Keeping Party Programmes on Track: The Transmission of the Policy Agendas of Executive Speeches to Legislative Outputs in the United Kingdom

Shaun Bevan (shaun.bevan@manchester.ac.uk) *

Peter John (peter.john@manchester.ac.uk)

Will Jennings (will.jennings@manchester.ac.uk)

School of Social Sciences, University of Manchester

* Corresponding author

Abstract

In the United Kingdom, the transmission between policy promises and statutes is assumed to be both rapid and efficient because of the tradition of party discipline, relative stability of government, absence of coalitions and the limited powers of legislative revision in the second chamber. Even in the UK, the transmission is not perfect since legislative priorities and outputs are susceptible to changes in public opinion or media coverage, unanticipated events in the external world, backbench rebellions, changes in the political parties and the practical constraints of administering policies or programmes. This paper investigates the strength of the connection between executive priorities and legislative outputs measured by the Speech from the Throne and Acts of Parliament from 1911 to 2008. These are categorised according to the policy content coding system of the UK Policy Agendas Project (www.policyagendas.org.uk). Time series cross-sectional analyses show that there is transmission of the policy agenda from the speech to acts. However, the relationship differs by party, strengthening over time for Conservative governments and declining over time for Labour and other governments.

Political systems operate in time. Policy-making follows an institutionalized sequence as decisions proceed from agenda-setting to implementation, but this process is not continuous. The political process has moments in the political cycle, such as State of the Union addresses or party manifestos prior to an election, when decisions and agendas are aggregated and priorities are established. While there is much in public policy that is fluid, institutional rules create junctures that structure the agenda and force decision-makers to establish priorities.

Almost all political systems have these decision points, which are designed to provide information to the public and to send signals to other parts of the political system, such as bureaucracies. These arenas shape the sequence of institutional decision-making as well as subsequent action. The policy priorities fixed during these periods act as a means of agenda-setting and credible commitment where political parties or governments commit to a particular course of action, encouraging them to follow through on their agenda by implementing policies. Because governments are faced with a multitude of pressures and problems, each deserving of some level of attention, decision-makers – with finite attention and resources – must prioritise some issues ahead of others (see Kingdon 1984; Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Jones and Baumgartner 2005). Through such decision points governments are able to set the agenda establishing the priorities they letter plan to act on through policy. Agenda-setting by governments entails some correspondence between the priorities of the stated agenda and subsequent policy outputs, including legislation. Decision-makers therefore select issues for attention with the intention of acting upon them.

Statements of priorities enable governments to enact political mandates and programmes (e.g. Budge and Hofferbert 1992, Kingermann et al 1994, Budge et al 2001, MacDonald and Budge 2005) and take credit for delivering their stated agenda.

Priorities established by party programmes are transmitted into government spending and legislative outputs in both the US and Western Europe (see Budge and Hofferbert 1990; 1992; Bara 2005). There is evidence, however, that the policy priorities of such party programmes have become more fragmented over time as well as exhibiting uneven patterns of change and stability (see Green-Pedersen 2007; Walgrave and Nuytemans 2009).

The expectation is that when governments use these decision points to set out their priorities and policy programmes, they do so with the intention of matching them with attention to the same issues in other institutional domains, such as legislation. The act of agenda-setting therefore precedes programme enactment and other outputs of government. However, governments respond to broad and often unrelated concerns, such as crime, health and the economy, and these can change in priority as new issues land on the agenda. The allocation of attention on the government agenda is therefore a stochastic process, where randomness and uncertainty are inherent to decision-making because of the complexity of the policy environment (Jones and Baumgartner 2005, pp. 115-116). Implementation or bureaucratic control problems may bedevil the ability of governments to follow through on their agendas and it may make sense to revise its priorities in response to new issues, policy solutions or emergencies. The transmission from policy priorities to policy outputs should therefore be less than one-to-one in most political systems, but there nevertheless should be a noticeable connection between the two.

We use the United Kingdom (UK) as the case for exploring the transmission of executive priorities into legislative outputs. The UK is a unitary, majoritarian political system with few veto points making it a good general case for the analysis of government agendas and programmes (Lijphart 1984; 1999; Tsebelis 1995). Other

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things being equal, we expect the proposed agenda to be reflected strongly in policy outputs. The decision point considered here is the Speech from the Throne,[1] which is a formal annual statement, on behalf of the executive, setting out its priorities for the year ahead and is found across a range of political systems. The outputs we consider are Acts of the UK Parliament. Through time series cross-sectional analyses of one hundred parliamentary sessions between 1911 and 2008, we find a positive and significant relationship between executive priorities and legislative outputs. This transmission of the policy agenda from executive speeches to legislative outputs is less than one hundred percent. Furthermore, there are significant differences between in the level of transmission over time according to political party. The connection has strengthened for the Conservatives and weakened for Labour and other governments.

This paper takes the following structure. First, it discusses the political and institutional function of the Speech from the Throne, the likelihood of transmission from speech (priorities) to acts (outputs) and the importance of credible commitment from policy priorities and promises from which it formulates two hypotheses. The paper then introduces the data and presents the results of time series cross-sectional analyses. Finally, it discusses these results and draws implications for the study of government agendas.

The Institutional Structure of Decision-Making – From Priorities to Outputs

In many political systems the head of state or head of government delivers an annual formal statement, on behalf of the executive, setting out the government agenda for the year ahead. These speeches are forward-looking, communicating general priorities as well as specific measures that the executive intends to address in

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[1] The speech is more widely known as the Queen's Speech or the King's Speech depending upon the sex of the monarch.

the following year (e.g. Cohen 1995; 1997; Hobolt and Klemmensen 2005; 2008; Breeman et al. 2009; Green-Pedersen et al. 2009; Jennings and John 2009; Jennings et al. n.d.). Such speeches articulate the government agenda, prioritise some issues ahead of others and are intended to lead to a corresponding set of policy outputs.

The Speech from the Throne is an integral feature of the State Opening of UK Parliament where the sovereign addresses the chamber of the House of Lords with members of the House of Commons watching from the galleries. Such an institutionalised ritual is characteristic of what Bagehot (1867) described as the dignified part of the British constitution, in which political custom and tradition perform a stabilizing function and allow the 'efficient secret' of Cabinet government to operate effectively. Since 1901, the Speech from the Throne has been a permanent fixture of the parliamentary calendar delivered at the start of a new parliamentary session. It normally takes place toward the end of the calendar year or just after an election when a new government enters office.[2] The speech highlights matters of importance and details the legislative programme that the government intends to enact in the forthcoming year. By highlighting certain issues and ignoring others, the Speech from the Throne provides an annual platform for government to shape the policy agenda (see Jennings, Bevan and John, n.d.).

The unification of executive and legislative powers in Britain's Westminster system, combined with its longstanding tradition of party discipline, means a close link between manifesto pledges, the legislative proposals of governing parties and policy outputs exists (Bara 2005). The speech also enables government to 'go public' (Kernell 1997; Canes-Wrone 2001; 2005), either to set the tone of national debate

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[2] Until 1928, the start of a new parliamentary session generally occurred early in the year, January or February. Since then, the parliamentary year has begun in October or November except after an election, where the first act of business for an incoming government is the opening of parliament with a Speech from the Throne.

over a particular issue or to highlight promises that it intends to later claim credit for (Strøm 2000; 2001; Bara 2005). Studies show that despite the separation of powers in the U.S. presidents can influence the Congressional agenda through public appeals and through the annual State of the Union address, the American executive speech (see Rudalevige 2002; Canes-Wrone 2005). Such effects should, in theory, be stronger under the unified executive and legislative powers of the British political system. The Speech from the Throne integrates both the executive and legislative agendas of the prime minister and cabinet, providing an annual signal of executive priorities, as well as an indication of its commitment to specific legislative proposals (see Jennings, Bevan and John n.d.).

Government, Credible Commitment and Policy Priorities

The Speech from the Throne is a costly signal. The policy agenda set out in the speech creates future potential costs for the prime minister and the government if the priorities in the speech were not followed by policy outputs. In this way, the speech ties the government's hands to the agenda expressed in the speech and conveys a credible signal to their party, the rest of parliament, and the public that this set of issues will be dealt with. By mentioning policies in the speech it can be difficult for the government to back down from its agenda without paying some political cost that may jeopardize its ability to hold power (see Fearon 1997; Kernell 1997; Canes-Wrone 2001; 2005). Given that the speech also contains many manifesto commitments, not following the agenda may alienate sections of the party and create problems for the leadership. Because of these costs, the government wants the policy agenda presented in the Speech from the Throne to translate directly into policy outputs in the form of Acts of Parliament. In this way the speech acts as a form of

credible commitment (North and Weingast 1989) forcing the governing party to stick to its agenda or risk damaging its reputation and political authority.

The Speech from the Throne is a political mechanism for British government to highlight its policy priorities (Jennings, Bevan and John n.d.), as well as to respond to public opinion (Jennings and John 2009). Not defining priorities and not delivering on its agenda can both damage the impression of the government with the electorate and make it easily assailable by its political opponents. As Laver observes, "…If party leaders cannot deliver on commitments that their parties will behave in certain ways, then the entire system of parliamentary government has the potential to become chaotic and unpredictable" (1999: 11). The electorate are known to punish government for failure to perform (e.g. Fiorina 1981; Anderson 1995). Far better is to gain a reputation as a strong government that retains its priorities and implements its programme, but this is a balancing act and only promises likely to be fulfilled are also likely to be made (Strøm 2000; 2001; Bara 2005; Cohen 1995; 1997). This process of credit-taking is not unique to parliaments and prime ministers either, as presidents also often choose to go public to claim a desired outcome (Kernell 1997; Canes-Wrone 2001; 2005). In a unitary system, it is even more important to act credibly, since there is no other branch of government to deflect blame onto if policy priorities are not acted upon (e.g. Anderson 1995). Further, electoral mandates in the UK and in the US have been shown to lead policy programmes to be translated into policy outputs (Budge and Hofferbert 1990; 1992).

Keeping the agenda of government on track also serves a wider purpose. The notions of government accountability and transparency are at the heart of the democratic ideal. Representative government depends on the public being responsive to what government actually does (Wlezien 1995; 1996) and citizens holding

government accountable (Strøm 2000). This is the essence of responsible party government (Ranney 1954) upon which parties seek to take control of policy in the legislature (Cox and McCubbins 2005), and from which they seek an electoral reward. Democracy is about the mandate that electors place on parties to implement their preferences: "what distinguishes democracy from benevolent despotism are precisely the institutional mechanisms for ensuring a *necessary* correspondence between government policy and individual preferences" (Budge and McDonald 2005: 4).

In theory, then, credible commitment implies a high degree of transmission of the policy agenda contained in the Speech from the Throne into Acts of Parliament. On average the relationship between the policy priorities contained in the speech and acts should be strong, with the policy programme presented in the executive speech mirrored by subsequent legislative outputs. For example, a speech that prioritises the economy would be expected to lead to a series of legislative outputs that also prioritise the economy. This expectation of credible commitments and agenda transmission in the Westminster system is due to the power of the prime minister who leads the party with a monopoly of power over the legislature and with powers of appointment. Typically a single party wins a majority in the general election and the governments of the UK have been historically strong (Cox 1987; Strøm 2000). The transmission of the agenda from the speech to laws will never be absolute because of the timing of the legislative process and the emergence of new issues on the political agenda (Goodin 1982; Kingdon 1984). Events and public opinion may also shift the necessary legislative outputs in a given year away from the policy priorities and commitments made at the start of a parliamentary session.

Change in British Politics

Besides those ever-present influences, the relationship between the speech and legislative outputs has changed in line with developments in British politics. Historically, British political parties tended to be centralised with control by elites over their members and their representatives flying the party flag (McKenzie 1955). This has however declined over time with party whips exercising less control than they did in the past. The cohesiveness of parties trying to push their legislation through parliament has weakened since the 1970s (Norton 1975; 1978; 1980), partly due to MPs gaining the habit of rebelling (Cowley 1999; 2002). Studies also suggest that ministers do not have total control over their departments due to the growth in what government does, if not necessarily a decline in executive power (Mueller 1987; Huber 2000). The growth of complexity of government, both in the details of laws in and the number of issues government attends to (Heclo 1980) along with the demands of a globalised economy, may have reduced the control that executives have over policy. The expansion of the activities of interest groups politics and the growth in the venues for policy-making, such as the European Union (Richardson 2000), may be another explanation. On the other hand, it is possible that the power of the executive has increased alongside prime ministerial powers (Foley 1993) and because of ministerial activism.

The Divergence of Political Parties in Britain

Over the last hundred years both parties have become more internally differentiated and less susceptible to rule by a centralising clique, but these long-term shifts have led Labour and the Conservatives to govern in different ways (McKenzie 1955; Beer 1965; Kavanagh 1985; Ware 1992). The Labour Party has evolved from being a party focused on a social movement and a clear programme of social and

economic reform to more of a catch-all party pursuing a more comprehensive party platform. Labour has adapted to the concerns of British society and government over time, pursuing a more comprehensive policy programme compared to its formation (Pelling 1996). Furthermore, the historical roots of Labour Party as a mass social movement has influenced development of an adaptive approach to government with the party focused more on accommodating public preferences rather than shaping them over time (Hay 1994; Smith 1994).

The Conservative Party evolved from a Victorian era party where government was smaller and less complex, dealing with fewer issues, into modern political party facing a wide assortment of issues (Blake 1985). Sweeping reforms concerning the social welfare state have changed the nature of government and the increasing technicalities of policy-making are both changes to which the Conservatives adapted. The Conservative Party had laid claim to the mantle of being the 'natural' party of British government until the breakdown of the post-war consensus (Kavanagh 1987; Kavanagh and Morris 1994; Marquand 1988) and has since pursued more concentrated policy programmes under the reforming governments of Thatcher aimed at shaping public preferences (Hay 2007). The Conservative Party has maintained its hierarchical structure and deferential political tradition that values delivering on their policy programmes (Ludlam and Smith 1995).

Hypotheses

The importance of credible commitment and the effect of political changes on political parties generate two hypotheses about the link between the Speech from the Throne (priorities) and Acts of the UK Parliament (outputs).

The first of these two hypotheses states that due to the institutional power of the prime minister and cabinet, and the nature of the Westminster system the relationship between the Speech from the Throne and Acts of the UK Parliament should be strong. This suggests that the policy priorities put forward in the speech are a good, but imperfect, predictor of the legislative outputs in the parliamentary year following the speech.

H1: Policy priorities indicated in the Speech from the Throne are transmitted into a number of corresponding Acts of the UK Parliament.

Over time, British politics and government has become more complex, with the introduction of new issues, greater inclusion of various actors (interest groups, the EU), and ever more technical legislation. These changes have led to a more complex system of government, but as we discussed above the parties have reacted differently to these changes.[3] The Conservative Party evolved into a modern political party with a strong hierarchy focused on implementing its agenda and we expect its governments to more effectively transmit its policy priorities mentioned in the speech into acts over time. In contrast, as Labour has become more of a catch all party concerned with responding to public preferences and events we expect the policy priorities presented by Labour governments in the speech to have become harder follow through on over time.

H2a: The rate of transmission of Conservatives' priorities expressed in the Speech from the Throne into Acts of the UK Parliament increases over time.
H2b: The rate of transmission of Labour's priorities expressed in the Speech from the Throne into Acts of the UK Parliament decreases over time.

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[3] In this paper, time is used as a proxy for the increasing complexity of government, from 1911 to 2008. There are a number of possible sources of this increasing political complexity, which we expect to affect the transmission of the speech to acts differently for the parties. Determining which type or types of complexity to measure and how to measure it over one hundred parliaments detracts from the central question of this paper, that is the differing rates of transmission from speech to acts between parties and over time. We expect, however, that future research will investigate the cause of differences between parties.

Hypotheses 1, 2a and 2b suggest a system where governments generally keep to their priorities, but where changes to British politics and the parties themselves have affected the maintenance of those commitments over time. So while the nature of the Speech from the Throne has remained stable (see Jennings, Bevan and John n.d.), its effect on legislative outputs has changed due to the responses of parties to their political environment.

Data and Methods

To test these hypotheses, we use data from the UK Policy Agendas Project (www.policyagendas.org.uk) on policy content of the Speech from the Throne and Acts of UK Parliament from 1911 to 2008,[4] spanning one hundred parliamentary sessions and covering nineteen major topic codes that encompass all the issues the UK Parliament deals with. Furthermore, the topic coding scheme is comparable across both speeches and laws. So, for example, what is health policy in the Speech from the Throne is health policy for Acts of the UK Parliament. This general coding scheme for policy enables the comparison of all government policy activity over time and allows for the testing of a time bound population of all activities, rather than just a sample of those activities.

For the analyses, we employ a time series cross-sectional design with panel corrected standard errors.[5] This modelling strategy is preferred to separate analyses of each issue area because it allows for the estimation of how well governments keep

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[4] This paper's analyses were also conducted separately on the post war period, 1946-2008 and this version of the model led to the same inferences.

[5] The data used in this papers analysis is over-dispersed count data, but to ease interpretation and to allow for the use of panel corrected standard errors we present a time series cross-sectional regression. The use of ordinary least squares analyses with count data still produces the best linear unbiased estimates, but may lead to predictions outside the range of the data, but which does not occur in this case. However, this paper's models were also run as time series cross-sectional negative binomial models as a robustness check. These models produced the same inferences as the models tested here.

their commitments in general.[6] The unit of analysis is the policy topic, parliamentary year, where each parliamentary year is the time value and each major topic is treated as an individual panel. This resulted in a total N of 1900 (101-1 parliamentary years (T) * 19 major topics (n)) observations.[7] The pooled time series cross-sectional design also allows for the estimation of the autoregressive nature and trend in acts over time. By using parliamentary sessions rather than calendar years, the occasional occurrence of multiple sessions in a single year do not affect the analysis.

The model used in this paper to test the relationship between the Speech from the Throne and Acts of the UK Parliament takes the following form:

$$⟦Acts⟧_{it} = \alpha_0 + \alpha_1 ⟦Acts⟧_{(it-1)} + \beta_1 ⟦Speech⟧_{it} + \beta_2 (⟦Speech * Time)⟧_{it} + \beta_3 (⟦Speech * Co$$

The dependent variable used for this papers analyses is Acts of the UK Parliament ($Acts_{it}$), specifically acts by policy topic, parliamentary year. For example, the number of acts on healthcare in the 30th session in the dataset is one observation, as is the number of acts on healthcare in the 31st, and so is the number of acts on Defence in the 31st, and so forth. The aggregated acts measure was generated from the UK Agendas Project database of Acts of the UK Parliament. Two researchers blind-

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[6] The use of a pooled analysis most closely fits the question and theory put forth in this paper. As the paper asks how well the priorities expressed in the Speech from the Throne are kept, which suggests pooling, and not how well government keeps its commitments on social welfare separate from housing and other issues. While a concern with this strategy is the exclusion of issue specific controls or events, such as the unemployment rate for macro-economics or wars for international affairs the use of separate models issue area models would still not allow for these additional controls if comparisons between issue areas were to be made. Acts of Parliament themselves follow a stochastic process where randomness and uncertainty are inherent to legislative enactment of the government agenda due to the complexity of the policy environment. This means that events are just as likely to cause increases or decreases in rates of transmission across all topics, so if acts follow a stochastic process then events do not introduce systematic bias into their enactment. The omission of events or socio-economic variables from our model therefore increases the standard errors of our estimates but otherwise does not affect the results.

[7] Note that while one hundred and one parliamentary years exist during this period, that only one hundred parliamentary years are used for the analyses due to the lagged dependent variable which requires that the first year be dropped from the analyses.

coded each act from their long and short-title and assigned a single major topic code.[8]
For each act the date of royal assent of Acts of the UK Parliament is the observed
time point, in other words when an act has officially became law. Since all acts in a
parliamentary year receive royal assent prior to the start of a new parliamentary
session, which is marked by the Speech from the Throne, we are certain that all acts
are properly attribute to the correct parliamentary year.

With a few exceptions most speeches in the UK have two parts.[9] One focuses
on an executive agenda, primarily composed of international affairs, defence, as well
as colonial and territorial issues. However, almost all issues can and do receive some
attention in this part of the Speech from the Throne at some point in our dataset.[10] The
other section of the speech presents the legislative agenda and consists of policy
promises, including many non-specific mentions of forthcoming bills,[11] and other
general legislative intentions directed toward the House of Commons intended for
parliamentary action. The split between these two sections is generally obvious and
marked by formal non-policy statements indicating the shift in attention from one
agenda contained in the speech to the other. Historically, the first section of the
speech contained the executive agenda; however, the Labour Government changed
the format in 1997, which instead put the legislative section of the speech first.

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[8] This procedure led to eighty-five per cent inter-coder reliability for major topic codes in most years. The remaining differences were resolved through discussion and the project leaders made the final decision in the few cases where coders could not agree.

[9] In 1921 a second speech was given that only focused on the executive portion of the agenda, in particular the Irish Free State. For more details on this and other specifics concerning the Speech from the Throne historically see Jennings, Bevan and John n.d.

[10] With the exception of Banking, Finance and Domestic Commerce, and Space, Science, Technology and Communications all issues are mentioned at least once in the executive part of the Speech from the Throne over the 100 speeches contained in our dataset.

[11] The legislative portion of the speech mostly contains statements such as "measures will be put before you…" or "a bill will be introduced on…". These statements indicate parliamentary legislation and that an Act of Parliament is the intended, final outcome of the mention in the Speech from the Throne. The identity and number of resulting legislative outputs cannot always be identified with this data, as often the language used in the speech can be non-specific and does not refer to intended titles of legislative acts (constraining direct mapping of intentions to outputs). Because in most instances mentions are non-specific we believe a probabilistic model is the best method for examining the general pattern of transmission of intentions from speech to act.

However, the transition between the two parts can still be clearly seen in direct and formalized non-policy statements.[12] For the analyses, we use both the total number of mentions in the speech by policy topic, parliamentary year (*Speech*$_{it}$), and the number of mentions in the legislative section also by policy topic, parliamentary year in separate versions of the analyses. To create the data two researchers first separately broke each speech into quasi-sentences achieving an inter-coder reliability of ninety-five per cent. A quasi-sentence represents a complete thought, but not necessarily a complete sentence.[13] The researchers then blind-coded the quasi-sentences assigning each a single major topic code achieving an inter-coder reliability for major topic codes of eighty-five percent for most years.

Figure 1 displays the total number of mentions in the Speech from the Throne, legislative mentions in the speech and Acts of the UK Parliament from 1911-2008. As this figure shows, both the total number of mentions and those in the legislative section of the speech have grown slightly over time while the number of Acts of the UK Parliament has decreased although not without momentary shifts.

[insert Figure 1 about here]

Following hypothesis 2a and 2b we expect the effect of the Speech from the Throne on Acts of the UK Parliament to change over time and in different ways for each party. In other words, the relationship between the speech and acts is conditional, both on time and on the party in power. A conditional hypothesis requires the use of

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[12] For more on this and the other characteristics of the Speech from the Throne mentioned herein see Jennings, Bevan, and John n.d.

[13] A quasi-sentence (or policy statement) constitutes an expression of a single policy idea or issue (see Volkens 2002). Often this unit of analysis is identifiable from the use of punctuation, though it is possible for sentences to include multiple references to policy content (in particular those which address a series of major policy issues in a list).

an interaction term or terms as the underlying relationship is modified by the other factors expressed in the hypothesis. To test whether the transmission from the speech to acts has changed over time and has done so differently for the parties, the model includes a three-way multiplicative interaction term between the Speech from the Throne, a Conservative party variable and a time variable (($Speech * Conservative * Time)_{it}$).[14] The proper use of an interaction term in statistical modelling further requires the inclusion of the interaction's component parts. These additional variables are often called constitutive terms as they constitute the various elements of the interaction itself. Our analyses therefore also include a time ($Time_t$) and Conservative ($Conservative_t$) party variable in the model, along with interactions between the Speech from the Throne and time (($Speech * Time)_{it}$) and the speech and Conservative (($Speech * Conservative)_{it}$).[15] Including these terms in the model allows for proper estimates and the calculation of substantively meaningful marginal effects, conditional on the party in power and the parliamentary year (see Brambor et al. 2006).

The model includes a time variable ($Time_t$) to control for a general trend in the number of acts over time and as a constitutive term. This variable takes the value of 1 in the first parliamentary session in our time span (1911), and counts to 101 in the last

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[14] A split the sample using dummy variable is often used in place of interactions to test conditional hypotheses as it is easier to interpret directly. However, splitting our dataset in this way through the Conservative Party variable would lead to a series of non-random gaps in the time series as only one party is in government at any point in time. Each half of the sample would therefore contain gaps that would need to be addressed in the time series modelling. Techniques that deal with such gaps assume a linear trend over gaps. However, we know that this if not the case with our, as during these gaps another party with a different rate of transmission between the speech and acts is in power. Therefore, use of a split sample would at the very least produce biased estimates.

[15] The model excludes an interaction between time and Conservative, theoretically assuming this value to be 0 as there is no systematic pattern in the number of acts based on the party in power. Excluding this constitutive term is acceptable from a methodological standpoint as it does not directly modify the calculation of the marginal affects their standard errors. Additionally, including this term in the model does not affect the inferences gained from the statistical analyses.

(2008).[16] The Conservative Party variable (*Conservative$_t$*) is coded 1 when the

Conservative Party is in government and 0 when there is a Labour, Liberal or

National/Coalition government. This coding captures party differences during this

period as the Conservative Party is consistently further to the right of the political

spectrum than other parties.[17]

The model also includes interactions between the speech and time ((*Speech* *

Time)$_{it}$) and between the speech and Conservative ((*Speech * Conservative*)$_{it}$). These

interactions enable estimation of the marginal effects required to test the transmission

effect of the speech on acts, conditional upon party and time. In effect, these

variables, through the calculation of the marginal effects of the Speech from the

Throne on Acts of Parliament, allow the size of the speech coefficient to change based

on the parliamentary year (*Time$_t$*) and the party in power (*Conservative$_t$*). Footnotes

contained in the results section of this paper discuss how each of these variables are

interpreted and combined to calculate these marginal effects.

We introduce other control variables to account for the general pattern of Acts

of the UK Parliament over time. Two of these controls address the effect of general

elections on the passage of acts. Parliamentary years immediately following elections,

particularly when party control changes, are likely to have a higher than average

number of acts than non-election years due to the early implementation of manifesto

promises. As such, the model includes a post-election variable (*Postelection$_t$*) that

takes the value of 1 for parliamentary sessions immediately following an election and

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[16] Parliamentary years do not exactly match calendar years, with multiple speeches sometimes occurring within the same year which is the cause of this difference between the number of parliamentary years and calendar years during this period.

[17] Other coding options for party we also investigated, including dummies for each party with Conservative omitted, and a left to right variable, with parties coded from -1 to 1 according to their relative positioning on the liberal to conservative dimension. Both of these of these options were unsatisfactory and their inclusion or exclusion did not alter the other findings presented in this paper, leading to alterations in coefficients, but not signs or significances. Furthermore, a version of the analysis excluding the liberal governments from 1911-1922 led to the same inferences.

0 otherwise. Following a similar logic, parliamentary years just before an election tend to be shorter than normal as elections often happen in the spring months. As a result, there is less time to pass legislation which likely reduces the average number of acts in those years. To control for this, the model includes a pre-election variable (*Preelection$_t$*) that takes the value of 1 for parliamentary sessions just before an election and 0 otherwise.[18]

The two World Wars are major events in this period. During their conduct policy outputs altered fundamentally, not only for defence, but also for other policy fields, such as labour and welfare, with many changes to British government society occurring during this time. As Figure 1 shows the war periods generally experienced a higher than average number of acts. The model therefore includes a dummy variable (*War$_t$*), coded as 1 during wartime (1914-1918 and 1939-1945) and 0 otherwise.[19]

The dataset includes three special short sessions. Special short sessions occur when parliament reopens for a specific purpose rather than for a full session. Two sessions dealt with the independence of the Irish Free State in 1921 and 1922. The third occurred in 1948 on the passage of the third Parliament Act to resolve the gridlock between the House of Lords and the House of Commons. Only one of these, 1922, saw any acts actually passed. These re-openings were also marked by a significant decrease in the length of the speech, with only a single policy statement

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[18] Logically the inclusion of these two variables might indicate over-fitting, as the yearly variation for two years out of a five year election cycle are accounted for with just these two controls. However, these variables only vary by parliamentary year, while the speech variable and the interactions it is included in vary by policy topic, parliamentary year. Furthermore, while incorrectly specified a version of the model that excludes these two variables and one which excludes all controls, which are not also constitutive terms, produce the same inferences although the models are somewhat poorer fitting.

[19] As also seen in Figure 1, the World Wars also led to a significant decline in the length of the Speech from the Throne, in particular the legislative section of the speech. It is therefore logical to assume that an interaction between the Speech from the Throne measures and our war dummy would be negative and significant. However, during model specification tests this interaction proved to be positive and insignificant. This is because the transmission from speech to acts remained strong for those issues that still received attention in the speech during wartime, and those issues which did not receive attention in the speech represented true 0's which had no effect on the calculation of the coefficients.

occurring in the 1948 speech for instance. Since these parliamentary years are clearly different than the norm, the model includes a dummy variable for short sessions (*SpecialShort$_t$*), coded 1 during a special short session and 0 otherwise.[20]

Finally, there is a strong reason to believe that acts follow an autoregressive process, which is confirmed by inspections of autocorrelation and partial autocorrelation functions for each individual panel for the majority of topics. In other words, one of the best possible predictors for the number of acts on healthcare in a given year is the number of acts on healthcare in the previous year. Like most autoregressive processes, the transmission will not be perfect and only a percentage of acts in the previous year should transmit to the current year. This is especially true as breaks in government generally weaken the strength of that relationship, although they do not break it, as events and other matters of context will mean that any government will often have to face the same issues as their predecessor (Jennings and John n.d.). This suggests that a lagged dependent variable will better fit the model than an AR(1) process simply because a lagged dependent variable accounts for history of the series beyond a single previous period.[21] Therefore, we include a lagged acts variable (*Acts$_{it-1}$*) in the model to control and test for the autoregressive nature of acts.

Results

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[20] As these are true parliamentary years, although of a different sort, it is important to include them in the model, as parliament was free to pass as many acts on whatever issues they wanted during these special short sessions. The fact that they only passed acts in the 1922 special short session does not change the need to include these years, especially since acts were passed on issues which were not mentioned in the corresponding Speech from the Throne. However, a version of the model which does not include special short sessions was also tested and put through the same robustness checks as the model tested in this paper and this led to the same inferences.

[21] A version of the model using an AR(1) term rather than a lagged dependent variable was also ran as a robustness check. This model produced the same inferences, with key variables maintaining the same signs and levels of statistical significance.

Table 1 presents the results for the time series cross-sectional models using the different speech variables.[22]

[insert Table 1 about here]

The positive and significant coefficient for the $Speech_{it}$ in both versions of the analysis presented in Table 1 indicates the average effect of a mention in the Speech from the Throne on acts across all nineteen major topic codes. In other words, on average a mention in the legislative half of the speech will result in 0.716 acts on the same topic holding all three interaction terms to 0. However, all three interactions are never 0 in the model and the $Speech_{it}$ variable only represents one part of the story. The tests of hypotheses 1 and 2a and 2b occur as part of several interactions meaning they cannot be directly interpreted from the coefficients alone. Each variable or interaction presents a different part of the story.[23] To understand the effect of the Speech from the Throne on Acts of Parliament given the interactions between the speech, time and party control of government requires $Speech_{it}$ variable's marginal effects, the strong negative coefficient for the $(Speech * Time)_{it}$ variable, the $(Speech * Conservative)_{it}$ interaction, and the three-way interaction requires additional empirics beyond the regression models, the results of which are best presented and interpreted graphically. Figures 2 and 3 graph the marginal effects of the speech on acts and show the 95% confidence intervals for All Mentions and Legislative

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[22] Two panels in each version of the model exhibited autocorrelation in their residuals. Environment and International Trade for All Mentions and Defence and International Trade for Legislative Mentions. Dropping these panels from data and running the analyses on the remaining cases did not alter the signs or significances of the results.

[23] The $Speech_{it}$ variable is the effect of the speech on acts for non-Conservative governments not accounting for change over time. The $Speech_{it}$ variable minus the $(Speech * Conservative)_{it}$ interaction represents the effect of the speech on acts for Conservative governments also not accounting for change over time. The $(Speech * Time)_{it}$ interaction shows the change in the speech acts relationship over time for non-Conservative governments. Similarly, the $(Speech * Time * Conservative)_{it}$ interaction shows the change in the speech acts relationship over time for Conservative governments.

Mentions respectively. The figures mark changes in party control of government by a vertical dotted line through the first year of a new government. The figures also label the party in control of government during each period of at the top.

[insert Figures 2 and 3 about here]

The Y axis in Figures 2 and 3 indicates the marginal effects and confidence intervals of the speech while the X axis indicates the parliamentary year. The solid line indicates the combined effects for the $Speech_{it}$ variable, $(Speech * Time)_{it}$ interaction, the $(Speech * Conservative)_{it}$ interaction and the three-way interaction $(Speech * Time * Conservative)_{it}$ at a given point in time. The dashed lines represent the 95% confidence intervals for these calculated effects for the speech by time and party.[24]

Both Figures 2 and 3 show that the average effect of the speech declines over time. The decline is slightly sharper in the legislative version of the analysis which also has a greater average effect overall. The marginal effects for both analyses remain significant for most of time span (indicated by the 95% confidence intervals), with the only exceptions being early on during a Conservative government in the All

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[24] These effects were calculated by taking the coefficient for the $Speech_{it}$ variable in each sample minus the coefficient for the $(Speech * Time)_{it}$ interaction which is multiplied by each parliamentary year in those years without a Conservative government. In those years with Conservatives in power the $(Speech * Conservative)_{it}$ interaction plus the $(Speech * Time * Conservative)_{it}$, which is multiplied by each parliamentary year, is added to the previous value. This produces the dynamic marginal effects over time and by party. Calculation of the 95% confidence intervals (represented by the dashed lines)for Figures 2 and 3 is more difficult to explain verbally, but is done following the formulas laid out by Brambor et al (2006) where the standard deviation is the square root of the variance- covariance matrix of the Speech variable and the three constitutive terms. The resulting number is then multiplied by 2 and -2 to calculate the upper and lower confidence bands respectively.

Mathematically in relation to the model as presented in the data section, the calculation of the marginal effects and 95% confidence intervals can be expressed as follows:

Mentions series, and during the most recent years in both cases indicated by the confidence bands dropping below 0.

Combined, Figures 2 and 3 and the results in Table 1 present the tests and offer a visual explanation of hypotheses 1, 2a and 2b. To interpret these results fully with regard to each hypothesis it is best to turn to the marginal effects presented in Figures 2 and 3. For the purposes of this discussion we focus on Figure 3 and the Legislative Mentions analysis presented in Table 1, although the same interpretation can be made for the All Mentions analysis. In Figure 3, the marginal effects of the speech on acts are positive throughout the time span and are statistically significant for all but the last four parliamentary years of data. This offers support for hypothesis 1, that there is a positive and significant relationship between the speech and acts. More important than the level of statistical significance is the strength of these results. As the transmission of the policy agenda of the speech to acts is conditional, changing over time and by party, the size of the effect cannot be discussed through a single coefficient value. It is best illustrated by the marginal effects presented in Figure 3. From visual inspection, it appears that the marginal effect is near to 0.4 in most years, indicating that each mention in the legislative section of the speech translates into 0.4 of an act on the same topic. This means that two and a half speech mentions are required on average to result in a single act, if the number of previous acts and the other controls are held equal to 0. Overall, the level of transmission over time is lower than might be expected as the majority of mentions in the legislative section of the speech, which sets the legislative agenda for the forthcoming parliamentary year, are direct references to forthcoming bills. The marginal effects presented in Figure 3 also show a strengthening of the relationship between the speech and acts for Conservative governments indicated by the increasing marginal effect for the speech during

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Conservative control of parliament, supporting hypothesis 2a, that Conservative governments have a higher rate of transmission of the policy agenda. These figures further demonstrate a decline in the transmission of the agenda between the speech and acts for Labour governments indicated by the decreasing marginal effect for the speech during non-Conservative control of parliament, supporting hypothesis 2b, that Labour governments find it harder to maintain the agenda presented in the Speech from the Throne over time.

Figures 2 and 3 show clear differences in the relationship between the speech and acts for parties, but those differences are dynamic in nature. An alternative version model which does not include a three-way interaction between the speech, time and Conservative Party showed no statistically significant differences between the parties in a (*Speech * Conservative*)$_{it}$ interaction. This alternative model specification suggested that on average, over a hundred parliamentary years, the ability for either party to maintain their agenda was the same. From the trends observed in Figure 3, it is clear why this result occurs. While the relationship between the speech and acts differs between parties dynamically, over the past hundred parliaments there has been no difference on average in the rate of transmission from the speech to acts, with the parties essentially changing places around the mid-point of this period. The difference between the parties is only observed when accounting for the dynamic change in this relationship over time, which is achieved through use of the three-way interaction. Overall, the model offers strong support for hypotheses 1, 2a and 2b.

Moving onto the estimates for the other constitutive and control variables, *Time*$_t$ is negative in both models as should be expected given the decline in the number of acts historically. This is only approaches significance in the Legislative

Mentions analysis, suggesting that the year-to-year change has been small. However, from the first parliamentary session to the last in the dataset, the number of acts, when considering the legislative version of the model, decreases by 1 for each issue area, meaning that holding all else constant, there are 19 fewer acts of parliament now than there were in 1911.

The *Conservative$_t$* variable is positive in both models, but insignificant indicating no difference in the total number of acts passed by each party. The *Preelection$_t$* variable is negative in both models and nears statistical significance, indicating that fewer acts are passed on average in the parliamentary session immediately before an election. Similarly, the *Postelection$_t$* variable is positive and statistically significant in both versions of the model, showing that more acts are passed following an election than in other parliamentary years. Both of these results fit with theoretical expectations concerning acts and the election cycle. The *War$_t$* variable is also positive, but insignificant in both versions of the model, indicating that no more acts were passed during the two World Wars than the average number of acts in all other parliamentary years. The remaining control variable in the model *SpecialShort$_t$* is negative and statistically significant in both versions of the model. This is consistent with evidence from the data in Figure 1, that the number of acts was 0 or very low in these parliamentary years due to the exceptional nature of the sessions themselves. The large negative effect of this variable in both versions of the model is logically consistent with that observation, as the average number of acts in each issue area is at or near 0 for these three sessions. Removal of these parliamentary years and of the control variable from the model does not however affect the other inferences presented in this paper.

Table 1 also shows positive and significant coefficients for $Acts_{it-1}$. Acts are indeed autoregressive, meaning that on average if there were two acts on a topic in the previous year, holding all else constant there will be at least one act in the current year. While this effect is smaller than many autoregressive time series using social science data, it is not surprising. Breaks in government, events and the absence of follow-up legislation to maintain existing laws mean that the number of acts by policy topic, parliamentary year is governed by many factors in addition to previous legislative activity.

Finally, our analyses demonstrate that the degree of transmission of the agenda from speech mentions to acts is stronger when considering just the legislative section of the Speech from the Throne for the entire period between 1911 and 2008 (see Table 1 and Figures 2 and 3). The large increase in the effect of the speech variable and the interaction terms are most likely because the legislative section of the Speech from the Throne refers to specific legislative intentions for the following session. Moreover, the model using only legislative mentions explains more variance the model using all mentions suggesting it is the more appropriate model specification.[25] The differences in results of these alternative specifications suggest that the legislative section of the speech is key source of transmission to acts of parliament, not the content of the speech in its entirety.

Conclusion

There is a relationship between the Speech from the Throne and Acts of the UK Parliament, but it is not as strong or as historically stable as the classic

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[25] Note that the coefficient estimates for other variables included in the model for all mentions (see Table 1) also change when compared against the model for legislative mentions only. For example, the effect of lagged acts is weaker, which can be explained due to the increase in explanatory power of the speech variable and interaction terms.

formulation of the Westminster model might suggest. Our study shows that the annual statement of executive priorities is both a statistically significant and substantial predictor of legislative outputs. However, this relationship has changed over time in different directions for the two major parties in British politics. While Conservative governments have steadily strengthened the relationship between the Speech from the Throne and Acts of the UK Parliament, this relationship has been in decline over the same period Labour and other governments. The degree of transmission from the speech to acts is also weaker than might be expected given the agenda-setting function of the Speech from the Throne itself and the strength of the executive in the Westminster system.

The results here further show that the transmission the agenda expressed in the speech to Acts of Parliament is far stronger when considering only the legislative section of the speech. This makes logical sense and shows that the institution of the Speech from the Throne has two distinct functions, namely an executive focus concerned primarily with international relations, territorial issues, and defence, and a legislative focus that highlights the legislation the government intends to see through in the coming parliamentary year (Jennings, Bevan and John n.d.). While the Speech from the Throne is a ceremonial event in the parliamentary calendar, it performs a clear and direct function in setting the executive agenda of British government, articulating both its executive and legislative priorities.

This paper considers how the relationship between the speech and acts changes over time both generally and by party. While there is some evidence of a general decline in the relationship between the Speech from the Throne and Acts of the UK Parliament, the stronger inference is that this decline has been party specific. Labour and other governments have experienced a general decline in this relationship,

while Conservative governments have had a gradual upward trend. While the evidence of these party differences is strong and robust, the exact reason or reasons why the parties have moved in different directions in their ability to maintain the priorities mentioned in the Speech from the Throne is not clear. As this paper has noted, many factors may explain the change in these party specific trends. In particular, changes to internal party organisation provide a plausible account of this changing degree of transmission over time. Labour has evolved from a single issue party to a centrist party concerned with public and media opinion, while historically the Conservatives have adapted from being a Victorian era party in a period when the legislative agenda addressed fewer issues, modernising to pursue a more ideological legislative programme concerned with shaping public opinion and setting the political agenda. For example, this explanation is consistent with popular characterisations of the governing styles of the Thatcher government, pursuing a focused programme of reform despite opposition, and that of the Blair government, with its sofa-style cabinet and preoccupation with media management. This paper has offered a general explanation for these findings, but this requires further research into the reasons why this pattern exists.

More broadly this paper has highlighted important methodological and theoretical points concerning political parties and their policy programmes. Methodologically, the paper has demonstrated that there are significant party differences in the UK concerning the degree to which the Labour and Conservative parties enact the priorities in the Speech from the Throne in terms of Acts of the UK Parliament, but that this difference is dynamic in nature. While it is possible to observe a significant difference between the parties during certain time periods, the largest difference between the parties is in the changing strength of the relationship

between the speech and acts over time. Other studies, particularly those using time series data that postulate party differences, should take care to consider if those differences are dynamic. Political parties change over time and so does the environment in which they operate.

Our findings concerning the differences over time in the degree to which the legislative agenda of political parties are transmitted into legislative outputs do not, however, inform normative claims regarding whether higher or lower degrees of transmission indicate a more efficient or responsive functioning of democracy. For instance, a government that is more sensitive to changes in public opinion, events or the media might be considered responsive, but also may find it more difficult to implement its legislative agenda. There are, however, trade-offs between enacting an agenda and responding to events or other external forces. Finding a middle ground between shaping and accommodating policy, between acting as a trustee and a delegate is likely the most desirable option.

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Figure 1: Acts of Parliament, All Mentions, and Legislative Mentions in the Speech from the Throne.
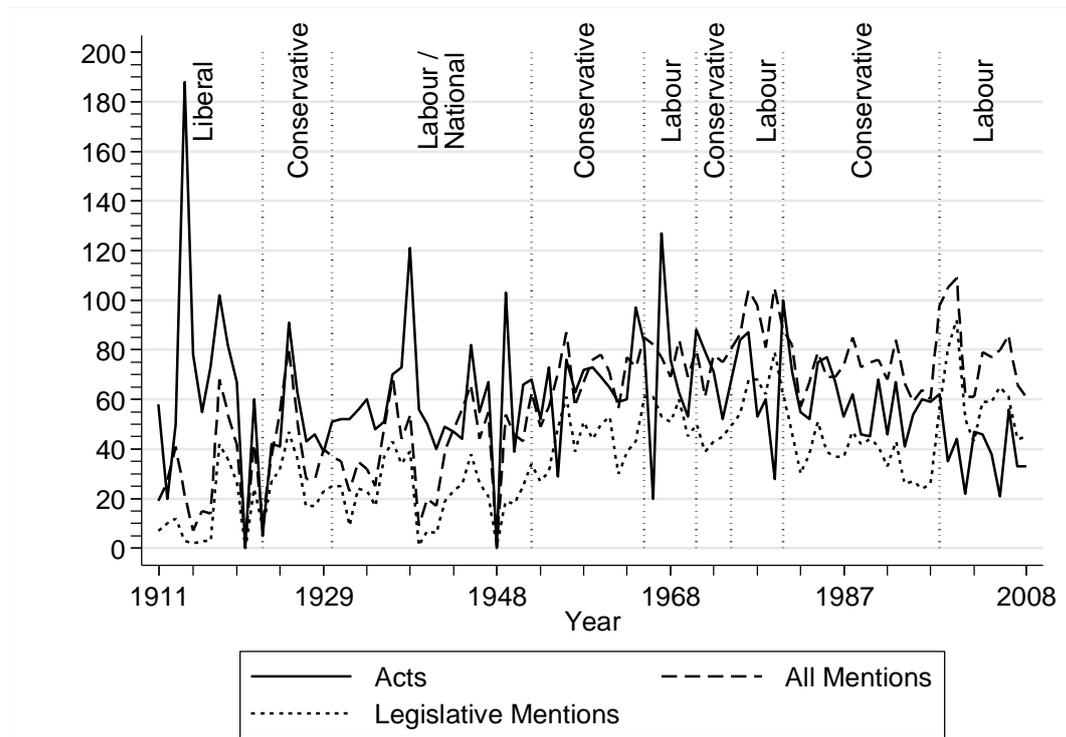
Table 1: Acts of Parliament by Major Topic

	All Mentions	Legislative Mentions
$Acts_{it-1}$	0.506***	0.438***
	(0.039)	(0.039)
$Speech_{it}$	0.285**	0.715***
	(0.064)	(0.138)
$(Speech * Time)_{it}$	-0.003**	-0.006**
	(0.001)	(0.002)
$(Speech * Conservative)_{it}$	-0.200†	-0.459*
	(0.103)	(0.213)
$(Speech * Time * Conservative)_{it}$	0.002	0.009**
	(0.002)	(0.003)
$Time_t$	-0.006	-0.009*
	(0.005)	(0.005)
$Conservative_t$	0.263	0.042
	(0.270)	(0.275)
$Preelection_t$	-0.449	-0.400
	(0.306)	(0.300)
$Postelection_t$	1.015***	0.874**
	(0.303)	(0.295)
War_t	0.172	0.450
	(0.469)	(0.458)
$SpecialShort_t$	-3.142***	-2.802***
	(0.766)	(0.748)
Constant (α_0)	1.322***	1.378***
	(0.352)	(0.347)
R^2	.329	.364

Note: * $p \le .05$, ** $p \le .01$, *** $p \le .001$, † $p \le .10$, N=1881

Figure 2: Marginal Effects and Confidence Intervals of Speech from the Throne
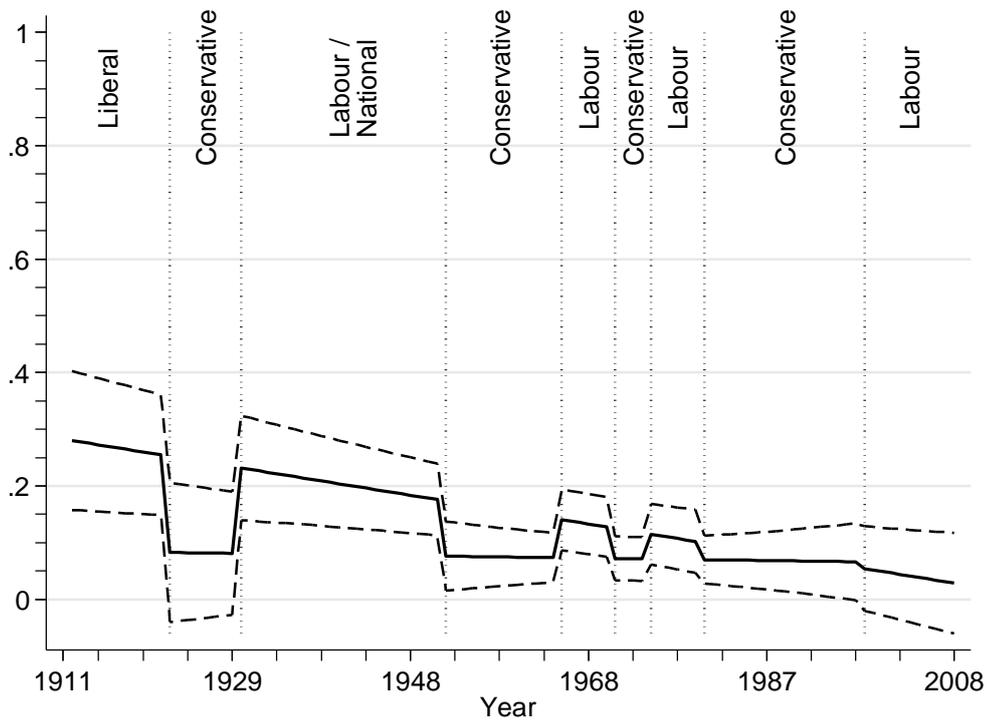Mentions Over Time – All Mentions

Figure 3: Marginal Effects and Confidence Intervals of Speech from the Throne
Mentions Over Time − Legislative Mentions