

The purpose of legislative debate in party-dominated parliamentary systems: The Canadian Case¹

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Abstract

The essence of Parliament is talk. But the mere occurrence, let alone duration, of debate in party-dominated parliamentary systems is puzzling in light of the fact that MPs, as individuals, are neither open to persuasion during such debates nor likely to reap much of a personal electoral reward from participating in them. In this paper, I reconsider this puzzle by developing five explanations for why parties, not individual MPs, might choose to debate bills – namely, to persuade other parties, to call the public’s attention to an already popular party position, to persuade an uninformed or hostile public of the merits of a party position, to fulfill an institutional norm, or, in the case of opposition parties, to obstruct decision making. I test three of these propositions by modeling the amount of speechmaking by five parliamentary parties in each of the initial plenary debates on government bills in the first session of the 37th Canadian Parliament (January 2001 to June 2002). I find no evidence that parties use these debates to persuade each other. Instead, I show that parties engage in speechmaking to systematically obstruct the passage of bills they oppose.

1 – The puzzle of legislative debate in party-dominated parliamentary systems

The essence of Parliament is talk: the notion of talk – of *parler* – is, after all, built into the institution's name. As Steiner et al. (2004) put it, "much (if not most) of what legislators do is talk" (3). This emphasis on debate, however, is puzzling in parliamentary systems where political parties dominate both the legislative and electoral arenas.

Persuasion is the nominal reason for legislative deliberation. But party dominance in the legislature means that debate is not obviously a persuasive enterprise – at least for individual MPs. Party discipline implies that legislators typically lack the open-mindedness considered a prerequisite for meaningful deliberation (Lascher 1996). Furthermore, party dominance in the electoral arena suggests that there are few benefits to MPs from individualized position taking. Moreover, even if there were a meaningful chance of cultivating a personal vote independent of the party, or even if MPs simply believed in the tantalizing prospect for doing so, it's hardly clear that participation in legislative debate is an efficient means for doing so.

In short, there are reasons to suspect that MPs do not participate in legislative debate in order to pursue personal policy goals by persuading each other, or to pursue reelection goals by burnishing their personal vote. And yet, despite this, legislatures in party-dominated systems still devote a considerable amount of time to debating bills. Why?

The purpose of this paper is to help answer this question by developing and testing some competing explanations for legislative debate in the Canadian House of Commons. As in many Westminster systems, the Canadian Commons reflects a tension between strong party influence (owing to institutional and party rules) and incentives for legislators to engage in actions independent of party (owing to single-member plurality election rules). Given this tension, I begin by reconsidering who are the primary actors in legislative debates and, by extension, what is the appropriate analytic focus for a study of legislative debate: individuals MPs or parliamentary parties? This basic question is often overlooked in contemporary accounts of legislative speechmaking, especially in Canada (but see Proksch and Slapin 2012). Drawing on the first-hand accounts of legislators, academic sources, and an original statistical analysis of the frequency of legislative speechmaking, I conclude that debates in the Canadian Commons are best understood as party-driven affairs.

In the balance of the paper, I turn to building and testing competing accounts for why *parties* would want to debate government bills. I set out five explanations for debate, each of which makes distinct predictions about the amount of partisan speechmaking. That is, the explanations identify conditions under which we should expect a party's legislators to talk a lot and conditions under which we should expect a party's legislators to talk very little. I evaluate three of these propositions

by modeling the total number of words spoken by legislative parties in the initial debates of government bills. I find no evidence to suggest that parties use such debates to persuade one another of the merits of their position. Instead, I find strong evidence consistent with the argument that debate is used by parties to delay the passage of bills that they oppose.

2 – Who are the primary actors in plenary bill debates?

The focus of this paper is plenary bill debates, defined as speechmaking in the full legislative chamber concerning bills.² This definition excludes other types of plenary speechmaking (e.g., Question Period, members' statements, emergency debates on topical matters, etc.), as well as bill debates that occur in committee. These other forms of legislative speech are subject to different institutional arrangements and potentially different dynamics, and are thus best treated separately.³

Despite the large proportion of time devoted on most legislative days to debating bills, there is surprisingly little study of why legislators talk.⁴ Notably, extant explanations for why legislators talk often overlook an important preliminary question: who are the primary actors in plenary bills debates? It goes almost without saying that any subsequent theory building and testing first requires a satisfactory answer to this question.

The rules governing MPs' ability to speak in plenary bill debates – both formal and informal – do not provide a decisive answer to this question. Nominally, the chamber's presiding officer may recognize in debate whomever she pleases. In practice, debate participation is organized by the party whips – who, in turn, provide the presiding officer with lists of members to call upon (O'Brien and Bosc 2009, chp. 13; Stewart 2013).⁵ Indeed, MPs will object if they believe their party's slot in the speaking rotation has been accidentally missed. However, these facts alone are insufficient to imply that parties are the dominant actor: in this regard, party whips could simply be passive clearinghouses for their respective caucuses, allocating floor time when members request it.

In his seminal works on debate in the Canadian Commons, Franks (1985, 1987) clearly endorses a party-driven explanation. Debate, he contends, is employed primarily by opposition parties to delay the enactment of bills. This delay, he

² Technically speaking, the definition refers to all debate that arises in the chamber on legislative process motions (e.g., "That the bill be read a second time", "That the bill be read a third time and passed," etc.).

³ For example, compared with bill debates, the Commons' Question Period is much more circumscribed – both in the length of individual speeches (roughly two minutes each) and the total length of the debate (45 minutes per day). Moreover, Question Period typically attracts far more media attention than bill debates (Franks 1985, 4). For an analysis of speechmaking in Question Period in Canada, see Soroka *et al.* (2009).

⁴ Indeed, the study of plenary bill debates is sometimes indirect, with scholars more interested in the when and why of high-quality legislative deliberation than in the simple act of parliamentary talk (Mucciaroni and Quirk 2006; Steiner *et al.* 2004).

⁵ This is consistent with Proksch and Slapin's (2012) observation that "[e]ven in systems where parliamentary rules mean party leaders cannot formally prevent backbenchers from giving a floor speech, party leaders can still design party rules to control who takes the floor" (523).

suggests, may serve a variety of purposes, including to embarrass the government, to hold up its legislative agenda, to rally opposition MPs, to extract concessions from the government, or to draw media and public attention to the bill (Franks 1985). Franks' (1987) examples of speechmaking-as-delay (e.g., the repatriation of the Constitution, the Crow's Nest Rate debates, etc.) implicitly treat parties – and opposition parties, in particular – as the primary actors. MPs feature in his account only to underline the apparent futility of individual action. To wit, Franks (1987, 157) observes that MPs' speeches are dull and repetitive, with little hope of persuading anyone or of attracting media coverage.

Indeed, there is very little to suggest that MPs engage in debate to attempt to persuade their colleagues. More recent, first-hand accounts from Canadian legislators underscore some of Franks' (1985, 1987) observations, and indicate that many legislators entertain no illusions about changing their colleagues' minds. For example, Michael Ignatieff, a former leader of the Liberal party and official opposition leader, observed that “Nobody comes to the [Commons] debates for the very good reason that nobody can be persuaded by debates. The fix is in before the debate starts.”⁶ Similarly, Michael Chong, a former Conservative party cabinet minister, observed that “virtually all speeches for Debate are written in various leaders' or ministers' offices. Members often have no input into the content of these speeches” (Chong 2008, 6). Moreover, Chong argues that “[i]f members know how they are voting before Debate begins, then there is no real reason to listen or to participate in Debate” (6).

In my own interview with Kennedy Stewart, the first-term NDP MP echoed Chong's observation that all parties script the speeches delivered by their members on government bills. He further noted that, in his experience, plenary debates on government bills consist of partisan attacks by opposition parties and partisan cover by the governing party.⁷

The academic literature is equally skeptical of legislative persuasion in party-dominated systems. Steiner et al. (2004), for example, observe that high-quality deliberation is much less common in competitive and majoritarian parliamentary democracies (such as the UK or Canada) than in consensual democracies (such as Switzerland). Similarly, Proksch and Slapin (2012) discount the possibility of persuasion altogether – pointing to findings in the formal modeling literature that legislative speech is an “ineffectual” tool for persuasion (521).

Clearly, then, MPs do not engage in debate to persuade their colleagues. However, this is not the only possible motivation for individual action. Recent scholarship suggests a possible alternative explanation for why MPs debate the government's bills: namely, to further their own chances of reelection by building or maintaining their personal vote.⁸ Proksch and Slapin (2012) argue that, in systems where

⁶ Interview with Ignatieff on *The Sunday Edition with Michael Enright*, November 18, 2012, CBC Radio One.

⁷ I conducted the interview with Stewart by telephone on January 16, 2013.

⁸ See Blais et al. (2003) for a recent discussion of the personal vote in Canada.

personal reputation is electorally valuable, “parties develop rules that make it easier for members of parliament with dissident views to take the floor” (520). Consistent with this claim, they show that ideologically extreme MPs (relative to their party leadership) speak *more* frequently in the UK (a single member plurality system), but *less* frequently in Germany (which employs a combination of proportional and single member plurality electoral rules). Similarly, Killermann and Proksch (2013) find that, in Britain, marginal MPs from the governing party deliver more locally-focused parliamentary speeches.⁹

If single member plurality rules create incentives for individualized position taking in UK Commons debates, then the same could well be true in Canada. Indeed, we already know that in Canada electorally vulnerable MPs ask more parliamentary questions (Soroka, Penner, and Blidook 2009), and propose more private members’ motions, particularly on matters of local interest (Blidook 2012). Plenary debates of the government’s bills thus offer, in principle, another legislative opportunity for MPs to burnish their personal vote – either by using the debate simply to be visible to constituents (e.g., through televised coverage, through published excerpts in the MP’s newsletters, etc.), or by using debate to dissent publicly from unpopular party policies.

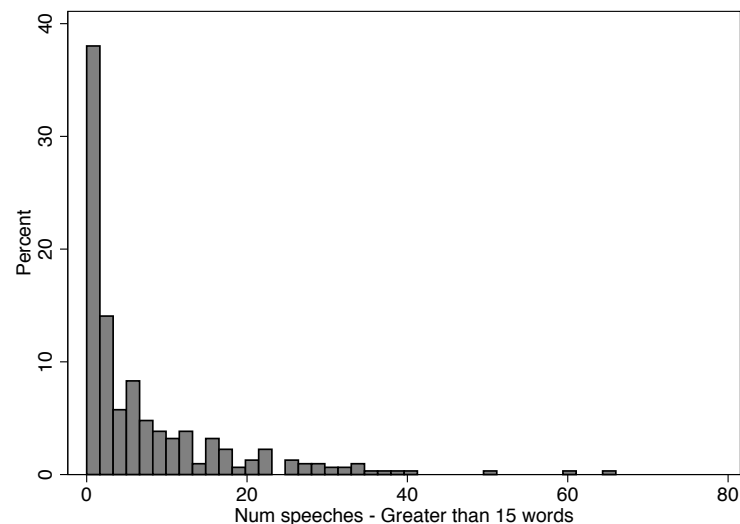
I evaluate this proposition using an original dataset of the number of speeches that each MP made in the initial plenary debate of government bills during the first session of the 37th Parliament (hereafter referred to as 37-1).¹⁰ To collect the data, I wrote a series of short computer scripts that first identified the days on which each government bill was debated, and then downloaded and parsed the appropriate transcripts of proceedings (i.e., the Commons *Hansard*). While some of these debates took place on one day, some spanned several days. For each day, the computer recorded in a spreadsheet the number of words spoken in each intervention, as well as the name, party, and electoral district of each legislator who spoke. I then manually cleaned the data, deleting all but the pertinent interventions.¹¹ As shown in Figure 1, the measure has a long, right tail. Nearly 30% of MPs said nothing at all, while a quarter delivered ten or more speeches.

⁹ In Victorian Britain, marginal MPs also spoke more than safe MPs (Eggers and Spirling 2013).

¹⁰ In particular, I employ a count of all speeches longer than 15 words. I employ this threshold to avoid inadvertently counting off-the-cuff interjections as true speeches.

¹¹ In the space of a single day, the Commons engages in variety of activities unrelated to the debate of government bills, including question period, routine proceedings, private members’ business, etc.

Figure 1 - Number of Speeches by MP



If MPs use debate to build a personal vote, we should expect those who need the votes to debate more often than those who do not. As is customary for single member plurality systems, I measure electoral threat as the difference, in percentage points, between the MP's vote total and that of the runner-up in the last election: the smaller the win margin, the greater the threat.

Similarly, if debate is used to dissent, we should expect disloyal MPs to debate more. I employ three different measures of MPs' loyalty to their party. The first is the percentage of recorded divisions, held in the previous parliament (the 36th Parliament), in which the MP voted with a majority of her party. The second is calculated in the same fashion but uses recorded divisions from the parliament under study (the *entire* 37th Parliament).¹²

The third measure of party loyalty is predicated on Kam's (2009) finding that demotion in the party ranks sparks dissent from the party line. I capture demotion (and, conversely, promotion) by first recording the top status of each MP (e.g., opposition critic, parliamentary secretary, cabinet minister, etc.) in both the 36th Parliament and 37-1.¹³ I then calculate the difference between the two.¹⁴ The resulting positive scores indicate a promotion (i.e., a higher status in 37-1 compared with the 36th Parliament); negative scores denote a demotion. Notably, there was considerable stability in the ranks of all parties during this period: over 70% of MPs were neither promoted nor demoted.

¹² Godbout, Jean-Francois and Bjørn Høyland. 2013. Canadian Parliament Data File (1867-2013). Unpublished data. The advantage of measuring party loyalty in the previous parliament is that all votes used in the calculations occurred before any of the speechmaking being analyzed; the disadvantage is that I lose nearly a fifth of the sample due to MPs who were members of the 37th Parliament but not the 36th.

¹³ I omit MPs who were members of the 37th Parliament but not the 36th Parliament.

¹⁴ My coding scheme is similar, but not identical, to that employed by Kam (2009, p. 158). It is: 0 = backbenchers; 1 = parliamentary secretary or assistant critic; 2 = junior minister, house leader, or whip; and 3 = critic or cabinet minister.

Finally, I include parliamentary experience in the model – captured as the date on which the MP was first elected. The expectation here is unclear. If inexperienced MPs are ill at ease with parliamentary repartee, deferential to their experienced colleagues, or otherwise preoccupied with “learning the ropes,” then they should participate less. Indeed, Blidook (2012, 57) shows that experienced MPs propose more private members’ motions than their inexperienced colleagues. However, if debate is about expressing dissent, then inexperienced MPs may debate *more*, assuming that they have yet to fully subscribe to norms of party loyalty (Kam 2009).

I pit the foregoing explanations against the alternative that MPs debate at the behest of their party. Of course, testing this claim directly is difficult; I do not know what motivates each MP when he or she takes the floor. Absent this information, I instead evaluate a logical implication of party-driven debates – namely, that MPs who serve as party spokespeople debate more than backbench MPs. Consequently, I include in the model indicators of whether each MP was a backbencher, an assistant or associate opposition critic, an opposition critic, a parliamentary secretary, a whip, a house leader, a junior minister, or a cabinet minister in 37-1.¹⁵

The results are reported in Table 1. The three models reflect the three different measures of loyalty. Electoral margin, party loyalty, and parliamentary experience are not statistically significant at conventional levels: electorally vulnerable, dissident, or experienced MPs are no more likely to debate government bills than electorally safe, loyal, or inexperienced MPs, respectively. Indeed, the sign on electoral margin is positive (i.e., safer MPs talk more) in Model 2. Likewise, in Models 2 and 3, the coefficients for loyalty are also positive -- i.e., loyal MPs talk more (Model 2) and promoted MPs talk more (Model 3). Although not statistically significant, the fact that the signs on these coefficients run contrary to expectations casts further doubt on the notion that debate is used to serve MPs’ personal reelection interests.

In contrast, the best, most consistent predictor of an MP’s participation in government bill debates is her status as a party spokesperson. The reference category here is backbench MPs, virtually all of whom are from the governing Liberal party.¹⁶ Assistant opposition critics, full opposition critics, parliamentary secretaries, party whips, and house leaders all debate more frequently than backbenchers.

¹⁵ MPs often serve in multiple capacities, either concurrently or consecutively during this period. To simplify the categorization, I assigned each MP to the *highest* status he or she attained during the first session of the 37th Parliament. From lowest to highest, these ranks are: backbencher, assistant or associate critic, critic, parliamentary secretary, whip, house leader, junior minister, and cabinet minister.

¹⁶ Almost all opposition MPs during this period were assigned at least one party function.

Table 1 - Negative Binomial Regression Models of MPs' Speeches

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Margin	-0.00204 (0.00498)	0.00142 (0.00437)	-0.00150 (0.00493)
Loyalty (36th Parl.)	-5.663 (5.489)	---	---
Loyalty (37th Parl.)	---	2.131 (2.250)	---
Change of status (36th Parl to 37-1)	---	---	0.117 (0.134)
Parliamentary experience	0.00894 (0.0141)	0.00995 (0.0124)	0.0107 (0.0140)
Asst. critic	1.902*** (0.473)	1.641*** (0.424)	2.048*** (0.503)
Critic	1.722*** (0.217)	1.685*** (0.194)	1.650*** (0.235)
Parl. secretary	0.915*** (0.274)	0.722** (0.250)	0.801** (0.281)
Whip	1.337*** (0.373)	1.281*** (0.362)	1.243** (0.384)
House leader	2.016*** (0.445)	1.785*** (0.400)	1.896*** (0.452)
Junior minister	-0.120 (0.401)	-0.121 (0.381)	-0.328 (0.439)
Cabinet minister	-0.236 (0.302)	-0.439 (0.289)	-0.430 (0.311)
Constant	0.254 (5.470)	-7.442*** (2.189)	-5.303*** (0.257)
ln (α)	0.246* (0.118)	0.247* (0.110)	0.255* (0.118)
Pseudo R-squared	0.062	0.058	0.062
<i>N</i>	241	293	242

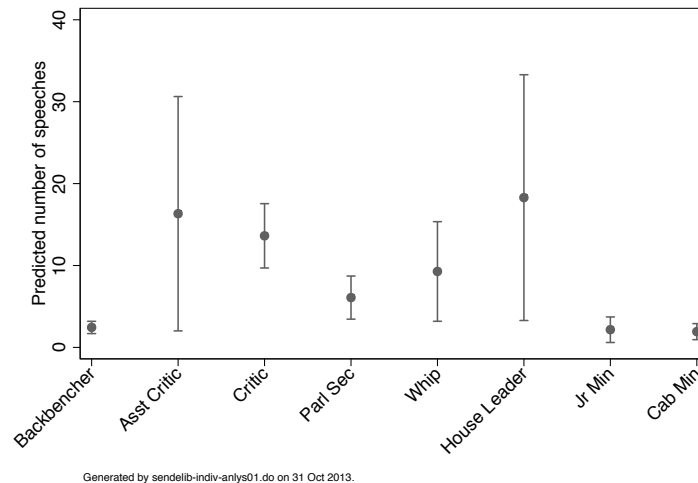
* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. Standard errors in parentheses.

The dependent variable is a count of the number of speeches (longer than 15 words) delivered by each MP. Eleven party switchers and four presiding officers are excluded. The model is also adjusted to reflect the fact that a handful of MPs did not serve for the entirety of 37-1.

To ease the interpretation of these coefficients, Figure 2 reports the expected number of speeches, and their associated 95% confidence intervals, for each of the six party roles, as well as for backbenchers.¹⁷ The differences are quite evident. While the typical backbencher is predicted to deliver only 2.5 speeches during initial plenary debates in 37-1, opposition critics are predicted to deliver nearly 14!

¹⁷ The expected counts are computed from Model 1, using Stata 13's `margins` command, holding electoral margin, loyalty, and parliamentary experience at their respective sample means.

Figure 2 - Adjusted predictions for party role, with 95% CIs



Notably, this phenomenon is also not strictly a function of whether the MP hails from the governing party or an opposition party.¹⁸ The typical parliamentary secretary, a role filled only by government MPs, is expected to deliver six speeches – 2.5 times as many as her backbench colleagues. Figure 2 also illustrates how parliamentary secretaries, the most junior of the government’s legislative spokespeople, are the primary participants on behalf of the governing party. Junior ministers and full cabinet ministers speak roughly as often as backbenchers.¹⁹ This observation is consistent with a common complaint from opposition MPs that ministers are rarely present during these debates.²⁰

In sum, I find no evidence that MPs engage in plenary bill debate to develop their personal vote – the most plausible reason for considering individual MPs as the primary actors in plenary bill debates. In contrast, I find strong but indirect evidence – consistent with the thrust of Franks (1985, 1987) – that such debates are mostly party-driven affairs. However, this finding only prompts another question: why would *parties* want to engage in legislative debate? I turn to this in the next section.

3 – Competing theories of why parties debate

In this section, I draw on the extant literature to develop five explanations for why a party engages in plenary bill debate. For ease of exposition in what follows, I use party to refer to the party leadership, which I assume is a unitary actor. The five

¹⁸ As one might expect, opposition party MPs participate more, on average, than government MPs (results not shown).

¹⁹ When the dependent variable is recomputed to count only speeches longer than 1,300 words (roughly 10 minutes or longer), I find that junior ministers and cabinet ministers do participate more than backbenchers, but the substantive difference is small (results not shown).

²⁰ The relationship between party role and debate can also be seen without recourse to the regression predictions. Opposition critics constitute 31% of MPs in this sample, but are responsible for 58% of all speeches (1,287 of 2,238 speeches). Similarly, parliamentary secretaries make up 20% of the caucus of the governing Liberal party, but deliver fully 38% of Liberal party speeches in the Commons (189 of 494 speeches).

explanations are: (1) interparty persuasion; (2) public attention seeking; (3) public persuasion; (4) obstruction; and (5) the fulfillment of longstanding norms of debate. I begin by making some general assumptions about party goals.

I assume that each party has an ideal policy outcome in each policy domain, and prefers outcomes closer to its ideal point over those further away. I refer to this as a party's *policy goal*. I treat these preferences as intrinsic and exogenous. They may originate from the preferences of party activists, interest groups, or other sources. Parties are uncertain, however, about bills' policy effects or outcomes. While a party may be familiar with a bill's provisions, no party knows exactly what the policy outcomes of each bill, if adopted, will be. Third, I assume that each party prefers more legislative seats and, if possible, to form the government. I refer to this as a party's *electoral goal*.

3.1 – Interparty persuasion

As highlighted above, there is a consensus among scholars and practitioners that persuasion, at the level of individual MPs, is unlikely during plenary debates in party-dominated parliamentary systems. To be clear, however, the existence of intense party discipline does not necessarily mean that *parties* cannot be persuaded.

Thus, an initial possible explanation for plenary debate participation is that parties debate in order to offer reasoned arguments in favor or against the bill in the hopes of changing the bill preferences of one or more other parties. In effect, this is simply a reframing of individual persuasion, the nominal or traditional reason for all parliamentary debate, to better reflect the realities of a party-dominated system.

Why might parties want to persuade each other? The governing party may want to persuade opposition parties to support its bill in order to: (1) reduce parliamentary opposition, freeing up valuable plenary time and avoiding public criticism of the bill – both in the short term and in subsequent elections; (2) reduce the chance of the bill's repeal by a future parliament not controlled the current governing party; or (3) increase the chance of the bill's passage in the event that the government does not command a parliamentary majority. For its part, an opposition party may want to persuade other parties in order to: (1) increase the chance of adopting amendments to the bill favored by the party; or (2) convert one or more other parties to its cause – something that could be useful in future elections or parliaments.

In short, both the governing party and opposition parties have incentives to try to persuade each other. Successful persuasion can serve a party's policy goal, its electoral goal, or both. The assumption that parties are uncertain – i.e., about the relationship between the provisions contained in a bill and the bill's policy effects – provides an important prerequisite for persuasion.

An observable implication of this account is that a party should engage in more debate when it is both beneficial and realistic to attempt to change the bill preferences of one or more other parties. This statement implies that a party's speechmaking depends on two things: the party's own preference and the preferences of the *other* parties in the chamber.

Let Party A be the prospective persuader. Let Party B be another party in the chamber – a possible target of Party A's persuasion attempts.²¹ For simplicity, assume that each party has one of three possible, exogenously derived preferences about the bill at the outset of debate: in favor, opposed, or ambivalent.

First, consider the scenario in which Party A and Party B have the same preference (i.e., they both favor the bill or both oppose it). Here there is no benefit to Party A from persuasion. After all, the two parties already agree. If debate were solely about interparty persuasion, then we should expect Party A to say nothing.

Second, consider the case in which Party A is ambivalent about the bill. Here too we should expect Party A to say little – regardless of the position of Party B. While in some circumstances there may be a realistic prospect of persuading Party B, Party A nevertheless has little motivation for doing so. This is because Party A is itself uncertain whether to vote in favor or against the bill.

Next, consider a third scenario in which Party A and Party B have opposing positions (either Party A is in favor and Party B is opposed, or Party A is opposed and Party B is in favor). Here there is clear benefit to Party A from persuading Party B. However, the prospects of successfully persuading Party B are far from certain – the latter party may be strongly committed to its position. In this case, we should expect Party A to debate more than in the previous two scenarios but less than the final scenario.

To see this, consider the situation in which Party A has as position (in favor or opposed) and Party B is ambivalent. Here there is not only a benefit to Party A from persuading Party B, but also a realistic prospect for doing so. It is in this final scenario that we should expect Party A to do the most talking. I summarize these predictions in Table 2.

²¹ The model can be easily adapted to accommodate more than one *other* party (i.e., Party B, Party C, etc.).

Table 2 - Predictions from the interparty persuasion hypothesis

Preference of Party A	Preference of Party B	Prediction of the amount of talking by Party A
In Favor	In Favor	0
Opposed	Opposed	0
Ambivalent	In Favor	0
Ambivalent	Opposed	0
Ambivalent	Ambivalent	0
In Favor	Opposed	+
Opposed	In Favor	+
In Favor	Ambivalent	++
Opposed	Ambivalent	++

3.2 – Public messaging: advertising or public persuasion?

Public messaging is a common explanation for legislative activity. As noted earlier, Proksch and Slapin (2012) argue that debate is a tool for public position taking – either by the party or by individual legislators, depending on the incentives created by institutional and electoral rules. Franks (1985) observes that the “audience for debate ... is, for the most part, outside the House” (9). Similarly, Docherty (2005), again in reference to the Canadian case, argues that “the opposition parties use their skills and parliamentary expertise to hinder the passage of a bill *while trying to garner public support for their position*” (19, emphasis added).

But why would parties choose to use legislative debate for position taking? Media coverage of plenary bill debates, as already noted, is small and pales in comparison to coverage of Question Period (Franks 1985, 1987). Why would a party not simply convene a press conference or ask questions about the bill during Question Period?

I suggest two possible explanations. The first is timing. By debating in the chamber, a party takes up time and delays any decision on the bill. A lengthy delay, in itself, may help the party attract media attention when it might otherwise struggle to do so. As the US Senate illustrates, filibusters can generate considerable media interest. Moreover, if the party’s goal is to somehow leverage public opinion into a more favorable legislative outcome, then any public messaging needs to come *before* the chamber makes a decision on the bill. In this sense, it does the party little good to convene a press conference after the bill has passed.

A second reason for using plenary bill debates for public messaging is consistency. Here I argue that a party has an electoral incentive to be consistent: if it likes or dislikes a bill, it needs to say so both on *and* off the floor. This is most evident when an opposition party strongly opposes a government bill. If the party intends to criticize the bill outside Parliament, perhaps even to use the bill as part of a critique of the incumbent government in an election campaign, it must vigorously articulate those concerns in plenary debate – even if there are no journalists present to report them – or risk charges of inconsistency, hypocrisy, or opportunism later.

A party's public messaging strategy could come in two forms. The first is when the party use plenary debate to call the public's attention to an already popular party position (or to an already unpopular position taken by one of its rivals). Doing so serves a party's electoral goal by increasing the salience in voters' minds of a policy on which the party and much of the public already agree. The publicity helps make the bill a top-of-mind consideration for voters, who, in turn, respond by placing greater emphasis on the bill or issue when deciding whether to vote and, if so, which party to vote for. I label this strategy *advertising*.

The second is when a party uses plenary debate in an attempt to change public opinion such that it becomes more favorable to the party's bill position, or to defend itself from attempts by its rivals to do the same. This strategy again helps a party achieve its electoral goal by persuading more voters to agree with its bill position and, by assumption, to vote for the party. I label this strategy *public persuasion*.

Both strategies – advertising and public persuasion -- help a party achieve its policy goal. If the party is successful in harnessing public support, such support could be used as leverage to obtain a more preferable legislative action (e.g., the speedier passage of the original bill, a modified bill, no bill at all, etc.). An observable implication of advertising is that a party should debate more when it favors a popular bill or when it opposes an unpopular bill. The public persuasion hypothesis predicts the opposite: more debate when a party is defending an unpopular bill or opposing a popular bill.

3.3 – *Obstruction*

While obstruction is most famously associated with debate in the US Senate, it also features prominently in scholarly accounts of debate in the Canadian Commons. Franks (1985, 1987) argues that, first and foremost, plenary bill debate is about occupying time. Similarly, Charlton (1997) concludes – based on an analysis of the total duration of government bill debates in the Canadian Commons from 1974 to 1993 – that “obstruction has remained the norm” (28).

Similar to Franks (1985, 1987) and Charlton (1997), I define obstruction narrowly: namely, the use of speechmaking to delay legislative decisions with the intent of forcing changes to the bill or killing it entirely. In other words, obstruction is not simply a delay of decision making – something inherent in *all* talk during plenary bill debates. Rather, obstruction is the strategic use of talk to force amendments to the bill or block its adoption altogether. Naturally, changing or stopping a bill serves the policy goal of any party opposed to it and, in publicly showing its dedication to a cause, may also serve a party's electoral goal.

Despite strong claims of obstruction in the Canadian Commons, extant accounts struggle to show this directly. For example, Charlton (1997) identifies obstruction as debate lasting longer than two hours at the second reading of the bill and *any*

debate at third reading. This leads her to conclude that roughly half of the bills before the Commons at second reading are obstructed (23). However, this measure seems arbitrary. A third hour of debate on a genuinely minor, innocuous, or uncontroversial bill could well be excessive, but a third hour of debate of a major or controversial bill does not necessarily seem unreasonable. Indeed, Charlton herself acknowledges that if one does not subscribe to her operational definition, then the “proof [of obstruction] is much less definitive” (28).

I consider instead an alternative strategy that draws on analyses of the US Senate filibuster. In this literature, the occurrence of filibustering – which, by my definition, is most commonly employed to obstruct²² – is a function of the costs of filibustering borne by those who want stop the bill, and the costs of waiting out a filibuster borne by those legislators who want to adopt the bill (Wawro and Schickler 2006, 54; see also Koger 2010). This literature points to a number of drivers of costs, of which two are potentially transferrable to the Canadian case.

The first is the time remaining in the legislative calendar until a prescribed adjournment date. Wawro and Schickler (2006) observe that, prior to the adoption of a cloture rule in 1917, it was especially tempting for senators to filibuster bills at the end of a session. End-of-session session filibustering meant that the physical costs to bill opponents were low (since they did not need to hold the floor for long in order to win).²³ Conversely, the costs to bill proponents were high: not only was there a serious threat to their bill, but such filibustering also jeopardized the last-minute passage of other bills. In fact, end-of-session filibusters proved so tempting, Wawro and Schickler argue, that the early Senate developed a norm restraining their use (29, 42).

Like the US Senate, the Canadian Commons has prescribed adjournment periods – including a period typically extending from late June through mid-September every year. However, there are important differences. First, Commons adjournment periods can be changed by majority vote and Commons rules allow the chamber, again by majority vote, to extend the hours of sitting days prior to the start of the summer adjournment period (O’Brien and Bosc 2009, chp. 8). Second, bills do not automatically die at the beginning of the summer adjournment; they can be resumed again in September.

Nevertheless, I argue that obstruction is still tempting for opposition parties in the run up to the annual summer adjournment. First, even if the government is able to extend sitting hours or modify the calendar in order to give itself more time (something that only a *majority* government could take for granted), this still imposes an opportunity cost on government MPs as they forgo other useful activities (e.g., contact with constituents, office work, family time, sleep, etc.) in order to maintain a quorum or be on standby for any votes that may arise. Second,

²² For a detailed consideration of the motivations underlying filibustering in the US Senate, see Koger (2010, chp. 6). Koger shows that, by far, the two most common motives for filibustering are to kill the bill and amend the bill (112).

²³ See also Koger (2010, 79) on this point.

even if such obstruction only succeeds in delaying a bill until the summer adjournment, this may still come at a cost to the government if its planned implementation is disrupted. Third, should the government choose to prorogue Parliament, as sometimes happens in the summer months, any pending bills are killed and must be reintroduced in the next session of Parliament. Indeed, if the government chose to *dissolve* Parliament during the summer, and if it were to lose the ensuing election, its bill could be well and truly killed for good.

A second driver of the US Senate filibuster is the body's workload. As with end-of-session filibustering, the operative factor here is the scarcity of chamber and legislator time. For example, Koger (2010) argues that "legislators are more likely to obstruct when they believe that their opponents place a high value on their time and, thus, can be beaten in a war of attrition" (94). This too can be extended to the Canadian case in the form of the number of government bills awaiting plenary action. When there are many pending bills, the opportunity cost to the government of simply waiting out obstruction is high – doing so postpones decisions not only on the bill at hand but on everything else as well.

The government, of course, is far from helpless. Commons rules provide avenues to cut off debate. Using methods of closure or time allocation, a simple majority of MPs – in practice, almost exclusively, the governing party – may prescribe a maximum amount of time for debate. These avenues provide important alternatives to waiting out opposition obstruction. However, they too come at a cost to the government. First, they still take time. For example, when the government is acting unilaterally, the adoption of time allocation (the most common method of curtailing debate in recent decades) requires a day's notice, prescribes a minimum of a day's debate at each legislative stage, and must be adopted separately for second and third readings (O'Brien and Bosc 2009, chp. 14). Each of these features eats up time that is in short supply as an adjournment period approaches or as the legislative backlog grows. Second, widespread or whole scale application of curtailment procedures opens the government to charges of being antidemocratic. Finally, all rules for curtailing debate are predicated on a majority vote – something that minority governments, by definition, lack.

To summarize: if plenary debate speechmaking is about obstruction, we should observe that parties hostile to the legislation at hand talk more when the summer adjournment period approaches as well as when the list of pending government bills grows.

3.4 – Fulfilling an institutional norm of at least one round of debate

An institutional norm, or a "logic of appropriateness" in March and Olsen's (2008) terminology, offers a final possible explanation for why parties debate government bills. Norms of behavior feature prominently in legislative scholarship (e.g., Docherty 1997; Kam 2009; Wawro and Schickler 2006), although they are primarily seen as regulating *individual* behavior.

A possible norm at play here could simply be that, for all but the most trivial of legislation, each bill should be debated for at least one round. A round here refers to a particular order and allocation of speaking slots between the official parties. In the first round of debate on a government bill, “a representative from the government and from each of the recognized opposition parties are recognized by the Speaker if they rise to seek the floor in debate” (O’Brien and Bosc 2009, chp. 13).²⁴ Such a norm would provide each party an opportunity to go on the record, but also ensure that bills do not pass without at least some debate.

Admittedly, my claim is highly speculative but I cannot immediately rule out the possibility that at least some debates are simply *pro forma* – with each party offering a modicum of debate out of habit, tradition, or perhaps even a sense of duty. An observable implication of such a norm is that very few bills go undebated and that parties often stop debating after the first round.

4 – Data and measurement

In what follows, I present tests of three of these five explanations – namely, norms, interparty persuasion, and obstruction. Time limitations mean that I do not yet have adequate data to evaluate claims of advertising or public persuasion.

Measuring the volume of speechmaking

In order to evaluate the various theories of plenary debate described above, I collect data on each party’s participation in each of the initial plenary debates on government bills in 37-1. These are the same data used above to model the frequency of MP speechmaking, but this time aggregated by party instead of by MP. The session began in January 2001 and ended September 2002 (its final sitting days were in June 2002). This was a period of Liberal party majority government. The study period is also interesting in that the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 occurred roughly at the midpoint of the session, and several of the bills included in the analysis contain the government’s proposed anti-terror measures in the wake of the attacks.

The analysis consists of all bills on which an initial plenary debate could have been held – namely, 53 of the 61 bills introduced by the government during the session.²⁵ By *initial* plenary debate, I mean the first legislative stage at which debate could have arisen on the bill. In the Canadian Commons, this is almost always second

²⁴ In what follows, I identify each party’s first speech, and any associated questions and comments but the speaker, as being part of the first round. In virtually all instances, this determination is straightforward. First, a representative of the Liberal party speaks, then the CA, BQ, the NDP, and the PCs. On rare occasions, a party will not take its slot in this initial rotation.

²⁵ I exclude the pro-forma bill (bill C-1) and all seven of the generic supply bills. The pro-forma bill is not intended for debate and supply bills follow an entirely different process of legislative scrutiny (O’Brien and Bosc 2009, chp. 18).

reading, but for three bills in the dataset the initial debate occurs on the little-used motion to refer the bill to committee before second reading.²⁶

The unit of analysis is each party's total amount of speechmaking. There were five official parties in the Commons during 37-1: the Liberal Party, the Canadian Alliance (CA), the Bloc Quebecois (BQ), the New Democratic Party (NDP), and the Progressive Conservative Party (PC). This yields a total of 265 observations (53 bills x 5 parties).²⁷

Individual interventions in plenary bill debate vary widely in length, up to a limit prescribed by Commons rules. Some interventions are full-blown speeches, others are much shorter questions or comments put by one MP to another. Consequently, a simple count of the number of speeches made by each party is imprecise. I opt instead to measure partisan debate participation using on the total number of *words* spoken.

In 37-1 MPs spoke a total of approximately 1.72 million words in these initial plenary bill debates. That's roughly three times the length of *War and Peace*, believed to be one of the longest novels ever written.²⁸ Assuming an average rate of speech of 130 words per minute,²⁹ MPs spoke for a combined total of roughly 13,250 minutes, or 220 hours. And that is just for the *initial* plenary debate of 50-odd government bills in a single year-and-a-half-long parliamentary session!

What is more, this total could well have been higher had other events in some cases not prematurely cut off debate. Most plenary bill debates in the Canadian Commons have no predetermined limit; rather, they end when no legislator rises to speak. This was the case for 44 of the 52 initial plenary debates. For the remaining eight bills, debate was truncated. Three of the eight were time allocated – i.e., the chamber, at the government's behest, adopted an order to limit debate.³⁰ Three bills died on the *Order Paper* before concluding their initial debate when the government prorogued Parliament in September 2002. One bill was withdrawn mid-session by the government and a final bill, considered under a motion to refer it to committee before second reading, hit the debate limit prescribed by chamber rules for this rare procedure.

²⁶ For details on the Commons legislative process, see O'Brien and Bosc (2009, chp. 16). While time limitations mean I am unfortunately unable to collect data on speechmaking at all plenary stages of these bills, second reading is often considered the most important plenary stage (Charlton 1997, 24).

²⁷ In 37-1, a small group of disaffected Canadian Alliance MPs left the party, forming the Democratic Representative Caucus in a coalition of sorts with the Progressive Conservatives. I code all members of this splinter group as members of the Progressive Conservative caucus.

²⁸ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_longest_novels

²⁹ I arrived at this figure by counting the number of words spoken, in selected five-minute intervals, by members of each of the five legislative parties in three different plenary debates. The mean number of words spoken in five minutes was 656.5, which works out to 131 words per minute.

³⁰ These bills concerned employment insurance benefits, criminal justice, and MPs salaries.

Explanatory variables

In order to evaluate the interparty persuasion and obstruction hypotheses, I require measures of each party's position on each bill, as well as the amount of time remaining until the summer adjournment.³¹ The latter measure is straightforward: I count the number of calendar days between the start date of each bill's initial plenary debate and the date of the next summer recess, expected in June of each year.

Measuring parties' bill positions is more difficult. I cannot simply infer a position from a party's electoral platform since bills are specific and manifestos are general. Furthermore, I cannot wait until the first legislative vote on the bill since it occurs after the debate.

Consequently, I measure each party's bill position using the first speech that each party made at the outset of each plenary debate. I refer to this as the party's kickoff speech. It is generally given, on behalf of the government, by the relevant minister or parliamentary secretary, and by each opposition party's designated critic. In all instances, I assume that the MP who delivers her party's kickoff speech is authorized to articulate her party's official position on the bill.³²

I manually code the kickoff speeches, looking for positive and negative statements about the bill. The coding unit is the sentence. I summarize these statements by subtracting the number of negative sentences from the number of positive sentences.³³ To save time, I code only the first and last 200 words of each kickoff speech.³⁴

Figure 3 presents the distribution of bill preferences by party. Not surprisingly, the governing Liberals are far and away the most favorable – after all, they proposed all of these bills. The PC Party is the most ambivalent, with values clustered around 0 (i.e., an equal number of positive and negative statements). On average, the Canadian Alliance is the most hostile of the opposition parties.

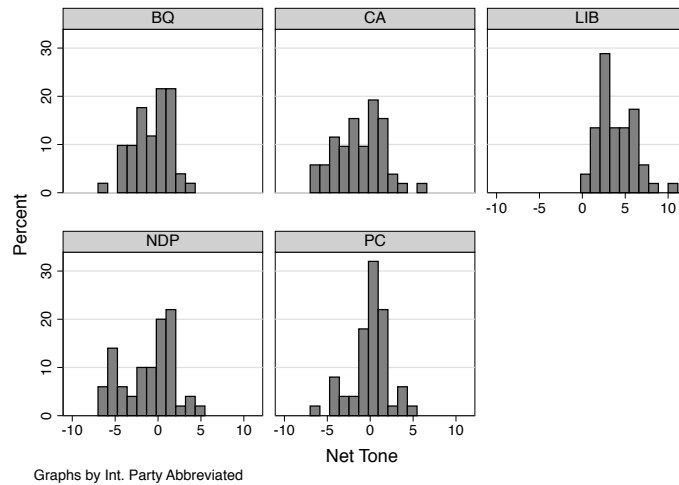
³¹ Time constraints meant that I was unable to collect data on a measure of workload.

³² In fact, in most instances, this is actually quite explicit (e.g., the BQ MP will say something like “the BQ cannot support this bill”, etc.).

³³ Further details about the coding procedure are available from the author.

³⁴ I chose these opening and closing statements because many kickoff speeches are constructed like academic papers – with summary statements articulated at either the outset, the end, or both. Admittedly, imposing this restriction means that the resulting measures will be inevitably less precise than if I had coded the entire speech. It is my intention in future work to automate the coding and to apply it to the kickoff speeches in their entirety.

Figure 3 - Distribution of bill positions by party

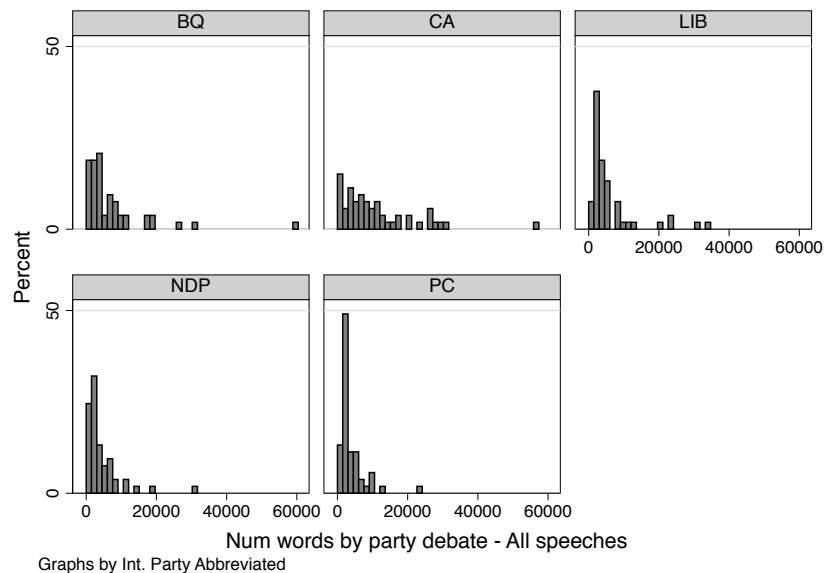


To be consistent with the theory and to simplify the forthcoming analysis, I trichotomize the measure: defining a party as opposed to a bill when its net score is less than -1, in favor of a bill when its net score is greater than 1, and ambivalent with respect to a bill when its net score is -1, 0, or 1. To summarize the preferences of the *target* parties, I count the number of opposed, ambivalent, and favorable parties for each bill – not including the party doing the talking.

5 - Explaining plenary bill debates

Figure 4 provides an initial glimpse of parties' debate participation. Two things are notable at this stage. First, there is considerable variation across the parties. In a typical debate, Canadian Alliance MPs speak for a total of roughly 7,500 words – the most loquacious of the five parties. That is roughly one hour of party speechmaking. In contrast, the median number of words spoken in debate by NDP and PC MPs in the order of 2,700 words.

Figure 4 - Distribution of debate participation by party



Part of the variation across parties is likely due to the relatively better floor access enjoyed by the larger parties. The informal arrangements governing recognition by the presiding officer mean that members of each party – should they wish to debate – are called upon in proportion to their caucus size. This means that smaller parties have to work a little harder to match the volume of words spoken by the larger parties.³⁵

Second, the distributions in Figure 4 are similar to the distribution of the number of speeches by MPs in Figure 1. The large proportion of low counts and the long right tail are characteristic of count measures. In other words, for many debates, parties stop talking fairly quickly.

All parties debated virtually all bills. Of the 225 chances the parties had to engaged in untruncated debate (i.e., the 45 debates that were not truncated x the five parties), they failed to do so on only seven occasions, or 3% of the time.³⁶ Furthermore, of the 218 occasions in which a party chose to engage in an untruncated debate, it ceased debating after a first round of speechmaking on 88 occasions, or 40% of the time. Both of these findings are consistent with a norm

³⁵ I argue, however, that while smaller parties are disadvantaged in their floor access, they are hardly prevented from talking at great length if they so chose. Even with firm limits on the amount of time any *single* MP may speak, and even with a chamber rule preventing an MP from speaking twice to the same motion, a well-organized and motivated smaller party could still keep debate going indefinitely (or, at least, for a very long time) by regularly moving amendments and subamendments to the main motion. Each amendment and subamendment constitutes a new question, allowing each member of the caucus to speak again and again in the same plenary debate. Indeed, I found no evidence that smaller parties came close to exhausting their ability to engage in plenary debate on any bill in the study. For example, the NDP and PCs spoke for 31,067 and 23,068 words respectively on an anti-terror bill in May 2002 (bill C-55).

³⁶ In fact, of these seven occasions, five stem from a decision by all five parties not to debate the innocuously titled “Act to correct certain anomalies, inconsistencies and errors and to deal with other matters of a non-controversial and uncomplicated nature in the Statutes of Canada and to repeal certain provisions that have expired, lapsed, or otherwise ceased to have effect” (bill C-40).

that prescribes that all bills receive a minimum level of debate. To be sure, these findings do not demonstrate such a norm. At most, they demonstrated a repeated or customary behavior, but one I argue that cannot be readily explained otherwise.³⁷

In the following analyses, I take this routinized behavior out of the equation by recomputing each party's contribution to plenary bill debates as the total number of words spoken *after* the first round of speakers. The idea is that, if the first round is merely customary or *pro forma*, then the puzzling phenomenon is not why parties debate, but rather why they choose to debate beyond the first round.

Table 3 presents negative binomial regression estimates of three models of the quantity of party speechmaking beyond the first round. The three models reflect different ways of incorporating party bill preferences when evaluating the interparty persuasion thesis. Model 1 uses the number of other parties in the chamber that are *opposed* to the bill. Model 2 uses the number of other parties that are *ambivalent* toward the bill. Model 3 incorporates the number of other parties that *favor* the bill. All models also include, as controls, party dummies as well as an indicator of whether debate on the bill was truncated. The reported standard errors are clustered on the bill to account for any non-independence that may arise from having multiple observations of each bill.

³⁷ An illustrative example is the 500-word contribution of the BQ to a debate on a bill that change governance arrangements for natural resources in the northern territory of Nunavut (C-33). Nunavut's government should be of little interest to the Quebec separatist party; nevertheless the party decided to participate in the first round of speechmaking.

Table 3 - Negative Binomial Regression Models of Party Speechmaking

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Party is Ambivalent	-.62 (.68)	-.12 (.76)	-.40 (.47)
Party is In Favor	-1.66* (.79)	-1.57* (.69)	-1.88** (.70)
Number Opposed	.17 (.24)	---	---
Number Ambiv	---	-.14 (.26)	---
Number In Favor	---	---	.14 (.35)
Ambiv * Number Opposed	.15 (.27)	---	---
In Favor * Number Opposed	.03 (.32)	---	---
Ambiv * Number Ambiv	---	-.23 (.35)	---
In Favor * Number Ambiv	---	-.20 (.26)	---
Ambiv * Number In Favor	---	---	-.26 (.32)
In Favor * Number In Favor	---	---	-.03 (.41)
Days to recess	-.004 ^a (.002)	-.005* (.002)	-.005* (.002)
Ambiv * Days to recess	.002 (.004)	.001 (.004)	.003 (.004)
In Favor * Days to recess	.007* (.003)	.008** (.003)	.008** (.003)
CA	.87*** (.22)	.90*** (.22)	.77*** (.21)
LIB	.45 (.27)	.73* (.33)	.59** (.20)
NDP	-.53* (.23)	-.58* (.25)	-.66** (.24)
PC	-.79*** (.19)	-.78*** (.21)	-.84*** (.20)
Truncated	.78 ^a (.40)	.93* (.44)	1.00* (.43)
Constant	8.54*** (.53)	8.97*** (.46)	8.71*** (.515)
ln (α)	2.06 (.16)	2.08 (.16)	2.07 (.16)
N	255	255	255

^a $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. The standard errors in parentheses are calculated by clustering on the bill. The dependent variable is a count of the number of words spoken by each party following the initial round of speakers in each plenary bill debate.

To again aid in the substantive interpretation of negative binomial coefficients, I plot the expected number of words spoken (i.e., predicted event counts) at pertinent covariate values, setting the party indicator to the largest opposition party (the Canadian Alliance) and setting the debate truncation indicator to not truncated.

Figure 5 plots the predicted number of words spoken – separately for parties that are opposed, ambivalent, or in favor of the bill – at different counts of the number of *other* parties opposed to the bill. The figure offers no evidence of interparty persuasion. Parties that are ambivalent toward the bill seem to talk just as much as parties that oppose it. Furthermore, while the interparty persuasion account would suggest *less* talk from an opposing party as the number of opposing parties grows, there is no evidence of this either. In fact, the expected number of words increases, albeit not at conventional levels of statistical significance – an apparent instance of preaching to the choir.

Figure 5 - Adjusted predictions at different counts of opposed other parties, with 95% CIs

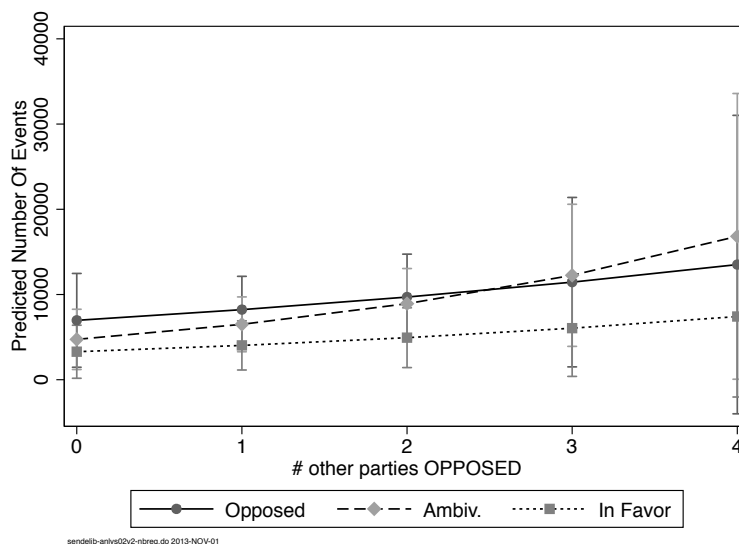


Figure 6 points to the same conclusion. Here the predictions are calculated at different counts of the number of other parties that are *ambivalent* with respect to the bill. In this instance, the interparty persuasion thesis would lead us to expect parties with positions on the bill (either in favor or opposed) to talk *more* as the number of ambivalent other parties increases. In other words, if debate is about interparty persuasion, then we should expect parties to exert more rhetorical effort when there are more plausible targets for persuasion – i.e., as more parties become “up for grabs”. Figure 6 shows quite clearly that is not the case. In fact, if anything, a party talks less when the other parties in chamber are ambivalent regarding the bill at hand.

Figure 6 - Adjusted predictions at different counts of ambivalent other parties, with 95% CIs

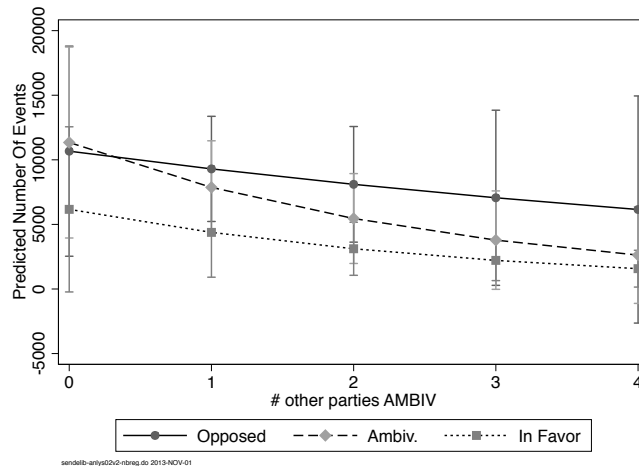
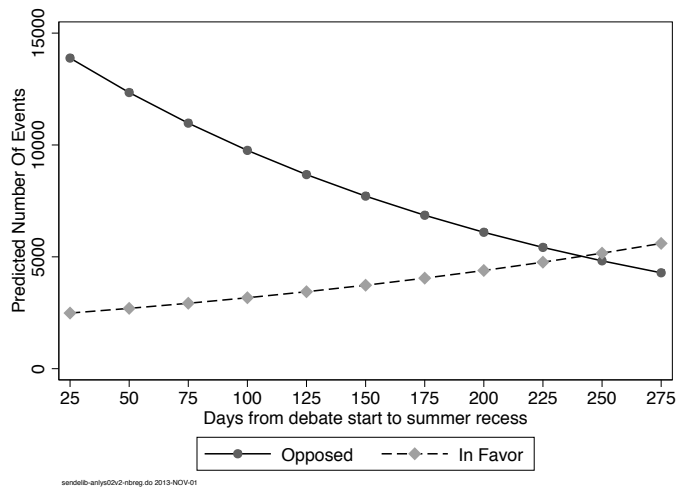


Table 3 does, however, provide strong evidence of obstruction. Consider Figure 7, which plots the expected number of words spoken for different lengths of time prior to the summer adjournment period.³⁸ To minimize the clutter, I drop the confidence intervals as well as the predictions for ambivalent parties (which, as one might expect, occupy the middle area between the two curves). Consistent with an obstruction-based account of plenary bill debates, the figure shows that parties opposed to a bill talk more when the adjournment approaches (moving to the left on the graph). Conversely, parties that favor a bill debate it less as the adjournment looms.

Figure 7 - Adjusted predictions at different lengths of time before summer adjournment



As summarized in Table 3, these relationships are statistically significant at conventional levels. Substantively, the model predicts that the Canadian Alliance

³⁸ The predictions are based on the estimates from Model 3, although the substantive inferences are the same regardless of which estimates are used.

would devote just over 4,800 words – or roughly half an hour beyond the end of the initial round – to debating a bill that it opposes if that debate is held 250 days prior to the summer adjournment (i.e., the previous October). In contrast, if the same party were to debate the same bill in May, a mere 50 days before the summer recess, the model predicts that the party would speak for 12,300 words – a full hour longer than the October debate. This additional hour, multiplied by several readings per bill, dozens of bills, and four opposition parties, could well present a meaningful obstacle to a government eager to see its legislation passed before the house rises for the summer.

6 – Discussion and future plans

Parliament devotes an enormous portion of its time to debating government bills – a puzzling arrangement in a party-dominated system where, scholars and practitioners agree, individual debaters are not open to persuasion. In this paper, I entertained several alternative explanations for why legislators would still wish to debate, foregoing other more useful or enjoyable activities to pursue a seemingly futile exercise. Contrary recent evidence of individualized position taking in other legislative activities like Question Period, private members' business, or the rare dissenting vote, I showed that the frequency of speechmaking is unrelated to MPs' incentives to develop and maintain personal electoral support in their districts. Instead, I showed that mid-level party spokespeople – the government's parliamentary secretaries and the opposition parties' critics – give many more speeches than backbenchers.

Given this apparent partisan orchestration, I offered five possible explanations for why parties debate. I showed that while the parties debated nearly all government bills brought to the chamber, they stop debating soon after they start – often allowing debate to collapse after a single round of speeches from each party. I argued that this was suggestive of a norm or a routine of putting the party's position on the record and then packing it in.

That said, the parties still spoke for a combined total of just over a million words in initial plenary bill debates that extended beyond the customary first round. I showed that such speechmaking is inconsistent with what one would expect if a party uses debate to try to persuade other parties. A party opposed to a bill does not talk any less, on average, when several other parties are also hostile to the bill. Furthermore, they do not talk any more, on average, when several other parties are ambivalent and thus potentially receptive to persuasion.

Instead, much of plenary bill debates appears to be about obstruction. I showed that parties hostile to a bill will debate more when those bills are brought up for consideration in the spring compared with the previous fall or winter. This is some of the most direct evidence yet of Franks' (1985, 1987) and Charlton's (1997) claim that systematic obstruction motivates much of the chamber's plenary bill debates.

Nevertheless, it cannot be the whole story. Obstruction alone cannot explain why MPs debate. The governing Liberal MPs, for example, spoke for a combined total of 200,000 words in plenary bill debates that stretched beyond the first round. Since the governing party has little incentive to obstruct its own bills, and since there is scant evidence that parties seek to persuade each other, this phenomenon remains a mystery for now.

Of course, conspicuously missing from these analyses – but not from the theory – are estimates of the role of public messaging. In future work, I intend to incorporate measures of the popularity of these bills – or, at least, for a subset of bills that are potentially visible to the mass public.

Finally, even if we are to conclude – perhaps dispiritingly – that interparty persuasion is absent from plenary bill debates in the Commons, this is not to suggest that persuasion or thoughtful deliberation is absent from the parliamentary process altogether. In their kickoff speeches, party spokespeople often expressed a desired to see a bill swiftly referred to committee where a more thorough study could take place. Thus, while parties may at times be genuinely open to persuasion, the venue for that conversation may be in committee rather than on the chamber floor. Likewise, Canadian scholars and senators alike have repeatedly argued that meaningful deliberation is still alive and well in the upper chamber (e.g., Lynch-Staunton 2000; Marsden 2009; Murray 2003; Smith 2003). I intend to extend the scope of this analysis in future work to these other legislative stages and venues.

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