

# **Dynamic Political Rhetoric: Electoral, Economic, and Partisan Determinants of Speech-Making in the UK Parliament**

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## Abstract:

Parliamentary debate is one major outlet for Members of Parliament (MPs), who spend lots of time preparing for and participating in such discussions. In this paper, we investigate in how far the focus MPs choose in their speeches varies as the economic, partisan and electoral context changes. We choose to study the dynamics nature of speech content in the UK House of Commons, as British MPs enjoy broad discretion regarding the content of their speeches. This paper analyses the constituency, national or partisan focus of all speeches held in the House of Commons between January 1996 and September 2004. We find that government and opposition MPs react differently to contextual changes. Government MPs generally have a higher district focus, which is increased further when the local economy declines and when the governing party becomes more popular.

## 1. Introduction

Electoral systems with single-member districts, such as in the United Kingdom, undeniably provide a geographical link between constituents and members of parliament (MPs). This “electoral connection” provides an important stimulus for constituency service of incumbent MPs. By engaging in representational activities with a focus on their parliamentary constituency in parliament, MPs can hope to increase their electoral prospects in their constituency at the next election (Cain, Ferejohn, and Fiorina, 1987; Carey and Shugart 1995; Farrell and Scully 2007). Political institutions, however, can curb such personal incentives when the importance of political parties trumps personal electoral considerations. In parliamentary system where governments rely on the support of a parliamentary majority, party unity is high and the opportunities for dissenting MP behavior are limited (Sieberer 2006; Carey 2007).

We investigate the parliamentary activity that provides MPs with the best opportunity to modify their representational focus: parliamentary debate. We focus on the United Kingdom as system that provides opposing incentives for MP behavior. While the geographical link between legislators and their electorate provides incentives for constituency representation, strong government control of the parliamentary agenda encourages confrontational partisan politics. Parliamentary debate in the UK has a particular set of features that allow a dynamic study of representation. First, MPs can deliver a parliamentary speech by catching the Speaker’s eye without prior partisan approval, as opposed to systems where parties regulate speaking time (Proksch and Slapin 2012). Second, parliamentary speeches are an inexpensive and flexible outlet for MPs to emphasize constituency-oriented or partisan interests. Finally, MPs can change their rhetoric during the course of the legislative term due to the relatively high number of speeches per MP compared to other individual MP activities such as early day motions (Kellerman 2012) or private member bills (Bowler 2010).

We argue that British MPs balance constituency and partisan rhetoric in speeches as a function of changing economic conditions in their constituencies, changes in party popularity, and electoral proximity. We furthermore confirm existing evidence on the influence of political institutions and intra-party politics on debate participation (Proksch and Slapin 2012, 2013). One of the most important results of our analysis is the effect of changing economic conditions in parliamentary constituencies. Our data analysis of UK parliamentary speeches between 1996 and 2004 shows that government MPs increase their rhetorical district focus when unemployment in their parliamentary constituencies increases, while opposition MPs persistently engage in partisan rhetoric. Furthermore, as the government's popularity compared to the major competitor rises, government MPs increase their district focus while opposition MPs increasingly focus on the nation or party level. This suggests that opposition MPs seek to close this popularity gap by attacking the government, whereas government MPs attempt to provide a stronger voice for their constituents during those times.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

British MPs face few constraints when delivering parliamentary speeches. To participate in a debate or at question time, MPs rise from their seats to catch the Speaker's eye and obtain his attention. Even though MPs may contact the Speaker ahead of a particular debate to indicate their desire to be called, the Speaker may honor such requests but does not need to follow them, in particular in popular debates (Sandford 2012). Moreover, parliamentary debate in the UK is characterized by frequent interventions and spontaneity, as members are not allowed to read a prepared speech (*ibid.*). Scholars have emphasized three aspects of parliamentary debate: as an opportunity for representing constituency interests, as a central arena to defend or attack government proposals, and as an activity characterized by an institutional selection process. We discuss each of these aspects and then formulate hypotheses with regard to the dynamics of speech-making in the House of Commons.

## **2.1. Parliamentary Speech as Constituency Representation**

Despite the dominant role of parties in British elections (Carey and Shugart 1995) and a government-controlled legislative agenda (Lijphart 1999; Tsebelis 2002), there is ample evidence, both observational and survey-based, that British MPs do consider their constituents in their parliamentary activities (Cain, Ferejohn, and Fiorina 1987; Norton 1994; Norris 1997; Carey 2007; Farrell and Scully 2007), leading some to speak of the “puzzle of constituency service” (Norris 1997). In other words, personal vote seeking incentives appear to influence MP activities in single-member electoral districts despite the importance of parties’ “brand names” during elections. As they seek re-election, MPs build a personal reputation, and the level of interaction with constituents is an important component of their behaviour. In his comparative study of party discipline in Westminster systems, Kam (2009) stresses how important it is for MPs to consider the preferences of their constituents to enhance their name recognition.

Studying MPs’ stated constituency focus in single-member districts in Westminster systems, Heitshusen, Young, and Wood (2005) show that MPs with unsafe seats are more likely to rank their constituency as their primary focus. While this provides an indication of the possible variation of district orientation among MPs, focusing on MPs’ characteristics alone is insufficient to explain variation over an entire parliamentary term. Elite surveys of MPs or candidates, moreover, are insufficient to study representational activities due to their snapshot view and low response rates. Moreover, elite survey responses on constituency focus are likely to suffer from a social desirability bias, as MPs have an incentive to overstate their constituency roles.

An increasing number of scholars therefore relies on parliamentary speech to measure constituency focus. For example, Martin (2011) codes parliamentary questions in the Irish Dáil between 1997 and 2002 to measure a local or national focus of MPs’ question activity.

Saalfeld (2011) codes parliamentary questions in the UK House of Commons to show that MPs from minority groups are responsive to minority-related concerns, but that non-minority MPs also respond to the sociodemographic composition of their constituency. For Canada, Soroka, Penner and Blidook (2009) show that the number of oral questions increases as seat safety decreases. In their words, “MPs participate more when they face more competition in the next election” (ibid., p.580). They furthermore show that having a military base in a constituency increases questions on defense policy, and ideological rightward shifts of constituency preferences increase MPs’ number of tax/debt related questions. Moreover, they find that MPs representing constituencies with a high overall unemployment rate are more likely to ask welfare-related questions. In short, parliamentary speech may provide ample information on the constituency focus of MPs. MPs may use this tool to be particularly responsive to changing constituent concerns.

## **2.2. Parliamentary Speech as Government-Opposition Debate**

Despite an electoral system with single-member districts that create electoral connections between MPs and constituents, parties in the UK House of Commons act in a highly cohesive manner when voting on bills due to strong government agenda control (Lijphart 1999, Tsebelis 2002, Kam 2009). Most votes in the House of Commons are whipped, meaning that party leaders issue instructions on how backbenchers should vote and party whips monitor whether party MPs actually behave accordingly. Using roll-call data for the 1990s, Sieberer (2006) estimates the average party unity index in the UK for the two main parties to be 99.3 (out of 100), meaning parties act almost always as a unitary actor. Similarly, Benedetto and Hix (2007) find that an average Labour MP rebelled, i.e. voted against the majority position of the party, on 1.3 percent of votes between 2001 and 2005. Tracing individual backbencher dissent between 1945 and 2005, Kam (2009) shows that while the percentage of MPs

dissenting at least once has increased over time, the percentage of MPs voting against the party whip when dissenting divisions occur remains relatively low.

Due to the frequency of single-party governments in the UK, relatively infrequent party rebellion, and a legislative process dominated by the executive, voters may consider a vote for a candidate as a choice for a party instead of for an individual politician representing a constituency. Even if infrequent, party rebellion can have electoral rewards. Kam (2009) shows that name recognition can increase as a result of rebellion in the UK and Vivyan and Wagner (2012) demonstrate that MP party rebellion can be an electorally successful strategy, in particular if a constituent evaluates the party leadership negatively. They estimated a moderately rebellious Labour MP between 2001 and 2005 to receive a constituency vote share about 1.5 percentage points higher than a loyal Labour MP.

Thus, while party rebellion is a prominent phenomenon, it occurs infrequently and for the most part MPs' voting behavior follows the party line. We would therefore expect that MPs also act as faithful party members during large portions of parliamentary debates, which provide an opportunity for opposition MPs to attack the government and for government MPs to defend their policies.

### **2.3. Parliamentary Speech as a Selection Process**

The previous account of parliamentary speech suggests a tremendous potential for the study of political representation. Yet, it is important to consider that not all MPs actually participate in debates. Recently, Proksch and Slapin (2012, 2013) have proposed a model of the institutional foundations of legislative speech that embeds the decision to speak on the floor of parliament into a strategic intra-party context defined by the electoral environment. In this model, MP participation in parliamentary debates is considered a selection process: not all MPs want to (or are allowed to) participate in any given debate on a bill. In electoral environments where the party label is important for parties' electoral fortunes, as in

proportional representation systems, party leaders will try to control the party message on the floor of parliament. This in turn means that MPs who are ideologically closer to the party leadership should be more likely to participate in debates and defend the party line rather than highlight a dissenting opinion from the party position. Conversely, in systems with a stronger local electoral connection, such as in the British first-past-the-post system, party leaders will allow their MPs more liberties to voice their district concerns, even if it is at the cost of diluting the party label. Thus, individual backbenchers have the opportunity in parliament to speak without strong party control. For the UK, they show that backbenchers are more likely to participate in debates than party leaders and that government MPs are also more active than opposition MPs. Any content analysis of parliamentary speech, therefore, needs to take into account the selection process that excludes (or provides little information for) a particular set of MPs.

## **2.4. Our Approach**

We model MPs focus in parliamentary speeches as a balance between two competing interests. On the one hand, MPs can emphasize constituency (or district) concerns. On the other hand, MPs can focus on attacking the opposing side and on national, rather than local, politics. This trade-off exists as the overall time at their disposal is limited. In other words, in order to determine an MP's responsiveness to local issues, it is not sufficient to look at such issues alone. Instead, it is the relative emphasis an MP chooses to put on the district in contrast to partisan and national issues, and we expect several time-varying variables to influence the focus an MP chooses during the parliamentary term. We consider the economic, electoral, and partisan context for MPs' speech content.

Concerning the economic context, the state of the British economy as a whole cannot explain variation across MPs and over time. Instead, we consider the economic conditions in each parliamentary constituency. Accordingly, if the economic situation in the constituency

worsens, we expect an MP to raise awareness for this problem by emphasizing the electoral district in parliamentary debates. This yields dynamic responsiveness in parliamentary speeches, as MPs will adjust their communicated message according to changing local economic conditions.

*Hypothesis 1 (local economy): MPs' district focus in parliamentary speeches increases (and party focus decreases) as unemployment in the parliamentary constituency increases.*

Several scholars have noted that electoral insecurity is an important consideration for British MPs' parliamentary activities, "spurring MPs to devote more time to constituency service" (Kam 2009, p. 111). We would therefore expect that personal vote seeking through the expression of local concerns is particularly important when the re-election of the MP is uncertain (Benedetto and Hix 2007; Heitshusen et al. 2005; Bowler 2010).

*Hypothesis 2 (seat safety): MPs' district focus in parliamentary speeches decreases (and party focus increases) as seat safety increases.*

Seat safety is also related to historic voting patterns of a parliamentary constituency. If an MP successfully challenged an incumbent MP from another party in a constituency, this may create pressure for the MP to represent local concerns in parliamentary speeches in the subsequent parliamentary term.

*Hypothesis 3 (constituency turnover): MPs who previously conquered a constituency from an incumbent MP from a different party express a higher district focus in their parliamentary speeches.*

The responsiveness of MPs to district concerns should be higher as general elections approach compared to any other time during the parliamentary term. MPs can thus be expected to use the time of heightened attention around elections to enhance their image as responsive representatives by focusing on local issues in parliamentary speeches.

*Hypothesis 4 (electoral proximity): The closer the next election, the higher the district focus.*

Apart from these electoral and economic considerations, we also consider the partisan dimension of parliamentary debate. After all, parliamentary debates in the House of Commons are confrontational with government members facing opposition MPs. At the outset, one would not expect differences in the balance of district and party focus between government and opposition MPs. However, considering that government members set the legislative agenda, one would indeed expect that opposition MPs use parliamentary speeches as an opportunity to criticize government policy more generally. Government MPs, on the contrary, can afford to focus more on district issues. This intuition has been confirmed by Martin (2011) whose study of question activity in the Irish Dáil finds that government MPs have a higher district focus in their parliamentary question than opposition MPs. Furthermore, he also finds that opposition MPs ask more questions related to foreign policy and thus the national level than government backbenchers do (Martin, 2013). He interprets this as opposition MPs fulfilling their role by holding the government accountable for their policies (ibid. p. 124).

*Hypothesis 5 (government): MPs of the governing party have a higher district focus (lower party focus) than opposition MPs.*

Regardless of their membership in a governing or opposition party, MPs with leadership roles should focus more on party and national politics than on local politics in their speeches. Previous studies have shown that constituency service efforts decline with a high parliamentary rank (Kam, 2009), ministers are more loyal MPs (Benedetto and Hix 2007), and constituency is less important to MPs as portfolio responsibilities increase (Heitshusen et al. 2005).

*Hypothesis 6 (party leader): Party leaders have a higher party/national focus than backbenchers.*

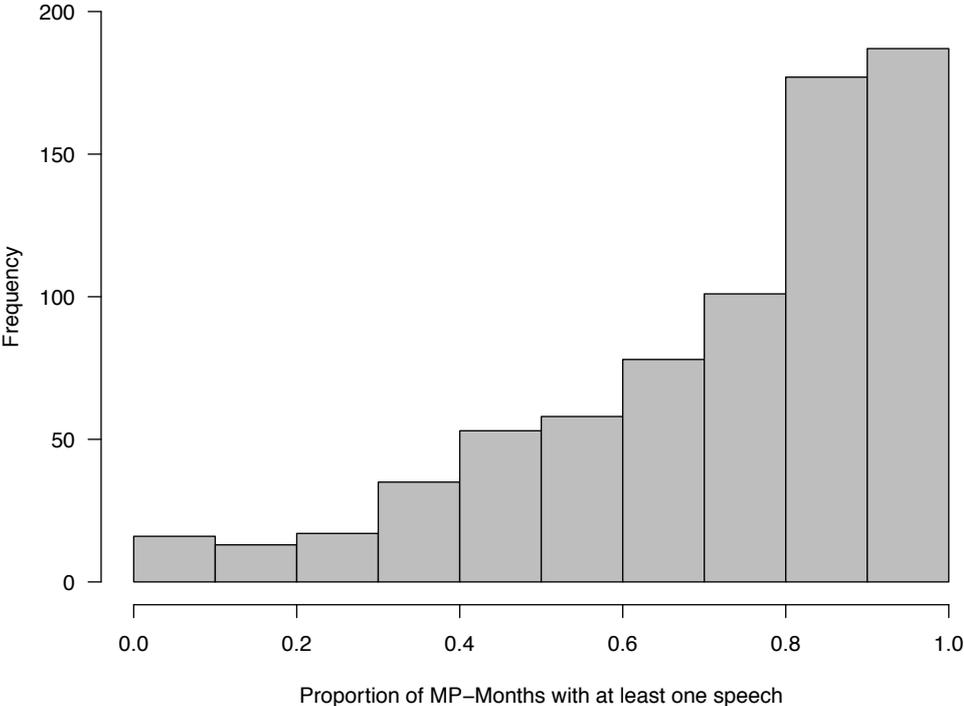
The national popularity of government may decrease during the course of a parliamentary term, providing an indicator for governing MPs that their re-election, even if not specific to their electoral district, may be endangered. We therefore expect that governing MPs will increase their district focus if the national popularity of their party decreases relative to the opposition.

*Hypothesis 7 (government party popularity): Decreasing national popularity of the government increases the district focus of governing MPs and increases the party/national focus of opposition MPs.*

### 3. Data and Method

We examine parliamentary speeches in the UK House of Commons between 1996 and 2004. Data on unemployment rates in parliamentary constituencies only cover the period since 1996, therefore limiting our analysis for the time being to two full terms of the Labour government and the final one and a half years of the Conservative government. Our unit of analysis are monthly speeches per MP. Thus, we aggregate all individual speeches of each MP delivered in each month prior to calculating our quantity of interest (district versus party/national focus). Figure 1 shows the distribution of MP-months in our dataset with at least one speech. The plot shows that most MPs are highly active. During this time period, an average MP gave at least one speech per month in more than half of the months. Only 1.5 percent of MPs are completely inactive. In contrast, 25 percent of MPs give at least one speech in more than 90 percent of MP-months, and 5 percent of MPs give at least one speech in all months.

**Figure 1. Parliamentary Speech Activity by MP-Month in the UK, 1996-2004**



We apply an automated content analysis to measure the expressed balance on district and party/national issues. This is a challenging task because of the various possibilities available to MPs for expressing local concerns or partisan policy. We therefore first identify keywords that are indicative of a constituency or district focus and those indicative of a party or national focus of the speech. These are shown in **Error! Reference source not found.** We use references to the constituency and local references as district keywords. For example, when an MP refers to “my constituents”, “my constituency”, or “where I live”. These expressions are generic, but capture the intention to highlight the MP’s role as the representative of his constituency. This can be seen for example in the following statement, made by John McDonnell in the debate on the Iraq war:

I want to put my views on record for **my constituents** and the community **where I live** and which I work hard to represent so that they know and understand what I do today.  
- John McDonnell on March 18, 2003

MPs can also focus on national and partisan issues in their speeches. One possibility is to refer back to the general debate in their contribution. For doing so, there are several standing expressions in the British House of Commons to refer to other MPs. As the speeches are formally addressed to the Speaker of the House, the Members of Parliament refer to each other in the third person. Thus, parliamentary practice dictates that they use the expressions “honorable Friend”, which is generally reserved for references to members of the same party, or the general “honorable Member”, “honorable Gentleman”, or “honorable Lady”. Another possibility to refer to the party/national level is to stress the role of the major parties, either directly (“Labour Party” and “Conservative Party”) or in their function as government and opposition (e.g. “the Prime Minister”, “the Minister”, “the Government”, “the Opposition”). Lastly, MPs can also choose to refer to the general national interest using expressions such as “national”, “British”, or “this nation”.

**Table 1. Keywords Used for Parliamentary Speech Analysis**

District Focus	Party/National Focus	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• My constituent*</li> <li>• My surgery</li> <li>• Where I was born</li> <li>• Where I live</li> <li>• Where I grew up</li> <li>• Local</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hon Friend</li> <li>• Hon Member</li> <li>• Hon Gentleman</li> <li>• Hon Gentlemen</li> <li>• Hon Lady</li> <li>• Hon and learned member</li> <li>• Labour Party</li> <li>• Conservative Party</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Prime Minister</li> <li>• The Minister</li> <li>• Ministers</li> <li>• The Government</li> <li>• The Opposition</li> <li>• The previous Government</li> <li>• Home Secretary</li> <li>• Secretary of State</li> <li>• National</li> <li>• British</li> <li>• Britain</li> <li>• This country</li> <li>• This nation</li> </ul>

Two examples can illustrate speeches with a party/national focus. The first clearly expresses partisan division on policy:

At this moment, **the Government**—and the right **hon. Gentleman** as their faithful ally—are benefiting from the strength of the economy that they inherited from **the previous Government** and the decisions that that **Government** took, many of which were deeply unpopular. Those decisions were opposed mostly, but not entirely, by the right **hon. Gentleman** and almost entirely by the **Labour party**. However, their legacy is an economic climate unlike that inherited from any **previous Government**. The right **hon. Gentleman** would do well to reflect on that point.  
 - John Major on June 2, 1998.

The second speech refers more to a general British interest, rather than partisan conflict, but is also an example of a party/national rather than a district focus:

The **hon. Gentleman** should be aware that the **Secretary of State** is at the Environment Council, and has written to **the Opposition** to tell them that she is there looking after **British** interests. [Interruption.] The **hon. Gentleman** does not care about **British** interests, but we do, and the **Secretary of State** does.  
 - Alun Michael on October 17, 2002.

To generate our measure of the balance between a district and a party-national speech focus, we count the number of keywords used by each MP in each month between January 1996 and September 2004 using the electronic Historic Hansard database.<sup>1</sup> To capture the balance, one possibility is to subtract the number of district keywords per month-MP from the number of party-national keywords. However, an important consideration speaks against this procedure. It would attribute each keyword count in the two categories the same marginal effect. Lowe et al. (2011) have argued that what matters for expressing a position with categories is not so much the absolute difference between counts, but rather the ratio between them. This means that additional keywords in each category will have decreasing marginal effects. We consequently implement Lowe et al.'s empirical logit scale for our two categories.

$$\text{SpeechFocus} = \log \frac{\text{District} + .5}{\text{PartyNational} + .5}$$

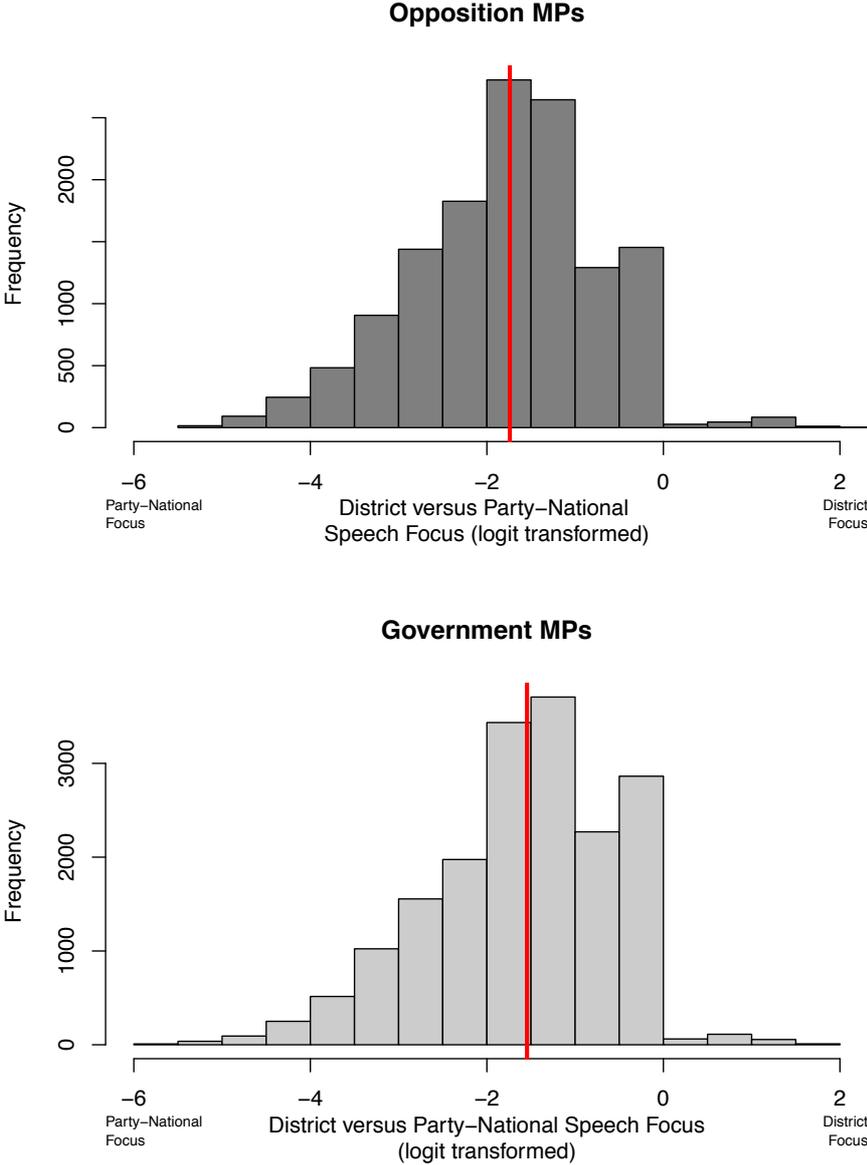
The benefit is that we can consider the balance between the two categories and that additional counts of either category have diminishing marginal effects on speech focus measure. We also implement Lowe et al.'s suggestion to add 0.5 to all counts to make the measure more robust to small category counts. Figure 2 shows the distribution of our speech focus measure. The mean value for both government and opposition MPs is negative, meaning that MPs used on average relatively more keywords referring to party/national politics than those referring to local constituency politics. We note that our keyword-based approach implies that changes to the dictionary entries, i.e. adding or removing keywords, may result in new absolute values of the individual MP's balance between party/national and district politics. Therefore, we refrain from interpreting a zero value on this scale as a substantively balanced expression of

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<sup>1</sup> The website can be access at <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/>. The online archive does not extend beyond 2004. We plan to add data for 2005-2010 from the official House of Commons website.

party/national and district politics in absence of an external anchor (see Lowe et al. 2011, p.131).

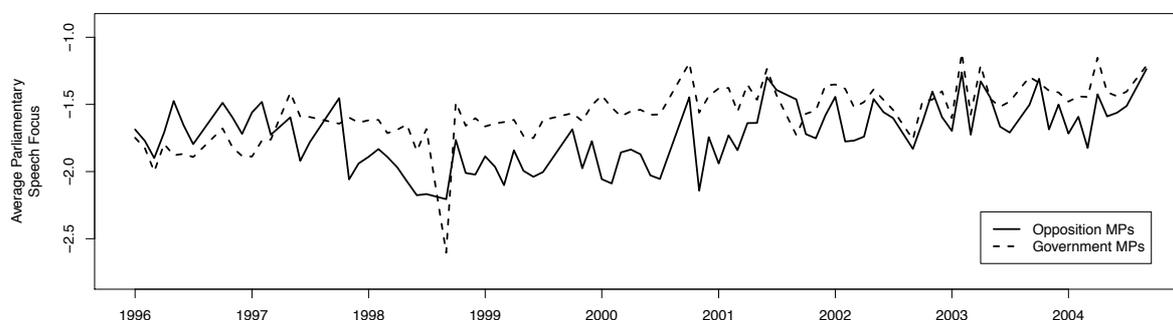
**Figure 2. District versus Party-National Focus in UK House of Commons Speeches (1996-2004)**



Note: red lines show average values.

Figure 3 shows that there is substantial variation over time of this expressed balance. The plot shows that in almost all months, government MPs have a higher district focus than opposition MPs, lending first support to Hypothesis 5.

**Figure 3. Average District versus Party-National Focus in UK House of Commons Speeches over Time (1996-2004)**



This difference is particularly strong for the first Labour term under Tony Blair between 1998 and 2001, a result that appears to be driven more by a stronger focus of opposition MPs on party and national politics than by a stronger focus of government MPs on district politics.

To measure the current economic situation of the MP's parliamentary constituency, we use the unemployment rate on the basis of claimant count statistics, which is the proportion of the resident population aged between 16 and 64 years receiving unemployment benefits (ONS, 2013). This measure varies per parliamentary constituency and by month. Another constituency-related measure pertaining to the electoral context is the seat safety, i.e. the margin of victory in the previous general election, measured as the difference in percentage points between the vote share received by the MP and the runner-up candidate in the constituency. In addition, we expect upcoming elections to have an effect on parliamentary speech making and include a dummy for whether the next election is held within a year of the speech-month.

We measure partisan and institutional characteristics as follows. First, the popularity of the different parties – as assessed in opinion polls – changes over time. We focus on the popularity difference between the governing party and the major opposition party (i.e. between the Conservative government and the Labour party between January 1996 and May

1997 and the Labour government and the Conservative party after that). As a measure, we calculate the government popularity gap by subtracting the percentage share of respondents intending to vote for the major contestant from the share of those intending to vote for the governing party. A positive value thus indicates that more respondents intend to vote for governing than for the opposition Party.

We include several additional dummies: the first one indicates whether the MP belongs to a party in government or opposition, the second whether an MP holds a leader position (party whip, Parliamentary Under Secretary, Minister of State or a Member of the (Shadow) Cabinet) – both these variables are from Proksch and Slapin (2013) –, and a third whether the MP conquered a constituency from an MP from a different party. An overview of the variables is shown in Table 2.

**Table 2. Overview of variables**

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Operationalization</b>	<b>Variation</b>	<b>Min</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Max</b>
Speech Focus	Logit transformed relation between district keyword counts and party/national keyword counts. A positive value indicates a higher district focus.	MP per month	-5.87	-1.19	2.12
Unemployment Rate Change	Change in the claimant count rate in one month compared to the average of the preceding three months	Constituency per month	-3.17	-0.07	1.60
Government MP	Whether that MP's party is in government (1) or not (0)	Party per legislative term	0	0.44	1
Party Leader	Whether the MP is a whip, a parliamentary under secretary, a minister of state or a member of the (shadow) cabinet	MP per month	0	0.17	1
Seat Safety	Difference between the vote share received by the MP and that of the runner-up	MP per election	0	22.07	74.36
Electoral Proximity	Whether the next election is to be held within a year of the speech (1) or not (0)	Month	0	0.26	1
Government Popularity Gap	Difference in the vote intention for the governing party and the major contestant	Party per month	-36	13.20	34
Constituency Turnover	Whether the constituency was represented by an MP of another party in the previous term (1) or not (0)	Constituency per election	0	0.15	1

We analyze the data as follows. We first apply a standard OLS model predicting the speech focus for those MP-months with positive speech counts, since our dependent variable is undefined for those months in which the MP did not deliver any speech. To control for unobserved heterogeneity at the MP-level, we additionally run a mixed model with MP-term specific random intercepts (i.e. each MP has a different random intercept estimate for each parliamentary term she is a House of Commons member) for the same set of observations.

In their study of party politics and parliamentary debates, Proksch and Slapin (2012, 2013) have noted that the decision to speak can be predicted systematically. This means that the data can be perceived as one of two problems. The first is a (Heckman) selection process where speech focus is conditional on speech participation. The second is a missing data problem where the patterns of missingness, i.e. unobserved speech focus values for months where MPs did not deliver a speech, can be predicted from the observed data matrix. In this sense, the analysis can include the non-observed cases by imputing the patterns using the variables in the dataset. Proksch and Slapin (2012, 2013), for instance, have shown that speech participation can be explained by party leader status and government status in addition to ideological disagreement between party leaders and backbenchers. We therefore perform multiple imputation to generate complete datasets and re-estimate the OLS and mixed effects models.

#### **4. Results**

Table 3 presents the estimation results for the OLS model (1), mixed effects model (2), OLS model using the imputed dataset (3), and the mixed effects model using the imputed dataset (4). Notably, the direction of all effects appears robust across all specifications, but there are important differences. We first discuss the results of the first model. To ease interpretation,

we simulate the marginal effects of the main independent variables and their interactions have based on Model 1 and plot these in Figures 4 through 6.

**Table 3. Explaining Monthly Parliamentary Speech Focus in the UK, 1996-2004**

(DV: district versus party/national focus)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	OLS	Multilevel	OLS Imputation	Multilevel Imputation
(Intercept)	-1.620 (0.020)	-1.675 (0.040)	-1.643 (0.015)	-1.678 (0.026)
Unemployment Rate Change	-0.005 (0.046)	-0.069 (0.041)	0.012 (0.052)	-0.054 (0.031)
Government MP	0.309 (0.025)	0.312 (0.049)	0.303 (0.021)	0.287 (0.026)
Party Leader	-0.634 (0.016)	-0.493 (0.026)	-0.584 (0.020)	-0.516 (0.022)
Seat Safety	-0.002 (0.001)	0.000 (0.002)	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.002 (0.001)
Electoral Proximity	0.030 (0.015)	0.086 (0.014)	0.056 (0.013)	0.109 (0.012)
Government Popularity Gap	-0.003 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)	0.000 (0.000)
Constituency Turnover	0.138 (0.018)	0.075 (0.041)	0.160 (0.017)	0.105 (0.034)
Unemployment x Government MP	0.099 (0.059)	0.112 (0.053)	0.063 (0.061)	0.096 (0.046)
Seat Safety x Government MP	-0.004 (0.001)	-0.003 (0.002)	-0.005 (0.001)	0.000 (0.001)
Gov Popularity Gap x Government MP	0.005 (0.001)	0.002 (0.001)	0.003 (0.001)	0.002 (0.001)
Ranef – MP		0.309 (0.556)		0.198 (0.445)
Ranef – Residual		0.842 (0.917)		0.944 (0.972)
R-squared	0.074			
adj. R-squared	0.073			
Log-likelihood		-41,253		-60,883
Observations (MP-Months)	29,927	29,927	42,850	42,850
Groups (MPs)		1,252		1,273

Note: Higher values in the DV mean more district focus of monthly MP speech. Group refers to MPs per parliamentary term.

**Figure 4. Effect of Unemployment Rate Changes in Parliamentary Constituencies on MPs' Parliamentary Speech Focus**

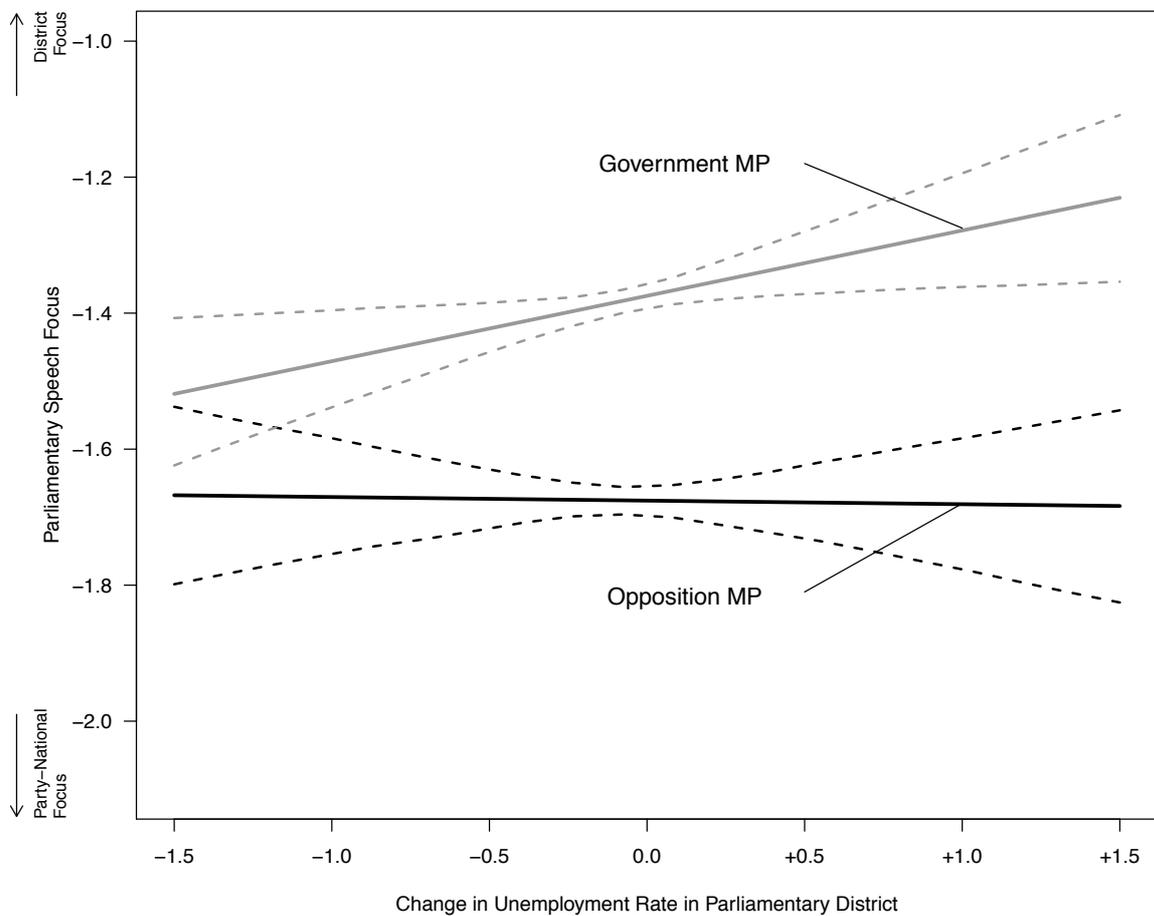


Figure 4 shows that there is an interaction effect between the state of the local economy and party status on the speech focus of the MP. Our expectation, as formulated in Hypothesis 1, was that MPs stress the local level as the unemployment rate in the constituency increases. This expectation is confirmed for government MPs. However, the state of the local economy does not affect the speech focus of MPs whose party is in opposition. Only when the claimant counts decrease noticeably, i.e. the constituency is doing better compare to the previous three-month average, do government and opposition MPs choose an indistinguishable speech focus. Opposition MPs retain their higher focus on party-national issues. To substantiate our quantitative finding, we present two examples to illustrate the point. Both are taken from legislative debates in December 1997, thus shortly after the electoral victory of the Labour

Party in May. Mr Redwood, the Conservative member for Wokingham, a constituency with a low but rising unemployment rate, used partisan language to discuss economic policy:

**Labour** is bad for business. So far, the **Government** have overtaxed and over-regulated business. They now threaten it with much damaging legislation. The Department of Trade and Industry, under the President of the Board of Trade, meddles, muddles and prevaricates on every issue. (...) The glorious summer of **Conservative** economic success that Labour inherited is quickly being made winter by the **Government**.  
- MP Redwood in December 1997

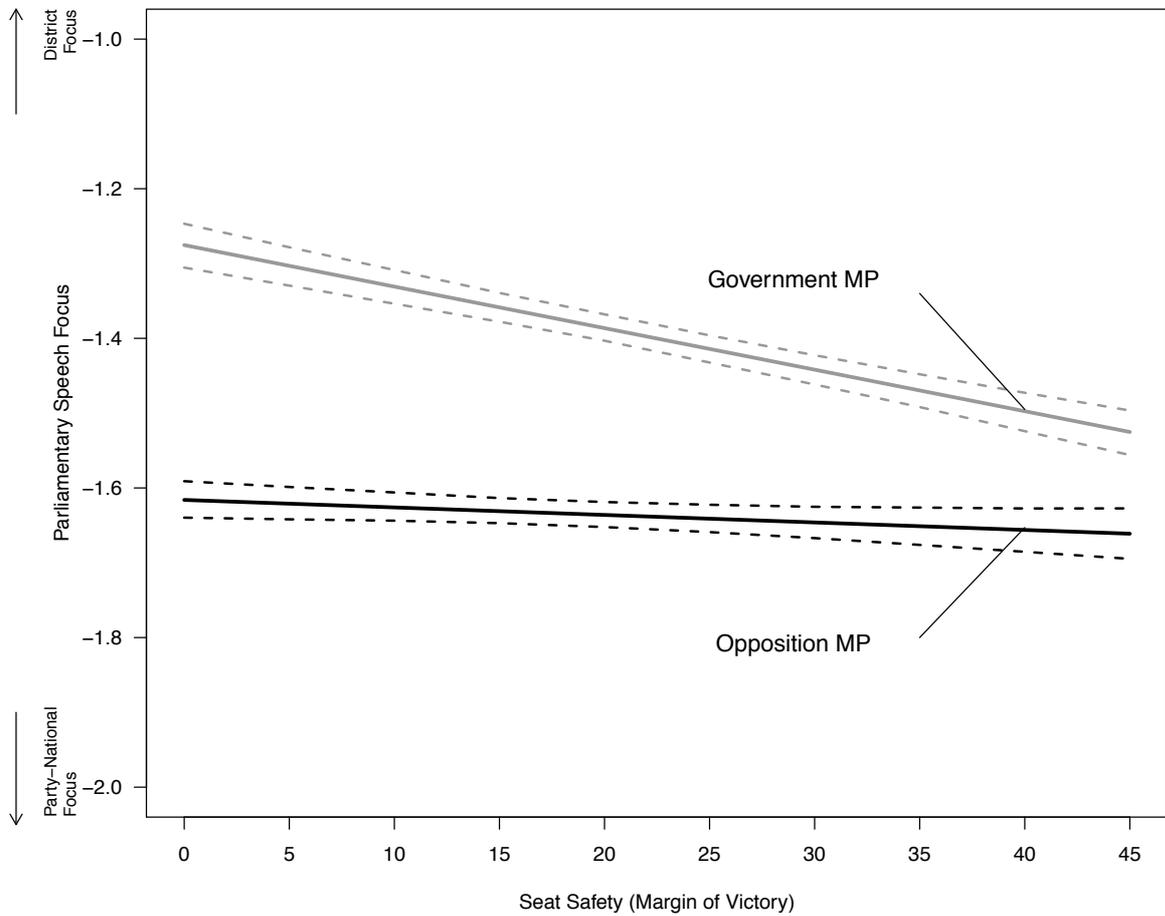
The MP emphasized that in his view it is clearly the Government led by the Labour party that is responsible for the downturn. Shortly after the election, he stressed how the economic situation had been better under the Conservative government. In contrast, the Labour MP Atherton representing Falmouth and Camborne, a constituency that has a considerably higher unemployment rate than Wokingham, emphasized local concerns:

I represent probably the lowest-paid **constituency** in the country. It would be fair to say that the people of Falmouth and Camborne are crying out for a national minimum wage. So important is the issue that I want to describe some of the problems that **my constituents** face.  
- MP Atherton in December 1997

She continued describing these problems, referring to the party when describing how the Labour policies will solve them. Still, she clearly put more emphasis on the district level in her speech.

When it comes to the effect of the leadership status, MPs holding a leader position put more emphasis on the party-national level, which is in line with Hypothesis 6. Given model 1, ceteris paribus, a leader is expected to have a speech focus value of -2.14 (95% CI: -2.17,-2.11) and a backbencher a value of -1.50 (95% CI: -1.52,-1.49), a substantially large difference given the speech focus scale.

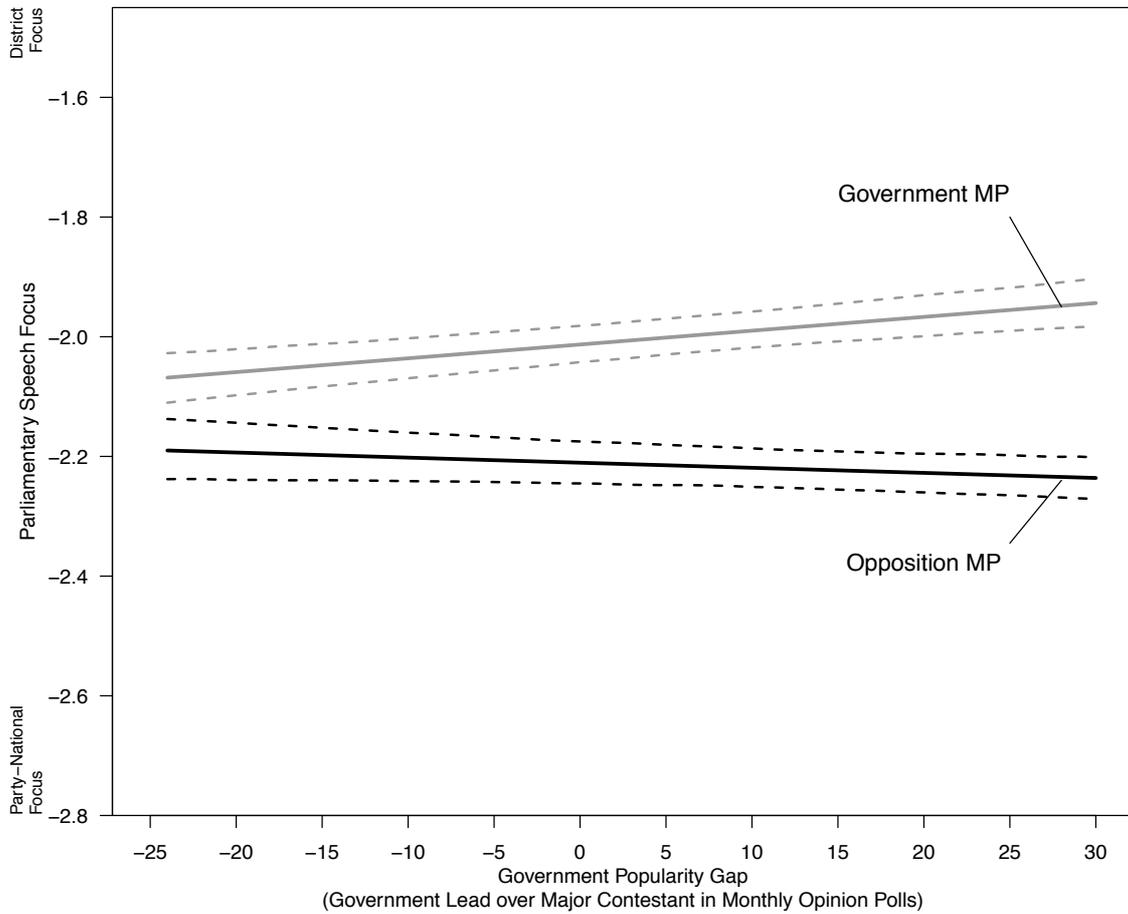
**Figure 5. Effect of Seat Safety on MPs' Parliamentary Speech Focus**



Put differently, while an average backbencher has a speech value in the 53rd percentile of the scale, an average party leader is in the 31st percentile.

As the seat safety of MPs increases, the district focus decreases. The data thus support the second hypothesis. There is a significant interaction effect between the seat safety and government status (see Figure 5). For opposition MPs, the seat safety has no effect on the speech focus, which is at a partisan level throughout, whereas government MPs appear more responsive to the future electoral contest in their parliamentary constituency.

**Figure 6. Effect of Monthly Government Popularity Gap on MPs' Parliamentary Speech Focus**



Additionally, the government popularity gap is included as a predictor for MPs' parliamentary speech focus. During the whole period there were more respondents intending to vote for the Labour Party in the next election than there were respondents intending to vote for the Conservative Party – regardless of the parties' government status. As can be seen in Figure 6, an increasing popularity of the government party as compared to the major contestant affects government and opposition MPs differently. While government MPs further increase their district focus as government popularity rises, opposition MPs slightly increase their focus on party/ national issues.

Lastly, Hypotheses 3 and 4 stated that the district focus should increase if the constituency has been 'conquered' from another party in the last election and if the next

general election approaches, respectively. Both of these variables indeed significantly increase the MPs' district focus.

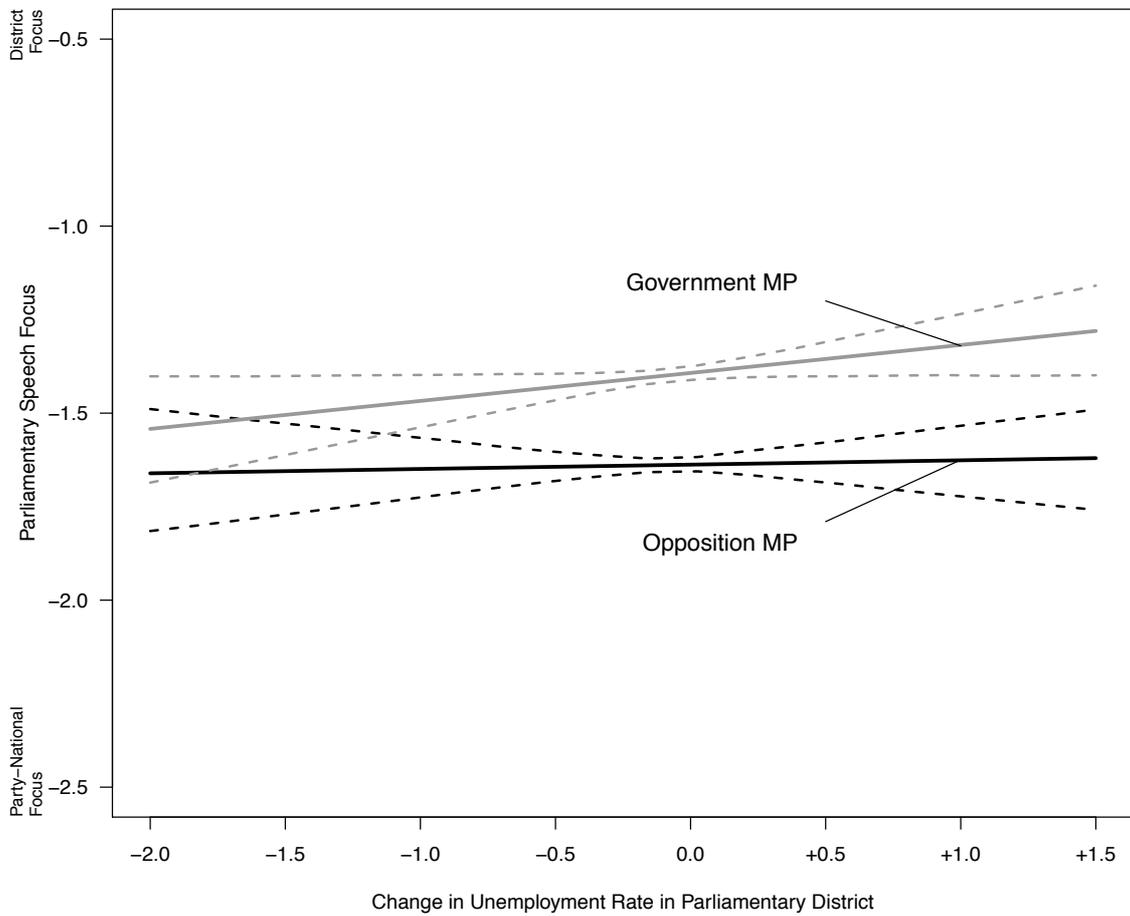
#### **4.1. Parliamentary Speech as a Missing Data Problem**

The results discussed up until now are based on cases when MPs held at least one speech per month, thus excluding the months in which no speeches were delivered. To impute the speech focus on the basis of the other variables, we apply the multiple imputation algorithm *Amelia* (Honaker et al., 2013), create five new “completed” datasets, and re-estimate models 1 and 2. Table 3 shows that the number of observations (MP-months) increases by about 45 percent using the completed dataset. Overall, the effects remain stable compared to Models 1 and 2, but the effect of the local economy is now weaker than before, while the interaction with the government dummy remains significant. The marginal effects have been calculated based on Model 3 and plotted in Figure 7. As before, government MPs are expected to focus more on the district level as the unemployment rates increase in their constituencies while opposition do not change their speech focus in that case.

### **5. Discussion and Conclusion**

We have argued that political representation can be studied dynamically by examining parliamentary speech records. Our analysis shows that British governing MPs are generally more responsive to changes in the economic, partisan and electoral context. Their district focus increases, as the state of the local economy decreases, or government popularity increases, whereas the nation/party focus increases, as the seat safety increases. In contrast, opposition MPs generally focus more on national and partisan issues and this focus is hardly affected by changes in the speeches' context.

**Figure 7. Imputed Data: Effect of Unemployment Rate Changes in Parliamentary Constituencies on MPs' Parliamentary Speech Focus**



These results show that politicians' parliamentary rhetoric does hold important promises for the study of political representation more generally. An important aspect of parliamentary debates, however, is the fact that not all MPs participate equally. While the UK House of Commons is a case where we would expect backbenchers who wish to express constituency concerns to also have access to the floor, the same does not hold for systems where parties try to communicate a unified message (Proksch and Slapin 2012).

We plan to expand the analysis in a threefold manner in the future. First, we will re-address the speaker selection problem through alternative treatment of the missing data. Second, we will expand the analysis to incorporate a long time period to examine whether the

results hold for the coalition government as well. And finally, we plan to check the robustness of our measure of parliamentary speech focus by using additional keywords and by considering the uncertainty of the measure conditional on the length of speeches delivered in parliament.

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