

Institution: University of Nottingham
Unit of Assessment: 21
Title of case study: Fighting myths with evidence: transforming political debate about Parliament
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>Professor Philip Cowley's high-profile research into the attitudes, motivations and voting behaviour of MPs has transformed press reporting and improved public understanding of their actions. Widely disseminated via social media, briefing notes and events, the research has become an on-going authoritative resource for journalists, MPs and lobbyists, and the findings have been covered by all major media outlets in the UK and beyond, reaching an audience of millions.</p> <p>Nick Robinson, the BBC's Political Editor, has described it as 'academic political research doing exactly what it should do – helping to inform the public debate – and in real time not years after it matters'.[source 1]</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>Cowley's research has tracked and explained the behaviour of British MPs in the voting lobbies of the House of Commons. It has looked at the drivers of rebellion and at the attitudes and behaviour of the party whips. The research is mixed methods work, combining quantitative analysis of parliamentary division lists with extensive elite interviewing.</p> <p>From 2002 onwards, during his tenure at Nottingham University, Cowley has published one monograph on the subject, and more than 20 academic articles and chapters. Amongst other things, the research has demonstrated the increased rebelliousness and independence of MPs (publications #1, #2). It helped demolish the myth that MPs were increasingly loyal and cohesive, rather showing that independence and rebellion were reaching record-breaking levels (#2). This has been true both in terms of frequency and quantity, with MPs rebelling more often and in larger numbers – although the work has also shown that it is not true of every issue (#3). This effect has also been true in terms of policy consequence – with the research tracking both the formal defeats and informal retreats and concessions performed by government in the face of backbench opposition. Early research into the post-2010 coalition government has confirmed this trend (#4).</p> <p>Research has also examined free-votes, those on so-called issues of conscience – demonstrating the fundamental party division that is present in the Commons, even on issues that are supposedly non-party, such as abortion or homosexuality, and the extent to which the outcome of the vote is dependent on the party composition of the Commons (#5). It has tracked the motivations of those rebelling – showing the importance of experience, ideology, and past behaviour – and also the gendered dimension to the behaviour, especially that seen under New Labour, with the large cohort of women MPs elected in 1997 and then in 2005. It has also examined the electoral benefits of rebellion (of which there are almost none, again contrary to myth) (#1).</p> <p>With very rare exceptions, outputs are either single-authored by Cowley or co-authored with Mark Stuart, employed as a researcher at Nottingham on the project.</p>
<p>3. References to the research</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>The Rebels: How Blair Mislaid His Majority</i> (London, Politico's, 2005), 317pp. +xiv [Shortlisted for the Channel 4 Political Book of the Year Award]. 2. 'A Rebellious Decade? Backbench rebellions Under Tony Blair', in M. Beech and S. Lee (eds), <i>Ten Years of New Labour</i>, London, Palgrave, 2008, pp. 103-199 (with M. Stuart) [established academic press]. 3. 'Where has all the trouble gone? British intra-party parliamentary divisions during the Lisbon ratification', <i>British Politics</i> (2010) 5 (1), 133-148 (with M. Stuart) [peer-reviewed journal].

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4. 'The Cambusters: The Conservative European Referendum Rebellion of October 2011', *Political Quarterly* (2012) 83 (2), 402-406 (with M. Stuart).
5. 'Party Rules, OK: voting in the House of Commons on the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill', *Parliamentary Affairs* (2010) 63 (1), 173-181 (with M. Stuart) [peer-reviewed journal].

All are available on request. The research from 2003-2006 was funded by the ESRC ('Robotic or Rebellious? Backbench Behaviour in the 2001 Parliament', £110,000), graded 'Excellent'. It was described by one ESRC referee as '**one of the best disseminated [projects] in ESRC history**'. Cowley was the Principal Investigator.

4. Details of the impact

At a time when public confidence in politics and politicians is very low in Britain, the widespread dissemination of the research has helped to improve public understanding about parliament, both at an elite-level, and then indirectly through TV, radio and press to an audience of millions. Citations by high profile parliamentarians and acknowledgements from the widest range of political journalists demonstrate that Cowley's research has helped to inform political debate in the UK, providing evidence to help combat mythology.[source 1]

The Commons Speaker, John Bercow, has made repeated references to the work, as helping to demolish the myth of the slavish backbencher. As he said:

I undertake considerable outreach work with the public, and especially schools and colleges, to try to engage them with politics and Parliament. I often make reference to the work of Professor Cowley when trying to persuade audiences that today's MPs are not, as many think, obedient but in fact have become increasingly rebellious and independent. His research is therefore invaluable in providing a reliable and up-to-date account of the behaviour of MPs and helping to demolish so many myths about their behaviour.[2]

There is an acknowledged improvement in the quality of political reporting, ensuring that it is informed by the latest and most up-to-date political research. As Robert Hutton, the parliamentary correspondent for Bloomberg, has said, the research '**has fundamentally changed how political reporters view the behaviour of MPs**. As both journalists and parliamentarians have adjusted to the new reality of coalition, their work is consulted on a constant basis by every lobby correspondent I know'.

Further **positive feedback on the impact of the research** has come from sources such as: Gary Gibbon, the Political Editor of Channel 4, who said that the research was 'priceless', 'essential' and had 'informed and improved' his reporting; Andrew Sparrow, of the *Guardian* said that it '**makes a significant contribution to the public understanding of parliament**'; Mark D'Arcy, who presents Yesterday in Parliament for Radio 4, argued that the research provided an alternative, objective source, 'the kind of perspectives... that used to be the presence of a few astute party whips'.

In May 2010, the *Guardian* dedicated its 'In Praise of...' leader to Cowley. They said:

Rare is the scholar that penetrates beyond the academy and into public consciousness. The work of Nottingham's Philip Cowley has indisputably made the leap... Cowley took the trouble to measure the historical truth, and demolished the myth, and now every punter worth their salt knows that there are more rebel hearts than ever among today's MPs. [the research] is so authoritative that even the whips use it...[3]

Indeed, some products of the research – such as the claim that the current parliament is the most rebellious of the post-war era – have now entered the political blood stream, and become so widespread that they get cited back to Cowley by practitioners, who are often unaware of where they originally came from.[4] In July 2008 one finding (that Gordon Brown suffered more rebellions in his first month than any other post-war Prime Minister) was even used (uncredited) as

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a quiz question on Channel 5's The Wright Stuff!

The key to achieving such widespread understanding of the work has been a many-layered approach to dissemination:

1. The establishment of a **research-based website** (www.revolts.co.uk), to disseminate findings. This was set up in 2004 – before blogging became fashionable in academia – and has been regularly updated since. **It became routinely used by journalists and politicians alike as their source of data on backbench behaviour.** When the resource to fund the site looked in jeopardy, it was cited as 'one of the best examples of the type of impact the academy should seek to emulate' (by Sunder Katwala, then of the Fabian Society); Ben Brogan (of the *Telegraph*) described it as a 'groundbreaking project [which] has over the years established itself as a vital reference point for politics'. Its funding was also raised in the Commons.[5]
2. Supplementation of the website **by other social media**, of which the most obvious is Twitter – where Cowley has over 6,200 followers, including almost all senior political journalists – and postings on other blogs and outlets, especially Nottingham's *Ballots and Bullets* site, where he posts regular explanatory updates on developments in the Commons.[6] But however disseminated, the principle has been the same: to highlight and explain current developments in parliament, drawing on the research.
3. Production of **regular briefing notes**, applying the research to ongoing developments in the Commons. These have put rebellions into their historical context; provided benchmarks and ready reckoners for journalists to use; discussed and explored the motivations of rebels; and explained the outcome of votes. As well as being disseminated online, these briefing papers were also sent to political journalists and columnists with whom Cowley had contacts. In addition, **every year since 2008 the project has published an end-of session (or end-of-Parliament) report**, detailing rebellions in the previous year, which has been widely disseminated to stakeholders, as well as available free-of-charge online. The 2013 report was launched at the British Academy in May 2013 and its findings were reported on outlets including: the World At One (on Radio 4), Yesterday in Parliament (also Radio 4), the Daily Politics (BBC2), Channel 4 News, the *Guardian*, *Telegraph*, *Express*, Bloomberg, *Huffington Post*, and BusinessWeek. Previous reports have attracted similar coverage.
4. Frequent **written contributions for outlets which reach beyond the academic community.** Articles have been written both for the national press (such as *The Times* and *Guardian*) and more specialised publications (such as *The House Magazine* and *Total Politics*) and websites (such as *LibDem Voice* and *ConservativeHome*). Examples of authored articles by Cowley include: in *The Times*: 'Biggest rebellion to date is sign of trouble to come' (23 October 2011); 'Rebels with few previous causes' (9 December 2010); in the *Guardian*: 'Who will be bravest in the tuition fees vote?' (7 December 2010); 'Student fees: why the Lib Dems' broken promises are what counts' (16 November 2010); in *The House Magazine*: 'Equal Marriage: The Great Divide' (7 February 2013); 'March of the Troublemakers' (10 May 2012); in *Total Politics*: 'Trouble ahead? The likely rebellions to the Queen's Speech' (10 May 2012); 'The ring of no confidence' (18 June 2009); for *LibDem Voice*: 'And then there was one... (Unmasked! The only backbench Lib Dem MP 100% loyal to the Coalition)' (18 November 2011); 'The reality is a long way from equidistance' (14 January 2008); for *ConservativeHome*: 'Key facts on the size and nature of last night's Tory budget rebellion' (1 November 2012); 'What will the Conservative Parliamentary Party be like after the next general election?' (8 January 2009).
5. **Exposure for the research on broadcast media.** The research formed the subject of Cowley's authored lecture for Radio 4 ('Forethought'), first broadcast 25 May 2011, with an estimated audience of 450,000. Other broadcast media appearances discussing the research have included every major broadcaster in the UK.
6. High profile talks at **seminars and events organised outside academia**, including those organised by the House of Commons library, the Lords Speaker, and the Government whips.[7]

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These have included events organised by lobbyists and thinktanks. Chris Rumfitt, a Managing Director of Edelman, the world's largest PR company, described a presentation to their Public Affairs team as '**of a sort that we would just be unable to get from any other source...** colleagues found it interesting and extremely useful in helping them understand developments at Westminster, and I know that it has helped inform our work since then'. Greg Power, the Director of Global Partners, for whom several sessions on dissent have been run, said: 'we only work with academics... whose expertise is applicable... Cowley provides exactly this sort of expertise.' [8]

As a result of this proactive dissemination strategy, **findings from the research have been covered by all major media outlets in the UK and beyond**, including multiple features in every major British newspaper, on BBC (radio and television), Channel 4, Sky News, ITV, along with a host of overseas outlets. Listing the occasions when the research has been cited in the media or Parliament would itself take up more than the length of this case study. As **illustrative examples only**, see the following, all of which are reports based entirely on the research: 'Backbenchers more rebellious than at any stage since World War Two' (*Independent*, 9 May 2012); 'Gordon Brown faced more revolts last year than any PM since Edward Heath' (*Guardian*, 4 December 2008); 'Gordon Brown suffers backbench rebellions as he struggles to control party', *Telegraph*, 17 November 2009); 'Gordon Brown struggles to maintain discipline after 103 rebellions', *Times*, 26 December 2008; 'Rebel MPs who vote against the Government' (*BBC Daily Politics*, 24 January 2011); 'Labour's rebellious streak' *BBC Website*, 25 February 2011). For its use in Parliament, see examples such as in the Commons (HC Debs, 24 June 2009) or Lords (HL Debs, 26 January 2011, c1047). **In total, between 1 January 2008 and 1 June 2013, Cowley's research was featured in 169 newspaper stories, spanning eight countries.**

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

[1] Testimonial from Nick Robinson, BBC Political Editor, is available on file. Testimonials from the other journalists cited above – Robert Hutton (Political Correspondent, Bloomberg), Gary Gibbon (Political Editor, Channel 4), Andrew Sparrow (Political Correspondent, Guardian), Mark Darcy (BBC) are also available on file. In addition, a broader list of journalists who have used the research, and who praise it, can be found at: http://revolts.co.uk/?page_id=564. The list includes most of the major print and broadcast journalists working in the UK.

[2] Letter, 12 September, available on file.

[3] *Guardian*, 19 May 2010.

[4] An *illustrative* example of where the work was used but not credited would be: 'Parliament's power surge', *Spectator*, 4 February 2012.

[5] At: <http://www.nextleft.org/2010/05/save-our-revolts-why-esrc-should.html> and <http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/benedictbrogan/100040246/save-revolts/> For the House of Commons: HC Deb, 3 June 2010, c.566.

[6] Twitter account is: @philipjcowley.

[7] See, for example, the account of a presentation to a group in the House of Lords, organised by the then Leader of the Lords (<http://lordsoftheblog.net/2008/02/06/sheep/>), and Lord Tyler's comment: 'Professor Cowley cheered us up'.

[8] Testimonials from Chris Rumfitt (Managing Director, Edelman) and Greg Power (Director, Global Partners) are available on file.