Most not-promoted back-benchers had been MPs for one full term already without being promoted. In addition, a Labour MP was more likely to vote against the government if he or she had a large electoral majority (were in a “safe seat”), if the median voter in his or her constituency was to the right of the Labour Party (when the Conservative Party was the second party), if he or she was retiring at the end of the Parliament, or if he or she had spent many years in the House of Commons.
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<th>2: Basic Model Only MPS With Preferences Data</th>
<th>3: Basic Model, Plus Preferences</th>
<th>4: Basic Model, Plus Preferences and Interactions</th>
<th>5: Model 4, Replicated With Poisson Regression</th>
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<td>0.095</td>
<td>.111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years as MP</td>
<td>0.036***</td>
<td>.002</td>
<td>0.048***</td>
<td>.003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(continued)
Table 2 (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1: Basic Model MPs</th>
<th>2: Basic Model MPs Only MPS With Preferences Data</th>
<th>3: Basic Model, Plus Preferences and Interactions</th>
<th>4: Basic Model, Plus Preferences and Interactions</th>
<th>5: Model 4, Replicated With Poisson Regression</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coefficient</td>
<td>Pseudo $R^2$</td>
<td>2301.91</td>
<td>837.39</td>
<td>1174.69</td>
<td>1229.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SE</td>
<td>LR chi-square</td>
<td>837.39</td>
<td>1174.69</td>
<td>1229.49</td>
<td>857.28</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Log likelihood</td>
<td>12075.624</td>
<td>4938.621</td>
<td>4769.971</td>
<td>4742.572</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>124,440</td>
<td>30,523</td>
<td>30,523</td>
<td>30,523</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No. of groups (votes)</td>
<td>408</td>
<td>233</td>
<td>233</td>
<td>233</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: SE = standard errors. In Models 1 to 4, the dependent variable is whether an MP voted against the majority of the party (1, 0) in a vote, pooled for each vote between June 2001 and the end of September 2004, and the method is conditional logistic regression with fixed effects for each vote. In Model 5, the dependent variable is the number of times an MP voted against the government, and the method is Poisson regression.

*p < .10. **p < .05. ***p < .01.
To assess the impact of Labour MPs’ policy preferences on their voting behavior, Model 2 uses the same specification as in Model 1 but with the sample of 131 MPs who responded to the left-right self-placement question in the survey. The results in Model 2 are identical to those in Model 1 for all the main variables.

Model 3 then adds the effect of policy preferences. The results reveal that the further left that a Labour MP is, and the further he or she was from the median member of the party, the more likely he or she was to vote against the government. Also, the results for the other variables remain unchanged after the two policy-preference variables are added.

Model 4 then adds the three interaction terms, and as a robustness check, Model 5 replicates Model 4 using a Poisson regression model, in which the dependent variable is the number of times that a Labour MP voted against the government. The results are almost identical in these two models.

Interpreting the significance of the variables and the magnitude of the effects in these last two models is not straightforward because of the inclusion of the interaction terms (e.g., Braumoeller, 2004). Hence, to investigate the magnitude and significance of the effects, Figures 2 and 3 show the predicted relationships between the preferences of an MP, his or her office status or constituency situation, and the likelihood that he or she will rebel.

Figure 2 shows that former ministers with centrist preferences did rebel slightly more than other Labour MPs, although there are insufficient former ministers with outlying preferences to tell the difference between former ministers and other Labour MPs at these positions on the left-right scale. Also, backbenchers who have not been promoted were only different from other Labour MPs and former ministers if they were considerably to the left of the average Labour MP. Figure 3, meanwhile, shows that Labour MPs in marginal seats were more loyal than were Labour MPs in safe seats, even if they had preferences considerably to the left or to the right of the average Labour MP.

Rebellions on the Iraq War, Hospital Reform, and University Fees

Table 3 presents the results of the analysis of the three individual votes. No single set of factors explains Labour rebellions in these votes. In all three votes, not-promoted MPs and former ministers were more likely to rebel than other MPs. Also, the policy preferences of Labour MPs, as measured by their left-right self-placement, mattered in all three votes, but in slightly different ways. Right-wing MPs were less likely to vote against
However, members of the far right of the parliamentary party voted against the government on foundation hospitals and university top-up fees but not on the Iraq War.

Constituency effects, meanwhile, varied in terms of their impact in these votes. The size of an MP’s winning margin did not make a difference in any of the votes. The location of the median voter in an MP’s constituency was only significant on the issue of the Iraq War, where a median voter to the right of Labour decreased the likelihood that the MP rebelled. Also, none of the other measures of constituency interests had a significant impact.

Figure 2
The Effect of Preferences and Office Status on Probability of Rebellion

Note: These functions are the predicted values for these three types of Labour MPs, using the results from Model 4 in Table 2. The shaded areas around the functions are the 95% confidence intervals.
With multiple interaction terms, and because these are logistic regression models, the significance and the magnitude of the effects cannot be interpreted by simply looking at the size of the coefficients. Hence, Figure 4 illustrates the predicted probability that an MP with a particular policy preference voted against the government on university top-up fees if the MP was a former minister, a not-promoted MP, or any other Labour MP. Former ministers who were moderately to the left of the average member were more likely to vote against the government than other MPs (shown by the straight line at zero on the y axis). This is slightly different from the findings in Figure 2, which showed than, on average, more centrist former ministers were more likely to rebel. Not-promoted backbenchers were significantly different in their behavior from other Labour MPs at all points on the left-right scale, and not-promoted backbenchers on both the right and left of the parliamentary distribution.
### Table 3
Labour Rebellions on Three High-Profile Votes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Rebel on Iraq War</th>
<th>Rebel on Foundation Hospitals</th>
<th>Rebel on University Top-Up Fees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Model 6</td>
<td>Model 7</td>
<td>Model 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Coefficient</td>
<td>SE</td>
<td>Coefficient</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office status</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy preferences</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Left-right</td>
<td>-0.363*</td>
<td>0.190</td>
<td>-0.326</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>self-placement</td>
<td>0.136</td>
<td>0.299</td>
<td>0.111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distance from party mean</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constituency effects</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constituency median voter</td>
<td>-0.547**</td>
<td>0.277</td>
<td>-0.566*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Muslim</td>
<td>0.034</td>
<td>0.050</td>
<td>0.040</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% poor health</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% students</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Controls</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standing down in 2005</td>
<td>0.390</td>
<td>0.890</td>
<td>0.593</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years as MP</td>
<td>-0.012</td>
<td>0.030</td>
<td>0.109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Majority Size × Right–Left</td>
<td>0.201</td>
<td>1.599</td>
<td>0.746</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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| Former Minister × Right–Left | –0.272 | 0.966 | –2.550 | 2.812 | –1.589 | 1.768 |
| Not Promoted × Years as MP | –0.135 | 0.112 | –0.174 | 0.294 | –0.413* | 0.225 |

| Pseudo R² | 0.207 | 0.217 | 0.307 | 0.322 | 0.313 | 0.393 |
| LR chi-square | 34.33 | 36.02 | 34.33 | 36.01 | 36.09 | 45.34 |
| Observations | 131 | 131 | 131 | 131 | 131 | 131 |

Note: Method is logit.

*p < .10  **p < .05  ***p < .01.
party were both highly likely to vote against the government on university top-
up fees. Again, this is slightly different from the general pattern of rebellion, 
as revealed in Figure 2, where left-wing backbenchers were more likely to 
rebel than those on the right of the party.

**Conclusion**

In parliamentary systems, party leaders can use a variety of carrots and 
sticks to force their troops to follow instructions in key votes, such as the 
promise of ministerial office, the threat of an early election if the government 

**Figure 4**

**Probability of Rebell ing in the Vote on University Fees**

Note: These functions are the predicted values for these three types of Labour MPs, using the results from Model 11 in Table 3. The shaded areas around the functions are the 95% confidence intervals.
is defeated in a key vote, or the threat that undermining the cohesiveness of the party will be detrimental to the national standing of the party. Our analysis of the voting behavior of Labour MPs in the 2001-2005 House of Commons confirms this view in the case of the United Kingdom. Rebellion was rare in this period, and as previous research has found, constituency interests, such as the size of a particular social group with intense preferences on a key issue, played only a marginal role in shaping voting behavior among the members of the governing party in the British Parliament.

Nevertheless, an identifiable group of Labour MPs did vote against the government in this period. MPs who were on the first rung of the promotion ladder (such as parliamentary private secretaries of ministers) were more loyal to the government, even if they had policy preferences considerably to the left of the government. In contrast, former ministers were more likely to rebel, even if they were centrists. And backbenchers who had not yet been promoted to any political office and who were considerably to the left of the government were more likely to rebel, as were left-wingers with large majorities in their constituencies.

These results lend support to our theory of when governing parties in parliamentary systems are potentially vulnerable to rebellion. The longer that a party is in government, the larger the group of former ministers and overlooked backbenchers who are less easily corralled by the carrot of ministerial promotion. The threat of government collapse is also undermined if there is a faction among the parliamentary party that expects a new cabinet to form that would be closer to their preferences than the current cabinet—as was the case in the second term of the Blair administration. The system of candidate deselection in Britain also reinforces the independence of potential rebels, in that once an MP has been selected in a constituency, the MP is difficult to remove if he or she is supported by his or her local party elite. Contrast this with a national-based, party-list proportional representation system, which gives the national party leadership the power to move a candidate down the party list in the next election and so reduce his or her chances of being reelected.

This does not suggest that more rebellion should necessarily be observed the longer a party is in power in Westminster or other parliamentary systems. With perfect information, the party leadership should predict rebellion and thus compromise before an issue is put to a vote on the floor. Hence, a corollary of our argument is that if a party has been in power for some time and if the threat of government defeat is unlikely to lead to new elections. The government may not necessarily be defeated more often but will be heavily constrained by its parliamentary party—which is exactly
what happened toward the end of the second term of the Blair government and at the start of its third term.

Appendix

Descriptive Statistics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Observations</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rebel against the government</td>
<td>414,652</td>
<td>0.142</td>
<td>0.118</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>1.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rebel against the government</td>
<td>408</td>
<td>13.165</td>
<td>16.633</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>128.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rebel on Iraq War</td>
<td>408</td>
<td>0.336</td>
<td>0.473</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>1.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rebel on foundation hospitals</td>
<td>408</td>
<td>0.147</td>
<td>0.355</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>1.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rebel on university top-up fees</td>
<td>408</td>
<td>0.176</td>
<td>0.382</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>1.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minister</td>
<td>408</td>
<td>0.226</td>
<td>0.419</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>1.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Former minister</td>
<td>408</td>
<td>0.127</td>
<td>0.333</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>1.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not promoted</td>
<td>408</td>
<td>0.627</td>
<td>0.484</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>1.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Left-right self-placement</td>
<td>131</td>
<td>3.214</td>
<td>1.159</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>7.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distance from party mean</td>
<td>131</td>
<td>0.896</td>
<td>0.737</td>
<td>0.210</td>
<td>3.790</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standing down in 2005</td>
<td>408</td>
<td>0.059</td>
<td>0.236</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>1.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years as MP</td>
<td>408</td>
<td>11.392</td>
<td>7.479</td>
<td>2.000</td>
<td>42.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Majority size</td>
<td>408</td>
<td>0.275</td>
<td>0.150</td>
<td>0.003</td>
<td>0.690</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constituency median voter</td>
<td>408</td>
<td>11.350</td>
<td>0.864</td>
<td>9.110</td>
<td>12.824</td>
</tr>
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<td>% Muslim</td>
<td>408</td>
<td>3.607</td>
<td>5.980</td>
<td>0.050</td>
<td>48.810</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% poor health</td>
<td>408</td>
<td>9.003</td>
<td>4.084</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>18.470</td>
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<tr>
<td>% students</td>
<td>408</td>
<td>6.857</td>
<td>4.883</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>27.570</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes

1. For simplicity, we do not count abstention as a vote against the majority. There may be a strategic reason for abstaining, but the most common reason is that an MP is unable to attend, in which case he or she is “paired” with an absent MP from the opposition benches.

2. We include whipped as well as nonwhipped votes. It is not possible with the available data to differentiate between these two types of votes. Also, in practice most free votes are not truly “free” in that there is invariably a position of the cabinet in these votes. Indeed, the government sometimes calls a free vote for strategic reasons, recognizing that there is disagreement inside the party. Only a small proportion of votes are free votes, and the three individual votes we look at separately are all whipped votes.

3. In the Poisson model, for simplicity, the MP-level independent variables (e.g., whether an MP was a minister) are measured at the start of the 2001-2005 Parliament.

5. We also coded the trade union membership of the Labour MPs, to see whether membership of particular trade unions could be used as a proxy for being on the left of the parliamentary Labour Party. However, only membership of 2 of the 24 trade unions, the National Union of Mineworkers (with only eight MPs) and the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers (with only five MPs), were significant predictors of voting against the government.

6. This is a chi-square of .989 for the comparison of actual to expected proportions for these three categories.

7. See http://www.statistics.gov.uk/census/ for England and Wales and www.scrol.gov.uk for Scotland. Data from Northern Ireland were not included because the Labour Party does not contest elections in Northern Ireland.

References


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