

# Do oversight responsibilities encourage legislative specialization? Evidence from the British House of Commons\*

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June 26, 2014

## Abstract

Informational theories of legislative organization suggest that legislative authority provides committee members with incentives to acquire specialized expertise. By conceptualizing oversight as a signaling game between the committee and the executive, this study argues that committee oversight responsibilities also encourage specialization. Evidence from departmental select committees in the British House of Commons, which conduct oversight but have no legislative authority, demonstrates that service on oversight committees promotes specialization as measured by the parliamentary questions asked by members. Membership on a departmental select committee increases the number of questions asked within the jurisdiction of that committee, without increasing other questions.

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\*This research was conducted with the support of a Naval Academy Research Council summer grant. Thanks to Paul Ling and Janet Lewis for helpful comments. Any views expressed are the author's and do not reflect the official policy or position of the United States Naval Academy, Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

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# 1 Introduction

Legislative specialization – the decisions of individual legislators to acquire expertise on specific policy areas and to focus their legislative efforts on those areas – has been viewed by many scholars as an important determinant of a legislature’s ability to perform its duties effectively in both presidential and parliamentary systems (Judge 1974; Krehbiel 1992; Bowler and Farrell 1995).<sup>1</sup> As Gilligan and Krehbiel (1997) note, specialization has been linked to institutionalization, legislative performance, and legislative-executive relations, among other characteristics of legislatures. Low levels of specialization have been linked to legislative ineffectiveness and a lack of control of the executive (Jones et al. 2002). Specialization, however, presents a collective action problem for legislators. The acquisition of expertise is costly to the legislator who specializes, while all legislators benefit from their expertise in the form of improved policy outcomes.

Informational theories of legislative organization (Gilligan and Krehbiel 1987, 1989, 1990; Krehbiel 1992) suggest that legislative committees exist, in part, to solve this collective action problem. Gilligan and Krehbiel argue that, by giving legislative committees the ability to propose legislation to the floor, legislatures provide committee members with incentives to develop specialized expertise in the policy jurisdiction of their committees. The payoff that committee members receive from specialization comes in the form of legislative deference to committee proposals, which incorporate the benefits of committee expertise.

Many legislative committees have responsibilities that go beyond the ability to propose legislation to the legislature as a whole. They may hold hearings, question nominees for positions in the executive, conduct investigations, and generally perform oversight of the executive. Committee members with specialized expertise are assumed to be more effective in carrying out these oversight responsibilities (McGrath 2013). It is an open question, however, whether oversight responsibilities by themselves are sufficient to

induce committee members to specialize, or whether the ability to propose legislation is necessary to compensate committee members for the cost of acquiring expertise.

This paper argues that oversight responsibilities – the power to review and critique the performance of the executive – are sufficient to induce committee members to specialize under certain circumstances. While existing informational theories assume that committees are engaged in a signaling game with the legislature as a whole, committees engaged in oversight activities participate in a signaling game with the executive. This approach reconceptualizes the models proposed by Gilligan and Krehbiel with different actors but the same structure and payoffs, leading to analogous outcomes for legislative specialization. While the recipient of a committee’s signals is different in the context of legislative oversight, the incentives for specialization will be the same. This reinterpretation broadens the scope of existing informational theories of legislative organization.

To determine whether oversight responsibilities are sufficient to induce legislators to specialize in the substantive policy areas of their committees, it is necessary to examine legislative specialization in an institutional setting in which committees do not have legislative authority. Departmental select committees in the British House of Commons are an example of committees with oversight responsibilities but no legislative authority (Drewry 1985*b*; Jogerst 1993). Their only task is to perform oversight of executive departments. As a result, they are seen as extremely weak compared to legislative committees in other countries (Mattson and Strøm 1995). Recent scholarship, however, suggests that these committees do have some influence on the behavior of the government (Hindmoor, Larkin and Kennon 2009; Benton and Russell 2013) If the reinterpretation of the Gilligan and Krehbiel (1987, 1990) models as interactions between the committee and the executive is correct, then this influence should be accompanied by evidence of specialization on the part of select committee members.

This study demonstrates that British MPs specialize after they join departmental select committees. Specialization is measured by the number of written parliamentary

questions asked within the jurisdiction of each committee. Written parliamentary questions request that the government provide some information to the House of Commons. With limited exceptions, any member who is not on the government payroll may submit questions. Questions can be addressed to any government department, and must be answered by the department responsible for the issue raised in the question.<sup>2</sup> These questions provide a direct measure of the interests of members outside of their committee responsibilities. As such, they provide evidence that committee service changes the behavior of members even after controlling for unobserved member-specific characteristics, such as preexisting interests or expertise in the areas overseen by their committees.

The results of this study are surprising if legislative authority is necessary to induce specialization, but not if the potential for oversight committees to reveal information to the executive is taken seriously. These findings highlight the fact that legislators act in a more complex informational environment than identified by prior studies. Moreover, the results suggest that there are multiple ways for legislatures to incentivize specialization by their members.

## **2 Committees and legislative specialization**

Legislatures in all political systems face the problem of making decisions in the face of significant uncertainty about the effects of those decisions. Gilligan and Krehbiel (1987, 1989, 1990) and Krehbiel (1992) provide the most systematic attempt to grapple with the informational problems facing legislatures through the use of legislative committees. Specialization on the part of individual legislators has benefits for all legislators if it reduces the uncertainty in policy outcomes or makes oversight more effective. The expertise of legislators who specialize in a particular policy area constitutes a public good for the legislature if those legislators share information with their colleagues. Specialization is costly for members, however, requiring an investment of time and effort to develop

expertise in specific policy areas, particularly for members who have no prior knowledge. This leads to underinvestment in specialization unless the legislature as a whole is able to provide incentives to individual members to encourage them to develop expertise in specific policy areas.

Gilligan and Krehbiel argue that committees promote specialization within legislatures. The mere existence of a committee dedicated to a specific subject matter, however, is insufficient to induce legislators to specialize in that area. In Gilligan and Krehbiel (1990), committees with preferences that are similar to the legislature as a whole are induced to specialize by the ability to make legislative proposals that take advantage of their expertise in order to produce less uncertain policy outcomes. Since the legislature as a whole has the same preferences as the committee, they are happy to accept the committee proposal. When committees have preferences that are systematically different from the legislature as a whole, the committee has an incentive to withhold information selectively from the floor. To induce specialization, the legislature must allow the committee to shift legislative outcomes toward its own policy preferences. Legislatures can commit to this by providing restrictive rules that limit the ability of the legislature as a whole to amend a committee's proposal, thus creating a greater incentive for the committee to specialize (Gilligan and Krehbiel 1987).

In both of these cases, the incentive for committee members to specialize is the fact that the legislature will defer to the legislative proposals made by the committee within the area of its expertise.<sup>3</sup> This deference may or may not come at a cost to the legislature as a whole, depending on the gap in preferences between it and the committee, but it does respect the informational advantage of the committee. If the legislature as a whole does not defer to a committee's proposals, then the incentive to specialize disappears. Members no longer benefit from their investment in specialization through the ability to reduce policy uncertainty or to shift policy toward their own preferences.

The models proposed by Gilligan and Krehbiel focus on the rewards that committee members gain from their ability to propose legislation in the context of policy uncertainty. This focus is unsurprising, given the important legislative powers given to committees in the U.S. Congress, which was the motivating example for these theories. In a comparative context, the ability of legislative committees to shape legislation is a key measure of the strength or weakness of those committees (Mattson and Strøm 1995). More generally, there is a vast literature on the role of committees in shaping legislation that focuses on distributional outcomes and control of the legislative agenda rather than the reduction of policy uncertainty (Shepsle 1979; Shepsle and Weingast 1987; Rohde 1991; Cox and McCubbins 1993).

In addition to reviewing and proposing legislation, however, legislative committees may perform a variety of tasks for their parent legislatures. Committees may conduct pre-appointment review of nominees to positions in the executive. They may be responsible for oversight of policy implementation by the executive and the bureaucracy (McCubbins and Schwartz 1984; Aberbach 1990; Kriner and Schwartz 2008; Benton and Russell 2013; McGrath 2013). They enable parties in a coalition government to monitor coalition agreements (Martin and Vanberg 2004, 2005). In any given legislature, multiple tasks may be assigned to a single committee responsible for a particular policy area, as in the United States, or tasks may be divided between different types of committees, as in the United Kingdom. Other legislatures structure their committee systems in a variety of ways between these extremes (Strøm 1998).

Studies of the performance of oversight responsibilities by legislative committees have been far less extensive than research on the role of committees in the production of legislation. Recent scholarship on oversight committees in parliamentary systems focuses on the ability of such committees to influence the executive (Hindmoor, Larkin and Kennon 2009; Benton and Russell 2013). Research on the oversight activities of committees in the U.S. Congress, in contrast, examines the use of oversight hearings in the context of

partisan and ideological conflict between the legislature and the executive (Kriner and Schwartz 2008; McGrath 2013). In both cases, there is an implicit or explicit assumption that specialization by members of a committee makes oversight more effective. In particular, legislative specialization is a parameter in the McGrath (2013) model of oversight activity, operationalized by the average length of service on the committee.

A key insight of the Gilligan and Krehbiel research agenda, however, is that mere service on a committee is not sufficient to induce specialization by committee members. There must be some reward for specialization to induce members to invest in expertise. In the U.S. context, where legislative and oversight responsibilities are fused, the Gilligan and Krehbiel mechanism of deference to committee legislative proposals can induce specialization by committee members, which then spills over to the conduct of oversight responsibilities. In systems where legislative proposal power and oversight responsibilities are separate, or where the floor does not defer to committee proposals (as some recent evidence from the U.S. House of Representatives may suggest), the Gilligan and Krehbiel mechanism for specialization is not available. Without the ability to propose legislation, committee members cannot capture any of the legislative benefits of specialization to compensate for the costs of developing expertise. In such a system, one would not expect committee members to specialize unless there is some other way to reward them for their efforts.

### **3 Reinterpreting informational theories of legislative committees**

This study argues that oversight responsibilities encourage committee members to invest effort in acquiring expertise in their committee jurisdiction, even without the incentives provided by the power to propose legislation. Rather than engaging in a signaling game

with the legislature as a whole, as in the Gilligan and Krehbiel models, members of committees with oversight responsibilities engage in an analogous legislative signaling game with the executive. By acquiring policy expertise, committee members convey information to the government in a way that reduces policy uncertainty, which benefits both committee members and the government.

The logic of this signaling interaction between committee members and the executive parallels the legislative signaling games in Gilligan and Krehbiel (1987, 1990).<sup>4</sup> In Gilligan and Krehbiel, the recipient of the signal is the chamber as a whole, which then enacts legislation based on the content of that signal. In the context of oversight responsibilities, the recipient of the signal is the executive, which is tasked with the implementation of policy. The executive implements policy under conditions of uncertainty about the true effects of its actions. The executive is assumed to be risk-averse, so it would like to reduce uncertainty in order to ensure that policies as implemented are as close to its preferred outcome as possible.

Oversight committees have the opportunity to send a signal to the executive through a committee report containing recommendations for government action. The executive also observes whether committee members possess specialized expertise or not. Specialization allows the committee members to learn something about the true state of the world. When committee members have specialized expertise, they can reveal information to the executive about the actual effects of its policies. The executive then has an incentive to use that information to change its behavior in a way that brings policy outcomes closer to its own preferences. Committee members benefit because they are also assumed to be risk averse, preferring less uncertainty in the implementation of policy. Interesting strategic interactions could occur when the preferences of the committee are systematically different from the preferences of the executive, but those interactions are outside the scope of this study.<sup>5</sup> If the committee members have not specialized, then committee recommendations



should not influence the executive since the recommendations contain no information that would allow the executive to reduce uncertainty in policy implementation.

The specialization decision faced by the committee is thus straight-forward. If the benefits that committee members receive when the executive takes their recommendations into account exceed the cost of acquiring specialized expertise, then the committee members will specialize. On the other hand, if the costs of specialization are too high relative to the benefits of reduced policy uncertainty, specialization will not occur. This reconceptualization of the signaling game for oversight committees as one between the committee and the executive, rather than between the committee and the legislature as a whole, suggests that oversight responsibilities should have qualitatively similar implications for legislative specialization as does legislative proposal power. Oversight responsibilities will lead to less specialization overall, given the lack of distributive benefits available to reward committee members who invest in expertise, but the incentive for specialization remains.

Interpreting the work of legislative oversight committees as a signaling game between the committee and the executive is somewhat counterintuitive given the standard assumptions that the executive is better informed than individual legislators.<sup>6</sup> Without disputing that as a general principle, there are at least three reasons why a legislative committee would be able to reveal information to the executive through its actions.

First, oversight committees typically work through specific inquiries or investigations that focus on a particular policy issue or implementation. Committee members may have more time to study specific issues than the political leadership of the executive, which has to deal with the day-to-day responsibilities of governance. While the executive may be more informed in general, they may have less knowledge about the specific matters on which an oversight committee makes recommendations.

Second, members of an oversight committee may have been in their positions for more time than the political leadership of the executive. This is particularly true in

parliamentary systems, where ministers may be shuffled from one portfolio to another over the course of a government. In such situations, ministers may look to oversight committees for information to reduce policy uncertainty.

Finally, expertise in the executive typically resides in the bureaucracy rather than the political leadership. This imbalance in information in the executive creates potential problems for the political leadership when attempting to implement its policy preferences (Huber 2000). Information provided by oversight committees has the potential to aid ministers in exercising political control of the bureaucracy.

Taken together, the arguments made above suggest an informational rationale for oversight committees with respect to the executive, rather than the legislature. Such an informational rationale depends on the development of specialized knowledge by committee members. In the absence of specialization, members would be no more informed than the executive and, as a result, the executive would have no reason to take committee recommendations into account. Specialization by members of committees with oversight responsibilities provides micro-level evidence consistent with an informational rationale for oversight (cf. Gilligan and Krehbiel (1997)).

## **4 Departmental select committees in the House of Commons**

The British House of Commons is an example of a legislature in which legislative authority and oversight responsibilities are assigned to different committees. Proposed legislation is considered by ad hoc Public Bill committees dominated by party political interests. Oversight responsibilities, on the other hand, are assigned to a set of departmental select committees that, despite their name, are permanently established in the standing orders of

the House of Commons. These committees hold hearings, collect evidence, conduct investigations, and make non-binding recommendations to the government.

Departmental select committees were established in their current form in 1979, following a proposal by the House of Commons Procedure Committee in 1978.<sup>7</sup> Among the goals of the reform was to encourage specialization by members of the House of Commons (Baines 1985, 14). When these new committees were established, they received jurisdictions over government departments rather than substantive topics. This decision implied that each minister in the government is subject to oversight from one committee. It also means that whenever the structure of government is reorganized, the committees must be realigned as well. In addition to the departmental select committees, there are also select committees for Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, along with committees with jurisdiction over crosscutting issues or the internal governance of the House of Commons. These committees are not the focus of this study.

Membership on departmental select committees is allocated to parties in rough proportion to their representation in the House of Commons. While members are appointed by the House as a whole, the whips from each party took the lead role in choosing their party's representation on each committee prior to reforms after the 2010 general election. Members do not have seniority rights on committees, although they tend to remain on their assigned committee if they so choose. Committee members who take up positions on the government payroll must leave their committees, and no member is required to serve on a committee. Members can only receive new committee assignments at the beginning of each Parliament or when a serving committee member from the same party leaves a committee.

Departmental select committees typically operate through inquiries into specific policy issues under their jurisdiction. Each committee has a small number of permanent staff members and may employ specialist advisors to assist them during the course of a particular inquiry. At the end of an inquiry, the committee issues a report with recommendations for the government. These recommendations are usually, but not always,

arrived at by consensus among the committee members (House of Commons Information Office 2010).

Recent scholarship suggests that departmental select committees have been effective to some extent in affecting policy outcomes and implementation. Hindmoor, Larkin and Kennon (2009) finds that the Education Select Committee had little influence on legislation directly but more significant influence on policy in other ways. Most notably, Benton and Russell (2013) analyze the effectiveness of seven departmental select committees. Their quantitative analysis suggests that approximately 40% of all committee recommendations were accepted by the government, and a similar proportion were actually implemented, although recommendations were less likely to be implemented if they represented more substantial policy changes. Their findings were supported by qualitative evidence of select committee influence on the policy process.

Many of the characteristics of the departmental select committee system in the House of Commons have the effect, intentional or otherwise, of increasing the informational content of the signals sent by the committee. The composition of the committees in rough proportion to party representation in the House, the election of opposition party members to chair some committees, and the convention that recommendations are made by consensus are consistent with the model of heterogeneous committees in Gilligan and Krehbiel (1989) if the executive rather than the floor is the recipient of the signal. Recommendations are more informative if they are endorsed by members known to have disparate preferences. That this is recognized by political actors in the House of Commons is suggested by the former minister cited by Benton and Russell (2013, 789), who stated that a proposal supported by committee members on a cross-party basis is likely to be a sensible one.

The committee system in the House of Commons provides an opportunity to test whether deference to committee proposals on legislation, the mechanism identified by Gilligan and Krehbiel, is necessary to ensure that committee service induces legislative

specialization. Since departmental select committees have no legislative authority, members cannot be compensated directly through legislation. If service on departmental select committees does encourage members to specialize, it does so through influence on the implementation of policy by the executive rather than through legislative proposal powers. In the British House of Commons, the costs of specialization may be quite low given the lack of other outlets available to backbench MPs, leading one scholar to describe departmental select committees as outlets for “frustrated” members of Parliament (Jogerst 1991). This leads to the central hypothesis that this study will test:

Hypothesis: Membership on a departmental select committee leads MPs to specialize in the subject matter of that committee.

## 5 Measuring specialization

Measuring the degree of specialization by issue area is not a straightforward task. In the U.S. case, Gilligan and Krehbiel (1997) examine bill co-sponsorship by members of the House Energy and Commerce Committee to test hypotheses about variation in specialization within a committee. In parliamentary systems, the distribution of parliamentary questions asked by members provides another method to assess substantive specialization. The rationale for the use of questions to measure specialization is that it becomes easier for members to formulate relevant questions as they acquire expertise on a subject. This lowers the cost of asking questions in those areas relative to others.

Parliamentary questions also allow members to increase their knowledge of the subject matter in question. If joining a committee causes members to ask more parliamentary questions in the jurisdiction of that committee, it shows that the effects of specialization spill over to aspects of legislative behavior outside of the committee room.

Parliamentary questions have a number of advantages as measures of specialization. With limited exceptions, members who are not on the government payroll can ask as many

questions as they choose in any area of interest.<sup>8</sup> Questions are relatively free from the influence of party leadership. Asking questions is not part of a member's committee duties, and therefore they are not a necessary consequence of committee membership. All questions and answers are maintained in the public record. From a practical perspective, questions can readily be matched to the substantive jurisdiction of each committee. As a result, the pattern of questions can be used to test the hypothesis that service on oversight committees incentivizes specialization. If committee membership induces members to specialize, we should observe those members asking more questions in the jurisdiction of their assigned committee, with no change (or a reduction) in the number of questions asked in other substantive areas.

Two prior studies have used the distribution of parliamentary questions as a measure of legislative specialization. Judge (1974) measures the degree of concentration in parliamentary questions asked by British MPs during the 1970-71 session of Parliament. In this study, specialists were defined as those members asking more than 25% of their questions on a single topic. Most MPs in the study showed some degree of specialization in the pattern of their questions. This study predates the modern departmental select committee system, however, and therefore does not address the effect of committee service on specialization. Moreover, the use of a single year of data cannot distinguish between concentration due to the salience of a particular issue during that year and longer-term specialization on a topic.

A more comparable study is Bowler and Farrell (1995), which uses parliamentary questions as an indicator of specialization among members of the European Parliament. The authors find that committee members ask more questions than non-members on topics under their committee's jurisdiction, arguing that this indicates specialization on the part of committee members. Unlike the British House of Commons, however, committees in the European Parliament have significant legislative authority and receive considerable

deference from the floor. The effect of committee service on specialization in the absence of legislative authority is thus an open question.

Demonstrating that committee members direct their parliamentary questions to the ministers for which their committee has jurisdiction is not sufficient to show that committee service promotes specialization. Such a relationship would also arise if members are chosen for committee assignments based on their existing substantive interests or expertise. A great deal of the literature on legislative committees emphasizes the possibility that legislators with personal experience or constituent interests related to an issue area will seek positions on committees with jurisdiction over their issues. Much of this literature emphasizes the ability of committee members to obtain distributive benefits for their constituencies through committee service (Niskanen 1971; Shepsle 1978). While this is not an issue with committees in the House of Commons, which have no formal distributive powers, there is evidence of self-selection by MPs onto committees that correspond to their experience (Drewry 1985*a*) or constituency interests (Jogerst 1993, 160). For example, several medical doctors have served on the Health Select Committee in recent years.

Self-selection by members onto committees presents a problem because a member with a personal or constituency interest in a particular committee jurisdiction is likely to ask more questions in this area than other MPs. This produces a correlation between question frequency and committee service. To deal with this problem, the inferential strategy pursued in this study focuses on the patterns of questions submitted by members who change committee assignments during their time in Parliament. This allows for their degree of specialization to be measured before and after committee service. If committee membership produces greater specialization, then the proportion of questions directed to minister for whom that committee provides oversight should increase after an MP joins the committee. On the other hand, if committee service has no effect on specialization in the absence of legislative authority, the distribution of questions should remain unchanged.

## 6 Data

To test for the effect of committee service on legislative specialization, this study uses data on committee assignments and written parliamentary questions from 1997 to 2010, encompassing the period of Labour Party governments under Blair and Brown. The time period for this dataset is sufficiently lengthy that it contains numerous examples of members being added to or discharged from departmental select committees. The dataset is structured such that members contribute an observation for each session of Parliament in which they sat in the House of Commons. Observations from MPs serving as ministers and whips on the government payroll are excluded, since members cannot ask questions while holding those positions. The speaker and deputy speakers are excluded as well, as are MPs who did not take their seats in Westminster. This produces a total of 7288 observations.

The key independent variables for this study are a set of variables that indicate whether a member served on a particular departmental select committee at any time during a given session of Parliament. Committee membership was coded from the Sessional Returns of the House of Commons (United Kingdom. House of Commons 1998–2010). This study focuses on substantive committee jurisdictions, and thus excludes the regional departmental select committees for Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. The coding of committee membership is complicated to a certain extent by the fact that the departmental select committees are restructured whenever governmental departments are reorganized. In cases where significant changes to the organization of government occurred, committees are linked based on formal redesignations of existing committees by the House of Commons or through examination of overlapping memberships of committees before and after the reorganization.<sup>9</sup> There are a total of 14 committees, which are listed in the appendix.

The dependent variables for this study are the number of written parliamentary questions submitted to ministers under the jurisdiction of each of the departmental select committees.<sup>10</sup> This coding takes advantage of the fact that departmental select committees



provide oversight of departments rather than subjects. As a result, if a member of the Home Affairs Committee asks a question of the Secretary of State for the Home Office, that question by definition falls within the oversight responsibility of the member's select committee. This allows for coding based on the recipient of the question rather than the text of the question itself, which would require each question to be coded individually according to its subject matter. This produces a highly reliable assignment of questions to the jurisdictions of each committee. Question counts were computed from the daily Questions Book produced by the House of Commons.<sup>11</sup>

As discussed above, the principal threat to valid inference in this case is the possibility that specialization leads members to committee service rather than service leading to specialization. The main approach to address this problem is to focus on within-MP variation in question behavior by using a fixed effects model. The fixed effects remove time-invariant MP characteristics that lead some members to ask more questions in a particular committee jurisdiction than other MPs. In addition to the fixed effects, a number of additional variables are included to rule out possible confounding time-varying characteristics or to model other factors that affect the number of questions asked in a particular session, thus reducing uncertainty in estimates of the effect of committee service.

The first set of variables measure positions held within the House of Commons, other than positions on the government payroll for which observations are excluded. Service as a parliamentary private secretary at some point during a parliamentary session is coded as an indicator variable, PPS. While parliamentary private secretaries are not on the government payroll, they are precluded from asking questions of the ministers they support, which would reduce their question count in those areas.

In contrast, MPs who hold shadow minister or opposition spokesperson positions in opposition parties are expected to ask more questions of ministers than other MPs, since questions provide one means of holding the Government to account. The Opposition Spokesperson variable indicates whether an MP was identified as holding an opposition

position by the House of Commons Library (Gay et al. 2010) at some point during a session.

A final career variable measures the length of time that a member has served in Parliament. Members are expected to ask more questions as their experience increases. In addition, more senior MPs may no longer have realistic prospects for leadership positions within their parties, giving them greater leeway to ask questions of ministers.

Two variables are included to measure characteristics of parliamentary sessions that affect the number of questions asked. The first is session length, which measures the length of each session as a fraction of a calendar year. This variable accounts for the fact that some sessions are longer and others are shorter than the typical session. Longer sessions give members more of an opportunity to ask question, increasing total question counts. Second, the year in which the session commenced is also included to allow for secular trends in the number of questions asked during this time period.

## **7 Results**

The main hypothesis of this study is that members of departmental select committees will submit more written parliamentary questions to the ministers under their committees' jurisdiction than other MPs. A simple comparison of the average number of questions asked in each committee jurisdiction shows this to be the case. Moreover, regression models that account for fixed member and constituency characteristics demonstrate that committee membership does in fact prompt members to ask more questions in the jurisdiction of their committees.

### **7.1 Overall pattern of questions**

This analysis begins with a simple comparison of the average number of questions asked in the jurisdiction of each departmental select committee or committee group. These averages

are reported in Table 1 for members of the relevant departmental select committees and for all other MPs who were eligible to ask questions during a particular parliamentary session. For all of the committees, members on the relevant committee asked more questions of ministers under their jurisdiction than non-members. The differences between members and non-members are statistically significant at the 0.05 level using a standard t-test for differences in means for all committees except for the Foreign Affairs Committee. For some committees, such as Foreign Affairs and Culture, Media and Sport, the average number of questions asked by committee members is rather low (less than 10 per session on average), but these are areas in which non-committee MPs ask even fewer questions. In contrast, for areas such as health and defence, committee members ask many more questions than non-committee members.

[Table 1 about here.]

The increased frequency with which departmental select committee members ask questions within their jurisdiction is not simply a function of these MPs asking more questions overall. In areas outside of their jurisdiction, members of most committees ask fewer questions on average than their non-committee counterparts, as shown in the right-hand columns of Table 1.<sup>12</sup> The only exceptions to this are the Agriculture and the Trade and Industry Committees, but even here the differences are small and not statistically significant. These results suggest that select committee members not only ask more questions in their committee jurisdiction, but also have a higher concentration of questions in their jurisdiction as well.

These simple comparisons do not necessarily demonstrate that committee service leads to specialization. They are also consistent with self-selection of members with pre-existing interests on to select committees. These MPs would be expected to ask more questions in their respective areas of interest regardless of their committee membership. In short, the results shown in Table 1 demonstrate that committee members are specialized to

a certain degree, but not necessarily that committee membership leads to greater specialization.

## 7.2 Model-based results

The results presented above do not exclude the possibility that parties assign members to committees based on their existing interests or specializations. One approach to this problem would be to develop an extensive set of biographical variables in an attempt to estimate the baseline level of interest for each member in each substantive area. An alternate approach is to take advantage of the repeated-measures nature of this data, which consists of multiple observations for each MP. This approach identifies the effects of committee service from the behavior of members who were added to or removed from service on a particular committee during the time period covered by the dataset.

The basic modeling approach used in this study is negative binomial regression, which is the conventional model for count outcomes, such as the number of written parliamentary questions, in the presence of overdispersion. Overdispersion can occur when the individual events are not independent of each other or when there is unobserved heterogeneity in the data; both of these are likely to occur in the parliamentary question data. The model is specified such that the log of the average number of parliamentary questions is a linear function of the independent variables, which implies that each variable has a multiplicative effect on the average number of questions.

Individual-specific elements in a negative binomial regression model can be modeled using either random or fixed effects. Neither approach is entirely unproblematic. The fixed effect model estimates a separate baseline for each MP, thus removing the effect of time-invariant characteristics of members and, in most cases, of constituencies as well.<sup>13</sup> In generalized linear models, fixed effects models are potentially subject to the incidental parameter problem. Fixed effects models also suffer from separation in cases where a member never asks a question in a particular committee jurisdiction, so that all of the

outcomes for that MP are 0. On the other hand, Allison and Waterman (2002) suggests that in the particular case of negative binomial regression, there is little evidence of an incidental parameter problem associated with the use of fixed effects. The random effects model does not suffer from these problems, but produces somewhat biased estimates if the unobserved random effects are correlated with the independent variable of interest. Unfortunately, this is likely to be the case in this application, since members with a pre-existing interest in a committee jurisdiction, who would have high values of the random effect, are both more likely to serve on a particular committee and to ask questions in that committee's jurisdiction. As a result, this study reports the results from fixed effects models for each committee.

The use of fixed effects addresses the inherent degree of inter-personal variation in the frequency with which individual MPs ask questions. This variation is almost certainly idiosyncratic in large part. It is unlikely that any model will completely explain why John Bercow asked 5,837 questions during the 2001-02 session. However, by including an individual-specific term explicitly or implicitly in the model, systematic individual-specific variation in the rate at which MPs ask questions can be accounted for by the model.

[Figure 1 about here.]

The results from the negative binomial regression models are shown in Table 3 in the appendix. After controlling for other governmental or party positions and for characteristics of parliamentary sessions, and removing the effects of time-invariant member characteristics, committee service produces a large and statistically reliable increase in the number of questions asked within each committee's jurisdiction by members of that committee for 11 of the 14 committees. The three committees for which the estimates are consistent with no effect are Foreign Affairs, Justice, and Transport. The main quantity of interest is the magnitude of effect of committee service on average question counts. Point estimates and 95% confidence intervals for each committee are

shown in Figure 1. These results show the estimated percentage increase in the number of questions attributable to a member's committee service relative to his or her baseline.

Substantively, the results suggest that point estimates for the increase in the average number of questions asked due to membership on a committee ranges from 7% for the Transport Committee to 194% for the International Development Committee. Indeed, one of the striking results of this analysis is that, despite being estimated separately using non-overlapping question counts, the estimated effect of committee service is relatively consistent across all committees. For most of the select committees, the average number of parliamentary questions that members ask within the jurisdiction of that committee increases by 35% to 65% during their service on the committee. Even the point estimates for the Foreign Affairs, Justice, and Transport committees, while not statistically distinguishable from zero, are also not inconsistent with the estimated effects for the other committees.

The estimates for the other variables, while not of primary interest, are largely as expected. Parliamentary private secretaries asked fewer questions and opposition spokespersons asked more questions, although these variables were not statistically significant for all committee jurisdictions. Longer-serving members also ask more questions in most jurisdictions. The length of the parliamentary session has a large positive effect on the number of questions. Finally, there is no consistent pattern for the time variable, suggesting that there is no meaningful time trend for most committees once MP-specific characteristics are taken into account. The results in general are sensible, lending credence to the findings on the effects of committee membership.

The results presented here do not simply reflect an overall increase in legislative activity by members of Parliament that coincides with their membership of departmental select committees. Similar regression models of question counts falling outside of members' committee jurisdictions show no evidence of increased question frequency. For 10 out of the 14 committees, there is no statistically distinguishable effect on out-of-jurisdiction question

frequency. On the remaining four committees, there is a decrease in out-of-jurisdiction questions that is statistically significant at the 0.05 level. These results are shown in Figure 2 in the appendix.

Overall, there is clear and consistent evidence that service on a departmental select committee does lead to greater emphasis on matters under the jurisdiction of that committee in the form of higher numbers of written parliamentary questions within that jurisdiction. Since parliamentary questions are submitted in members' personal capacities, not as part of their committee duties, this shows that committee service spills over into other aspects of legislative behavior not directly tied to the committee itself. This is a clear sign of increased specialization by committee members.

## 8 Discussion

The results of this analysis demonstrate that service on departmental select committees encourages specialization by members of the British House of Commons. For the study of British politics, evidence of legislative specialization implies that departmental select committees have fulfilled some of the goals of their creators. Encouraging specialization was an explicit goal of committee proponents, and the informational benefits of this specialization are available in other aspects of the legislative process. While the importance of departmental select committees has been minimized by some observers, particularly when compared to committees in other legislatures, they allow members of the House of Commons to solve the collective action problem associated with the development of specialized expertise.

Evidence on specialization on the part of select committee members complements and helps to explain the recent findings of Benton and Russell (2013) that departmental select committees are relatively successful at influencing policy development and implementation despite their lack of legislative authority. In the absence of specialization,

there would be little reason for ministers to adopt the recommendations made by select committees, while the adoption of (at least some) recommendations provides committee members with an incentive to specialize.

The effects of specialization identified in this study occur in legislative behavior outside of the members' committee duties. This demonstrates, for the first time, that service on departmental select committees has observable effects outside of the committee chamber. Again, these findings are inconsistent with arguments that departmental select committees have minimal influence on politics in the House of Commons.

Beyond the British context, evidence of specialization due to service on oversight committees has larger implications for the study of legislative organization. Since specialization occurs notwithstanding the fact that departmental select committees have no authority over legislation, existing informational models of committee organization are inadequate to explain the observed behavior of MPs. Instead, the findings are consistent with a model in which oversight committees provide information to the executive, rather than the legislature as a whole, and choose to specialize in order to convince the executive to act on their recommendations. This reinterpretation of existing informational theories of legislative organization to apply to oversight committees highlights the more complicated informational environment in which legislators act, and emphasizes the role of policy uncertainty in shaping legislative behavior.

Certain aspects of departmental select committees in the House of Commons likely enhance the incentives for specialization provided by committee service. The norm that committee recommendations are made by consensus increases the informational content of the signal sent by those committees and decreases the ability of legislators to use oversight for partisan purposes. Even in legislatures in which committees with oversight responsibilities act in a more adversarial manner, information can be conveyed to the executive through recommendations by different parties on the committee. When these recommendations are consistent, they provide a highly informative signal to the executive.



Findings of specialization in the British case are likely to generalize beyond consensus-oriented oversight committees to apply more broadly to committees with oversight responsibilities.

While departmental select committees in the House of Commons are limited to oversight responsibilities, committees in most other legislatures combine oversight and legislative authority. The amount of deference shown to the legislative proposals of committees varies across countries and over time. Deference to committee proposals may break down if distributive coalitions collapse, party leaders choose to centralize power in their own hands, or intra-party squabbles prevent progress on legislation. If such deference were necessary to ensure specialization by committee members, then legislatures would obtain fewer benefits from specialization when deference to committee proposals was weaker. Committees may have more autonomy in their oversight responsibilities, thus maintaining some incentive for committee members to specialize even when their legislative authority is diminished. The extreme case of departmental select committees, however, shows that oversight responsibilities are sufficient to encourage specialization, thus maintaining some the informational benefits that committees provide to their parent legislatures.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Note that this definition of legislative specialization is distinct from the concept of role specialization (as a policy advocate, constituency representative, aspirant to higher office, etc.) that has also been influential in studies of legislative behavior (Searing 1994; Müller and Saalfeld 1997).

<sup>2</sup>This study uses written parliamentary questions rather than oral parliamentary questions, which are answered on the floor of the House of Commons. Written parliamentary questions always receive an answer, while oral parliamentary questions may

or may not be answered depending on the time set aside for answers by ministers. As a result, when deciding whether to submit an oral parliamentary question to a given minister, members must consider the probability that their question will be chosen, which in turn depends on how many other MPs have submitted oral questions for that minister. Using written questions removes this dependence from the data.

<sup>3</sup>In Gilligan and Krehbiel (1990), the legislature may also induce specialization by giving resources to committee members, such as committee staff or research budgets. While this approach provides a simple solution to the specialization problem, it assumes that committee members could not divert those resources to other tasks. Gilligan and Krehbiel (1987) does not allow such an outcome. Baron (2000) presents a screening model of informative committees as an alternative to signaling models. This approach relies even more heavily on the ability of the floor to provide rewards to committee members conditional on their decision to specialize.

<sup>4</sup>In particular, the discussion that follows is based on the expertise equilibrium in the absence of restrictive amendment procedures as presented in section 4.3 of Gilligan and Krehbiel (1987), under the assumption that the executive cannot credibly commit to implement the recommendations of an oversight committee in the same way that a legislature can commit to a restrictive amendment rule for legislative proposals.

<sup>5</sup>Much of the Gilligan and Krehbiel research agenda focuses on these issues of strategic information revelation and attempts to identify conditions under which more or less information is revealed. In the context of the empirical example used in this study, these issues are minimized by the conventions that departmental select committees represent all major parties and make recommendations based on consensus among committee members.

<sup>6</sup>See Martin and Vanberg (2004, 14–16) for a clear statement of this assumption.

<sup>7</sup>See Drewry (1985*b*) and Jogerst (1993) for discussions of the history of the introduction of departmental select committees.

<sup>8</sup>The main exception to this rule applies to members of parties in government who act as parliamentary private secretaries to minister. These MPs are not on the government payroll, but are restricted from asking questions of the ministers that they assist.

<sup>9</sup>Some departments, such as the Home Office and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, remained basically unchanged throughout this period; the departmental select committees providing oversight to those departments remained unchanged as well. In other cases, an existing departmental committee was redesignated to match a newly constituted government department. For example, when the Department of Trade and Industry became the Department of Business, Enterprise, and Regulatory Reform in 2007, the name of the departmental select committee changed as well. Both of these situations present no problem in identifying continuing committee service for MPs.

In two cases, however, significant changes to the structure of government led to more substantial reorganizations of the committee system. The Agriculture Committee and the Environment, Transport, and the Regions Committee were reorganized into the Environment, Food, and Rural Affairs Committee and the Transport, Local Government and Regions Committee in 2001, with the latter committee dividing further into committees covering transport and local government in 2002. Likewise, the Social Security Committee and the Education and Employment Committee were reorganized into the Work and Pensions Committee and the Education and Skills Committee. In these two cases, committees were linked based on the degree of overlap in the membership before and after reorganization. For example, of the 11 members of the new Work and Pensions Committee, 6 had served on the Social Security Committee and none on the Education and Employment Committee. As a result, the Work and Pensions Committee is treated as the successor to the Social Security Committee.

<sup>10</sup>An alternate strategy would be to examine the proportion of questions asked within the jurisdiction of each committee. This strategy is not pursued here for two reasons. First, using the proportion would condition on the total number of questions asked by each

member in a term, which is not limited under the rules of the House of Commons. Second, using the proportion would present a problem in dealing with members who asked no questions at all during a given session of parliament, thus making their proportions undefined.

<sup>11</sup>Archived editions of the Questions Book are published as part of the business papers of the House of Commons and were obtained from

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm/cmordbk.htm>.

<sup>12</sup>Unlike the in-jurisdiction question, out-of-jurisdiction questions are included multiple times, leading to very similar values for the average number of out-of-jurisdiction questions asked by non-committee members.

<sup>13</sup>The fixed effects do not remove the contributions of time-invariant constituency characteristics when (a) an MP moved to a new constituency or (b) constituency boundaries were redrawn during a periodic boundary review. This affects a relatively small number of members.

## 9 Appendix

[Table 2 about here.]

[Table 3 about here.]

[Figure 2 about here.]

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Table 1: Average Number of Questions per Session asked per Member within each Committee Jurisdiction as a function of Committee Service

Committee	Questions within committee jurisdiction			All other questions		
	Asked by committee members	Asked by non-committee members	Difference	Asked by committee members	Asked by non-committee members	Difference
	Agriculture	23.4	5.2	18.2*	95.9	78.8
Communities	10.7	6.3	4.4*	72.0	78.7	-6.7
Culture	7.2	2.7	4.5*	60.5	82.6	-22.1*
Defence	26.5	5.0	21.5*	67.4	79.7	-12.3
Education	18.2	5.8	12.4*	63.0	79.3	-16.3*
Foreign	7.8	5.0	2.8	28.4	81.1	-52.7*
Health	43.7	10.1	33.6*	53.7	74.6	-20.9
Home	21.7	8.4	13.3*	66.2	76.5	-10.3
Intl Development	13.3	2.0	11.3*	66.2	83.1	-16.9
Justice	7.6	2.6	5.0*	81.7	82.3	-0.6
Trade	13.8	6.0	7.8*	83.5	78.6	4.9
Transportation	20.2	6.2	14.0*	57.3	78.9	-21.6
Treasury	12.5	5.5	7.0*	58.9	79.8	-20.9*
Work	13.9	4.5	9.4*	74.4	80.4	-6.0

Note: Averages calculated from all MPs, excluding those not allowed to ask questions due to positions held during the session. N=7288.

Table 2: Classification of Departmental Select Committees

Label	Committees
Agriculture	Agriculture (1997–2001) Environment, Food, and Rural Affairs (2001–2010)
Communities	Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (2002–2006) Communities and Local Government (2006–2010)
Culture	Culture, Media and Sport (1997–2010)
Defence	Defence (1997–2010)
Education	Education and Employment (1997–2001) Education and Skills (2001–2007) Children, Schools and Families (2007–2010)
Foreign	Foreign Affairs (1997–2010)
Health	Health (1997–2010)
Home	Home Affairs (1997–2010)
Intl Development	International Development (1997–2010)
Justice	Constitutional Affairs (2003–2007) Justice (2007–2010)
Trade	Trade and Industry (1997–2007) Business and Enterprise (2007–2010)
Transport	Environment, Transport, and Regional Affairs (1997–2001) Transport, Local Government and the Regions (2001–2002) Transport (2002–2010)
Treasury	Treasury (1997–2010)
Work	Social Security (1997–2001) Work and Pensions (2001–2010)

Table 3: Negative Binomial Regression Estimates of Questions Asked, by Committee Jurisdiction

	Agriculture	Communities	Culture	Defence	Education	Foreign	Health
Committee Service	0.44* (0.13)	0.29* (0.13)	0.87* (0.19)	0.44* (0.15)	0.61* (0.12)	0.13 (0.21)	0.33* (0.15)
Opposition Spokesperson	-0.13 (0.07)	0.27* (0.07)	0.30* (0.08)	0.17* (0.08)	0.01 (0.07)	0.10 (0.08)	-0.24* (0.06)
Former Government Minister	-0.07 (0.19)	0.47* (0.16)	0.25 (0.22)	-0.12 (0.23)	0.19 (0.18)	0.30 (0.23)	0.23 (0.15)
Parliamentary Private Secretary	-0.19 (0.10)	-0.12 (0.08)	0.03 (0.10)	-0.22 (0.11)	-0.05 (0.09)	-0.32* (0.11)	-0.25* (0.08)
Year	-0.02* (0.01)	-0.10* (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.04* (0.01)	-0.04* (0.01)	-0.03* (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)
log(Session Length)	1.02* (0.04)	0.62* (0.04)	0.89* (0.05)	0.85* (0.05)	0.88* (0.04)	0.88* (0.05)	1.01* (0.03)
log(Tenure)	0.21* (0.06)	0.04 (0.05)	0.13* (0.07)	0.26* (0.06)	0.26* (0.06)	0.28* (0.06)	0.25* (0.05)
$\theta$	0.75* (0.02)	0.93* (0.02)	0.75* (0.02)	0.71* (0.02)	0.85* (0.02)	0.69* (0.02)	1.00* (0.02)
$N$	7288	7288	7288	7288	7288	7288	7288
AIC	27480.40	30717.46	21622.11	25048.41	29323.07	26459.62	36841.68
BIC	52353.90	55590.96	46495.60	49921.90	54196.57	51333.11	61715.17
log $L$	-10132.20	-11750.73	-7203.05	-8916.20	-11053.54	-9621.81	-14812.84

All models include member fixed effects. Standard errors in parentheses.

\* indicates significance at  $p < 0.05$

Table 3: Negative Binomial Regression Estimates of Questions Asked, by Committee Jurisdiction (continued)

	Home	Intl Devel.	Justice	Trade	Transport	Treasury	Work
Committee Service	0.45* (0.13)	1.08* (0.20)	0.23 (0.22)	0.44* (0.14)	0.07 (0.13)	0.34* (0.14)	0.64* (0.15)
Opposition Spokesperson	0.18* (0.06)	0.30* (0.10)	0.28* (0.09)	0.31* (0.07)	0.07 (0.06)	0.14* (0.06)	0.07 (0.07)
Former Government Minister	0.07 (0.16)	0.66* (0.29)	0.11 (0.25)	-0.07 (0.16)	-0.01 (0.16)	0.12 (0.17)	0.17 (0.18)
Parliamentary Private Secretary	-0.29* (0.08)	-0.16 (0.14)	-0.38* (0.12)	-0.13 (0.08)	-0.18* (0.08)	-0.04 (0.09)	-0.22* (0.09)
Year	-0.02* (0.01)	0.02 (0.01)	0.14* (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	-0.10* (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.00 (0.01)
log(Session Length)	0.91* (0.04)	1.04* (0.06)	1.11* (0.05)	0.83* (0.04)	0.81* (0.04)	0.89* (0.04)	0.91* (0.04)
log(Tenure)	0.15* (0.05)	0.24* (0.08)	0.10 (0.07)	0.17* (0.05)	0.05 (0.05)	0.12* (0.05)	0.17* (0.06)
$\theta$	0.93* (0.02)	0.56* (0.02)	0.66* (0.02)	0.90* (0.02)	0.99* (0.03)	0.94* (0.03)	0.81* (0.02)
$N$	7288	7288	7288	7288	7288	7288	7288
AIC	35032.62	17816.95	19986.96	32355.93	31838.72	30456.71	26946.60
BIC	59906.11	42690.45	44860.45	57229.43	56712.22	55330.21	51820.09
log $L$	-13908.31	-5300.48	-6385.48	-12569.97	-12311.36	-11620.35	-9865.30

All models include member fixed effects. Standard errors in parentheses.

\* indicates significance at  $p < 0.05$

Figure 1: Estimated Percent Increase in Questions within Committee Jurisdiction due to Committee Membership

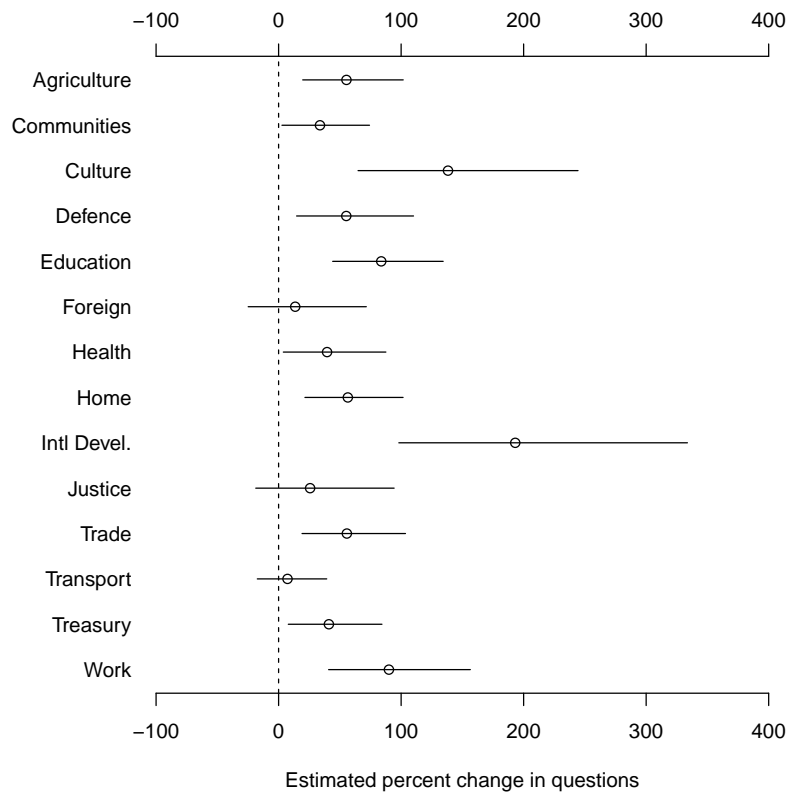


Figure 2: Estimated Percent Increase in Questions outside of Committee Jurisdiction due to Committee Membership

