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# The Role of Rituals in Adversarial Parliaments: An Analysis of Expressions of Collegiality in the British House of Commons

David Beck, David Yen-Chieh Liao & Thomas Saalfeld \*

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**Abstract:** »Die Bedeutung von Ritualen in konfrontativen Parlamenten: Eine Analyse der Ausdrucksformen von Kollegialität im britischen House of Commons«. Despite the adversarial character of debates in the British House of Commons, Members of Parliament (MPs) observe a highly ritualized rhetorical style emphasizing collegiality and mutual respect across party lines. The language MPs use in this context harks back to an ancient pre-democratic past. Why does a modern democratic legislature conceal partisan conflict by using pre-democratic ritualistic references to “the House” as a corporate actor? Why do they call their fiercest competitors “honourable Members” or even “Friends”? In this paper, we review the results of important empirical studies suggesting that the activities even of modern democratic parliaments (based on intense party competition) reveal traces of pre-democratic corporate bodies in some respects. Analyzing a large corpus of parliamentary speeches in the British House of Commons between 1988 and 2019, we propose a novel technique to identify and measure references to collegiality in Britain’s parliamentary system. We demonstrate the extent to which such references vary systematically by party and across time, suggesting that they are used strategically in the stylized and ritualized language of parliamentary debate in the Commons depending on the status of MPs as members of government or oppositional parties.

**Keywords:** Collective agency, quantitative text analysis, British politics.

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\* David Beck, University of Bamberg, Feldkirchenstraße 21, Bamberg, Germany; [david.beck@stud.uni-bamberg.de](mailto:david.beck@stud.uni-bamberg.de). ORCID iD: 0009-0001-9588-2055.  
David Yen-Chieh Liao, Aarhus University, Aarhus, Denmark; [davidycliao@gmail.com](mailto:davidycliao@gmail.com). ORCID iD: 0000-0002-2465-3749.  
Thomas Saalfeld, University of Bamberg, Feldkirchenstraße 21, Bamberg, Germany; [thomas.Saalfeld@uni-bamberg.de](mailto:thomas.Saalfeld@uni-bamberg.de). ORCID iD: 0000-0003-2849-0665.  
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## 1. Introduction

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Organizationally, parliamentary chambers such as the British House of Commons meet standard definitions of corporate actors capable of “group agency” (List and Pettit 2011): They can be characterized by “their clearly defined membership, their – more or less – well-defined purpose, and their ability to make collective decisions” (Gehring and Marx 2023, 24; in this special issue). Through their votes and debates, Members of Parliament collectively make and break governments, hold governments to account, and take final decisions on legislation following a collective process of debate and scrutiny (Wheare 1963). Despite the competitive partisan nature of debates and its majoritarian tradition of decision-making, the House of Commons is often treated as if it were a collective body influencing its environment through its own actions, especially through its legislation, the authorization of executive power, ratification of international treaties, and decisions it takes over war and peace. As a result of legislative institutionalization, the House of Commons – like many democratic parliaments – has relatively stable institutional rules (conventions, routines, standard operating procedures, lasting social practices, and specific roles as well as the formal constitutional norms and rules of procedure) that have emerged over a long historical period. These formal and informal rules generate a certain amount of autonomy for the chamber’s decision-making process from any simple aggregation of individual or partisan preferences.<sup>1</sup>

However, many empirical students of legislative politics would argue with some justification that the notion of a parliament as a corporate actor constitutes a pre-democratic fiction. There is little doubt that many European parliaments emerged as corporate actors in antagonistic – and sometimes violent – conflicts against monarchs and other political forces from the late Middle Ages onwards.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For example, when the Speaker of the British House of Commons interprets the Chamber’s Standing Orders, he or she will consult an authoritative compendium referred to as “Erskine May,” which summarizes previous Speakers’ rulings on contentious matters of procedure and constitutes a powerful set of precedents (May 2019). Erskine May’s first edition was published in 1844, testifying to the long and uninterrupted history of British parliamentary government. One of the most impressive examples of the extent to which traditions and precedent were used to block the British government’s attempts to ride roughshod over the Commons’ right to have meaningful debates on matters of considerable importance are the (failed) decisions over the United Kingdom’s agreement with the European Union over Brexit where the Speaker used his interpretation of rules and precedents to defend the rights of the House as a collective body (Russell 2021).

<sup>2</sup> In one such conflict, the English King John had to grant the Magna Charta Libertatum to the English Lords in 1215. King Charles I’s attempts to roll back many of the traditional powers of Parliament in the 1630s and 1640s contributed to the English Civil War (1642–49) as a conflict between an absolutist Monarch and Parliament. This deadly conflict ended with the victory of

However, the extension of suffrage from the second half of the 19th century turned parliaments into arenas of conflict between increasingly disciplined parties. Especially the rise of the highly ideological mass parties of the late 19th century (Katz and Mair 1995) created hierarchical organizations that became the dominant collective actor in parliament (Cox 1987). More and more, legislators were seen as their parties' "delegates" rather than Burkean "trustees" with sufficient leeway to be part of an autonomous collective body (Eulau et al. 1959). One of the most influential formulations of this view is the doctrine of the "party state" ("Parteienstaatslehre") developed by the German constitutional lawyer Gerhard Leibholz (1966), which dominated rulings of the German Constitutional Court for decades and privileged party organizations over the chamber as a collective body.

In this paper, we examine the extent to which collective references to "the House" or "the legislature" in Britain are likely to have been mere metaphors (Beckenkamp 2006), and to which they have had behavioral implications. Are Members of Parliament (MPs) "acting in a group" of legislators only, or (and, if so, when) are they "acting as a group"? Is the notion of parliament as a group or corporate actor still tenable after British MPs have developed "from gentlemen to players" (Rush 2001) since the end of the First World War? What are the empirical conditions for Members of Parliament to act in a "we-mode" (Tuomela 2007) as opposed to the typical "I-mode" of their individual or partisan strategic goals?

Empirically, this paper will seek to address these questions by examining the extent to which verbal expressions of corporate agency in the debates of the British House of Commons are merely a ritual and – ultimately – 'cheap talk' (Austen-Smith and Banks 2002). How – and when – do these rituals allow MPs to frame debates to highlight the House's character as a collective actor – if they do so at all? And can we discern patterns that support a strategic rather than a purely habitual interpretation of such framing efforts?

In the following sections, we will start by sketching a conceptual framework for our empirical analysis. Subsequently, we will suggest a novel empirical operationalization of collective agency in the context of parliamentary speeches. In the fifth section, we will describe our data and method. In the main empirical section, we use counts of – positive and negative – expressions of collective agency in legislative speeches on the floor of the House of Commons as indicators and demonstrate striking diachronic and cross-party variations. The patterns we discover in the data suggest that the use of expressions of collective agency is likely to have both a ritualistic and a strategic component.

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Parliament's armies and the King's execution in 1649. Two hundred years later, the German National Assembly in Frankfurt's St. Paul's Church (1848–49) and many of the assemblies established following the European revolutions of 1848 imagined parliaments as collective actors vis-à-vis the Monarch and his or her government (Congleton 2010; Kluxen 1990).

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## 2. The House of Commons as a Marginal Case of Collective Agency

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Collective actors can be defined as “groups,” whose ability to act as a group depends on the resources available to them and the autonomy they enjoy (Gehring and Marx 2023, in this special issue). They can only act if they control resources enabling them to influence their environment. The most important resources at the disposal of legislatures tend to be defined in constitutions and parliamentary rules of procedure. These powers vary across constitutions but typically include the election and dismissal of the government in parliamentary and semi-presidential systems of government, final decisions on legislative proposals, and the right to call the government and other constitutional actors to account. These constitutional powers may be enhanced if the parliament enjoys a high level of public support (Easton 1968; Mezey 1979).

Autonomy, the second characteristic, is central to the present paper. It defines the way collective actors decide on the use of their resources. In the context of collective actors, the concept measures the extent to which its actions are based on rules and structures. In addition, it includes informal rules and constraints that are institutionalized or habitualized and affect the way group members interact. With growing autonomy, the collective actors’ structures and rules gradually gain more importance in explaining the outcomes of group action compared to the aggregated intentions of the group’s members (List and Pettit 2011, 77-8). As a result, group members and their preferences become gradually less central to the collective action (Coleman 1994, 35).

One example may suffice to illustrate this in the context of legislatures: From the 19th century to the second half of the 1990s, the United States Senate used a seniority rule to determine the selection of committee chairs. Aggregated individual preferences over specific candidates had comparatively little importance. Only with the growing ideological polarization of legislative politics in the United States since the 1990s did this rule lose its universal acceptance and was replaced by more majoritarian rule (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2016). This demonstrates that collective action in legislatures depends on political conditions and can be reversed when these conditions do not apply.

In the context of legislative studies, the most important sources of autonomy are formal rules. The evolution and institutionalization of such rules have been described historically as a response to problems of coordination in the chamber (Aldrich 1995; Cox 1987). Theorists have typically relied on notions of a social contract amongst legislators, which transferred agenda-setting powers to party leaderships and governments. They sought to “lock in” such transfers, which created political inequality amongst formally equal

legislators through supermajority rules and similar protections (Loewenberg 2011). While models of social contract are obviously compatible with methodological individualism (such as in rational-choice institutionalism), some theorists focusing on “group agency” (List and Pettit 2011; List and Spiekermann 2013; Tuomela 2007) make a more fundamental claim about group-based (rather than individual) preferences or, at least, group-based reasons for collective action. In Tuomela’s words (Tuomela 2007, 14), group members act as such by sharing a “*we-perspective*” on top of their position as “private” persons where they adopt an “*I-perspective*.” He suggests that

[t]hinking and acting in the we-mode basically amounts to thinking and acting for a group reason, that is, to a group member’s taking the group’s views and commitments as his authoritative reasons for thinking and acting as the group “requires” or in accordance with what “favors” the group. (Tuomela 2007)

Apart from the group-oriented reasoning, members’ commitment to a “group ethos” is an important condition for group agency:

The ethos of group [...] in its strict sense is defined as the set of the constitutive goals, values, beliefs, standards, norms, practices, and/or traditions that give the group motivating reasons for action [...]. The ethos directs the group members’ thoughts and actions toward what is important for the group and is generally expected to “benefit” it. (Tuomela 2007, 16)

Applied to legislatures, this reasoning runs against standard rational-utilitarian models of competitive party democracies where political parties present alternatives, which voters and legislators decide on using the majority rule. Such models tend to be based strictly on methodological individualism. In other words, there would be no space for any meaningful “group ethos” of a legislature shaping collective preferences. At the same time, Tuomela’s view does resonate with scholarship on legislative professionalization, cartel parties, democratic elitism, and legislative institutionalization. More generally, there are at least four reasons why some (perhaps residual) collective agency should be expected even in competitive legislatures.

First, without necessarily advancing the argument of a “power elite” (Mills 1956), students of political elites have demonstrated the increasing dominance of “career politicians” in most Western democracies (King 1981; King and Roberts 2015; Saalfeld and Müller 1997).

In virtually all liberal democracies, the share of professional politicians in national politics has increased dramatically since the beginning of the 20th century (Best and Cotta 2000; Best and Vogel 2014). These professional politicians have become socio-economically and socio-culturally more homogeneous across political parties – and they are a distinctive professional group enjoying legal privileges over ordinary citizens, that is, persons without group membership (Chafetz 2007).

Second, Katz and Mair (Katz and Mair 1995) argued that the growing socio-economic and socio-cultural similarity of the political class has been accompanied by changes to party competition and party organizations. They argued that the leaders of modern “cartel parties” have increased their autonomy from voters, party members, and the parties’ collateral organizations by substituting state funding for the resources that have traditionally been provided by such actors in the form of voluntary work, membership dues, and donations. They argue that this allowed the “party in public office” (especially the ministers and legislators in the chamber leading these parties) to maintain relatively high levels of “job security” in the face of electoral and membership decline (Katz and Mair 1995, 2009). These changes might be seen as a condition for representatives of cartel parties in legislatures to develop something like collective agency in parliament – not only in securing state subsidies but also in terms of determining the rules of the game more generally (e.g., by limiting competition to in-parties).

Third, focusing on policy preferences and values, scholars advancing the notion of “democratic elitism” (Higley and Best 2009; Borchert 2009) produce further empirical arguments why phenomena like a “group ethos” may be empirically relevant when it comes to fundamental values and constitutional norms. A number of studies have found that political elites tend to be characterized by more liberal attitudes than parts of the general public when it comes to civil liberties, and social and political tolerance (McClosky and Brill 1983; Sniderman et al. 1991; Stouffer 1955).

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, studies of institutionalization (Hibbing 1988; Polsby 1968) have observed legislatures to go through a “process by which a body acquires a definite way of performing its functions – a way that sets it apart from its environment and that is independent of the membership and issues of the moment” (Hibbing 1988, 682). One characteristic of institutionalization is the gradual establishment of universalistic rules for the conduct of business. As a result, the application of rules is thought to become “more automatic and less discretionary” (Hibbing 1988, 703). Examples include the seniority principle in assigning committee chairs or the speaker’s reliance on precedent in interpreting the chamber’s rules of procedure.

Thus, while the presence of a “group ethos” amongst legislators or related phenomena has been demonstrated in various studies in political science, it has generally not been used as an assumption driving causal explanations of variations in legislative behavior in rational-choice institutionalism. There are epistemological, ontological, and methodological rather than empirical reasons for this. In rational-choice institutionalism and other models based on methodological individualism, for example, the cost-benefit calculus of individual legislators or political parties (treated as self-interested unitary actors) have been assumed to drive legislative behavior given certain

institutional constraints and the information and costs associated with them (Laver and Shepsle 1999; Mayhew 1974).

Ever since Olson's logic of collective action (Olson 1965) and Arrow's impossibility theorem (Arrow 1951) have become accepted wisdom in formal models of legislative behavior, there has been severe skepticism regarding even the possibility of larger groups sustaining collective action based on phenomena such as a "group ethos." However, recent advances in analytic philosophy have made a rigorous theoretical case for a holistic perspective where group reasoning may complement individual calculus (List and Spiekermann 2013).

Collective agency as a motivation of legislators has been explored by scholars working in other intellectual traditions, especially in political anthropology (Crewe 2015a) and feminist and post-colonial studies of representation (Rai 2015). Compared to most comparative studies in the rational-choice paradigm, most of these studies are small-n single-country case studies based on data collection at a specific point in time. Nevertheless, some authors have created conceptual frameworks that allow linking representative claims (Saward 2006), ceremonies, and rituals (Crewe and Evans 2018; Rai 2010), including speech (Crewe 2015b), to fundamental notions of collective agency.

Nevertheless, empirical studies have shown that it is highly implausible that all legislators will be driven by "we-intentions" all the time. There is overwhelming empirical evidence to suggest that individual legislators and parliamentary parties as organizations within legislatures are strongly motivated by incentives to use the chamber as a competitive arena in the pursuit of policies, office, or votes at the next general election (Strom 1990). Hence, rather than expressions of collective agency being a constant, it may vary depending on the legislators' strategic objectives. For example, "we-intentions" may be particularly prominent in times of national emergencies. It is also likely that legislators may vary their emphasis on collective agency conditional to the timing of the speech in the electoral cycle. While a legislator may wish to "get on" with other fellow legislators and engage in political bargaining and exchanges (which makes a language highlighting collective agency useful) in the early parts of a legislative term, competitive (and even confrontational) communication may increasingly dominate as a general election approaches. At the beginning of a legislative term, government legislators, in particular, may wish to create the conditions for their legislation to get passed by the chamber as quickly as possible (appealing to collective agency as an argumentative tool to reduce opposition and, perhaps, obstruction), these incentives change over a legislative term. The closer the timing of the speech is to an election, the stronger the incentives for legislators to claim credit for the achievements of their party and criticize the other side. More fundamentally, government MPs – seeking acceptance of their policies and getting their legislative program passed – are likely to have much stronger incentives to appeal to the collective character of the chamber than minorities in the



parliamentary opposition who regularly get outvoted by the majority. For the purposes of the present paper, we will only focus on this aspect – varying incentives to refer to “we-intentions” and expressions of collegiality depending on an MP’s membership of a government or an opposition party. Our working hypothesis is that government MPs will refer to the chamber as a collective actor and “we-intentions” more frequently than opposition members.

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### 3. Cheap Talk or Strategic Framing? Analyzing Frequent Expressions of Collective Agency in House of Commons Debates

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Before we turn to the empirical analysis we should reflect on the question of relevance. As briefly outlined above, the House of Commons is a highly competitive chamber where “the winner takes all.” On the surface, therefore, it would seem to be an extremely unlikely place for collective agency to be a prominent motif. MPs are formal equals, but the reality of parliamentary politics is characterized by extraordinary imbalances of power between privileged Members (such as the Prime Minister and some senior Ministers) on the one hand and backbenchers (such as independent Members or members of small opposition parties) on the other. There are clearly “ins” and “outs” in political terms. Moreover, there may be outsiders to the purportedly collective agency in social terms. Scholars in the tradition of feminist institutionalism have long highlighted the gender bias of the rules and practices of parliaments, which systematically works against – and sometimes excludes – women (Krook and Mackay 2011; Mansbridge 1999; Norris and Lovenduski 1995; Phillips 1995; Rai 2015). Thus, expressions of “we-intentions” and references to the chamber as a collective actor may not be much more than cheap talk.

For analysts of legislative discourse and debate, the language used in the chamber has clear implications for the distribution of power and legislative outcomes in the chamber. In a case study of the Indian Lok Sabha, Rai and Spary (2018) demonstrated how ceremonies stemming from colonial times have effectively worked against the equal participation of women in the chamber even in post-colonial times. In Rai’s definition (Rai 2010, 288), ceremony is “providing the solemnity, formality and grandeur (*gravitas*) to rituals, which are more often seen as the performance of everyday routines, behaviors and activities that reproduce and reinvent power.” This resonates strongly with the British House of Commons and other parliaments with a long history where rituals and ceremonies play an important role. They are challenged as meaningless by some but highlighted as being important by others. In their work on “secular ritual,” for example, Moore and Myerhoff

(1977, 7-8) state that the “evocative style of staging events to produce a sense of belonging, [...] might lead to commitment – to [...] a collective dimension which has a social meaning.” Rai and Johnson (2014, 19) conclude from such work that ceremony and ritual “provide the glue that binds individuals to each other, to the social forms within which they perform, and to commonly held ideals and ideas that cohere within societies and polities.” We take inspiration from this work and allow for the possibility that the ritualized language in the House of Commons contributes to a “sense of belonging” or “group ethos” in Tuomela’s (2007) terms that serve as the “glue” referred to by Rai and Johnson (2014, 19) despite the divisions and differences in power.

There is a long tradition in social science to treat rituals as consequential. Building on Durkheim’s work on the role of rituals in religious life (Durkheim 2001), Rai (2010, 289) utilizes one of his key points:

When ritual is repeated over time, as individuals are taught and identify with key rituals, they recognise each other as co-participants and become a community. The participation in ritual then defined society, as well as made recognition of those “of the society” possible.

Thus, in the Durkheimian tradition, “political rituals provide the integrative glue for societies” (ibid.). The House of Commons is full of ceremonies and symbols, which frequently date back to the 19th century. The ceremonial State Opening of Parliament with the Monarch’s Speech is one example (Crewe and Evans 2018, 43). However, rituals can also be discerned in the everyday language of MPs. In her anthropological description of the House of Commons, Crewe (2015b, 68) highlights the discrepancy between formal rules and power structures and ritualized language: “government always has a majority and can therefore win nearly every division, both debate and votes are often ritualized show and few alterations to legislation are accepted.” Importantly for this contribution, rituals extend to parliamentary debates. As Crewe (2015b, 78) points out,

when you address the Chamber you do so through the Speaker and when referring to another MP you say “the Honourable Member for X” if in a different party, “my Honourable Friend for X” if on your side, and “the Right Honourable” if they are in the Privy Council.

She summarizes the ritual as follows:

X is always your constituency, so every remark emphasizes why MPs are there – as representatives of a particular part of the country. MPs speak to each other through the Speaker to [emphasize] her / his role as the mediator but also to depersonalize attacks; “you” is not allowed, so the sting is taken out of insults. The use of “friend” is obvious and the word “honourable” forces an appearance of respect. (Crewe 2015b, 78)

To provide some further contextualized illustrations for the use of expressions of collective agency and collegiality, we present a few quotes from the debate when the House of Commons considered House of Lords

amendments to the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill on 20 June 2018. The government minister responsible, David Davis, introduced the government's position accepting some and rejecting one of the amendments made by the House of Lords. Two aspects are particularly important for the context of this paper. Firstly, David Davis, the Conservative Minister for Brexit, addresses the House as a collective actor. A few quotes may suffice to illustrate this point: At the beginning of the debate, he states, "I beg to move, That this House agrees with Lords amendments 19C to 19E, 19G to 19L and 19P, and proposes Government amendments to Lords amendment 19P." Her Majesty's Minister "begs" to move a resolution that reflects the government's response to the Lords amendments in a standardized fashion. Later in his speech, explaining the government's position, he refers to "Parliament's role at the conclusion of our negotiations with the EU," pointing out that "the Bill gives Parliament significantly more rights than we see on the EU side" and highlighting "the significant flexibility that the Government have already shown in addressing the concerns of the House." The Minister refers to "concerns of the House" rather than concerns expressed in the House (from opponents of Brexit on the one end of the spectrum and supporters of what was referred to as a "hard Brexit" on the other).

When the oppositional Labour MP Hilary Benn, Chairman of the Select Committee on Exiting the European Union, challenged the Minister with a question, he addressed the Minister as follows: "*Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?*" This is another standard phrase, in which the chair of an important select committee of the House and a leading politician on the Opposition benches, addresses the Minister as "the right honourable Gentleman" rather than "Mr. Davis" or "Minister." The Minister responded: "*I will give way to the Chairman of the Exiting the European Union Committee,*" addressing Hilary Benn respectfully in his function in the House of Commons rather than his name or as "right honourable Gentleman." Later in the debate, Mr. Davis – a supporter of Brexit – was challenged by fellow Conservative and former minister Kenneth Clarke – an ardent opponent of Britain leaving the EU – and addresses him as "*my right hon. and learned Friend,*" because Kenneth Clarke is not only a fellow Conservative (which is why he addresses him as "Friend" despite the fact that they stood on opposite sides of the argument) but deserves particular recognition as a barrister ("learned Friend").

The expressions quoted above are far removed from everyday language. They hark back to a time when election to the House of Commons was typically a privilege of affluent and independent "gentlemen" who behaved with utmost courtesy setting them apart from those they purported to represent. It is hard to determine whether such ritualized phrases are more than "cheap talk" (Austen-Smith and Banks 2002) in the widest sense of this expression, or whether they are in fact "useful for building solidarity in the absence of shared beliefs" at the elite level (Crewe and Evans 2018, 44). Interview-based

anthropological research suggests that they can be seen as informal “paths for conflict and conciliation” (ibid., 46) that allow the House of Commons the appearance of being a collective actor.

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#### 4. Identifying Collective Agency in Legislative Speech

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Automated content analysis and the application of natural language processing have become valuable tools for analyzing the behavior of MPs in the chamber (Benoit and Laver 2007; Lowe et al. 2011; Slapin and Proksch 2008). By using computational techniques to analyze large volumes of textual data, researchers can gain insights into how politicians communicate with their constituents and colleagues, as well as how they position themselves as members of a group that could plausibly be seen as a collective actor.

In this paper, we suggested earlier that expressions potentially representing collective agency might be purely symbolic and might therefore be considered as “cheap talk.” The House of Commons is a good example of a body where ceremonies and rituals are important and hark back to historical symbols of a grand and “dignified” (Bagehot 1873) past. Although the language used in Parliament may be ritualistic, it cannot be assumed to be inconsequential:

Parliamentary debates [...] clearly form a core focal point in British politics. Debates are widely covered in the UK media, and both voters and MPs via speaking in debate as one of the most important roles that an MP performs. (Blumenau and Damiani 2021, 775)

As such, the language used in Parliament can have a significant impact on the public perception of politicians and their policies, as well as on the overall trajectory of political discourse in the country. Therefore, it is helpful to utilize quantitative text analysis techniques to holistically understand the language used in parliamentary debates and its potential impact on political outcomes.

We distinguish between two basic ways of expressing collective agency. MPs may express it either positively by explicitly referring to themselves as part of a collective actor, or we may infer it *ex negativo* from the use of expressions emphasizing division and hierarchy. Turning to positive identification first, we suggest there may be three fundamental ways of capturing we-attitudes in Tuomela’s sense (Tuomela 2007). Firstly, a “group ethos” or “esprit de corps” may be articulated through expressions of collegiality and mutual recognition as equal members of a socially distinctive group. As such, Members may recognize even political adversaries or competitors as their peers and extend courtesies to them. Secondly, drawing on the literature on legislative institutionalization (Hibbing 1988; Polsby 1968), collective agency may be expressed through frequent references to established rules for

interactions between group members. Thirdly, collective agency may be expressed through frequent references to committees or officers of the House that are deliberately designed to reach across partisan divides. Our second strategy of identifying expressions of collective agency in the speeches of legislators consists of identifying expressions that would emphasize partisan divisions and thus counteract notions of a “group ethos” or other characteristics of collective agency. Collective agency would be expressed by the absence of such expressions. Therefore, we refer to this approach as measurement “*ex negativo*.” Expressions that challenge any notions of a parliamentary group ethos would be frequent mentions of political parties (referring either to one’s own party or to a competing party) or expressions that explicitly refer to the adversarial relationship between government and opposition parties in the chamber.

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## 5. Data and Method

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For the purposes of the present analysis, we use parliamentary speeches in the British House of Commons, which are available in the ParlSpeech corpus of seven national parliaments. This corpus comprises a total of 1,956,223 speeches with corresponding meta data such as the name of the speaker, title on the Order Paper, and party (Rauh and Schwalbach 2020). In our paper, we used a corpus of all parliamentary speeches in the House of Commons between 1988 and 2019. Instead of utilizing unsupervised classification techniques like topic models, this paper employs a highly effective text summarization method, TextRank, to extract co-occurring words within sentences and process large-scale speech corpora (Mihalcea and Tarau 2004).

TextRank is a graph-based technique for text summarization and keyword extraction that identifies the most important words and phrases based on the major linguistic features in the language. It constructs a directed acyclic graph of the words and phrases in the text, with each tokenized character represented as a node in the graph and edges between nodes representing their semantic relationships and forming a noun or adjective phrase. Thus, the TextRank algorithm ranks the weights of each node (text) reflecting its importance in the corpus.

Compared to topic models and other keyword extraction algorithms, TextRank only requires the input text itself and does not rely on external corpora or prior knowledge, making it highly scalable and applicable to a wide range of analyses. In our analysis, we only include major linguistic features categorized as adjectives and nouns to find relevant patterns that might reveal collective agency. This approach helps us identify patterns in the speeches of Members of Parliament without requiring domain-specific

knowledge or manual validation of text, which is often necessary for justifying the number of topics in topic models.

To identify the most (or less) frequently used expressions by Members of Parliament between 1988 and 2019, we used TextRank to extract sequences of keywords and filtered them to only include those that were used collectively at least 500 times each year.

This exercise resulted in an initial list of expressions that largely consisted of two types. The first type of expressions were frequent bigrams or trigrams (noun or adjective key phrase) that semantically reflected the main political issues of the day. These expressions provided insights into the key concerns and priorities of MPs at the time of the speeches. The second type of expressions relates directly to our research interest, references to the House as a collective actor.

Illustrating the first type, the expressions “local authorities” and “exchange rate mechanism” were among the top ten bigrams and trigrams of 1989, reflecting two major issues of the day: Britain’s position in the European exchange rate mechanism and government policies to restructure the funding and autonomy of local government. In 1999, to choose another year for illustrative purposes, some of the main political controversies revolved around reforms of the National Health Service and the way families were taxed, resulting in frequent mentions of “health service” or “[working] families tax credit.” In 2019, the United Kingdom’s withdrawal from the European Union was the issue that dominated public debates. Therefore, the terms “Withdrawal Agreement” and “European Union” in Table A.2 constituted some of the most frequently used bigrams in that year.

The vast majority of the frequently-used bigrams and trigrams consist of expressions of the second type, relating to the House of Commons itself. As indicated above, we grouped these frequent bigrams and trigrams into two broad categories: expressions articulating the character of the House as a collective actor in the sense of our definition above on the one hand, and expressions emphasizing the partisan nature of parliamentary politics on the other.

The expressions reflecting collective agency include (a) explicit expressions of collegiality between MPs; (b) explicit references to the House as a collective body, its committees, and officers; and (c) rules that govern parliamentary business. *Ex negativo*, MPs may refer (more or less frequently) to agents that challenge the House’s character as a collective actor: in particular, we counted references to (d) political parties and (e) to the relationship between government and opposition.

Examples of particularly frequent bigrams and trigrams that could be seen as expressions of collegiality are bigrams like “right honourable” or “honourable Friend” or trigrams such as “Gentleman give way.” Examples referring to the House as a whole, its bodies and officers include “Select Committee,” “Mr Speaker,” or “Madam Deputy Speaker.” Bigrams and trigrams referring

to rules of the House include “give way” or “set out in.” Examples for references to political parties are “Conservative Members,” “Labour Members,” or “Scottish National Party.” When MPs addressed differences between government and opposition, they used expressions such as “Opposition Members,” “Government’s proposals,” or “previous Government” in Table 1.

**Table 1** Frequency of Narrative Expressions of Non-Hierarchical Collective Agency in the British House of Commons, 1988–2019

Expressions of	N of Mention (in Total Speeches)	Examples
Collegiality	2079302 (904368)	<i>right hon, right hon., hon. Friend, Gentleman will, Friend will, other hon, hon. Gentleman, Friend aware, Gentleman give, many hon, Many hon, Gentleman knows, right hon. Friend, Gentleman give way, Gentleman will, right hon. Friend, Gentleman said, Friend said, a Member, Friend confirm, Friend give, Friend knows, Gracious Speech, hon. Members, Members wish, Friends will, etc.</i>
References to the Parliament as a corporate body	167888 (135087)	<i>House will, in Parliament, House on, Members will, other Members, House today, Parliament will, House will recall, House will wish, etc.</i>
House of Commons rules and procedures	1225503 (620248)	<i>Mr. Speaker, Select Committee, give way, in Committee, Mr. Deputy, Deputy Speaker, Second Reading, set out, Committee will, private Member, will vote, Committee report, Bench spokesman, shadow Chancellor, Back Benches, Scottish Members, etc.</i>
References to political parties	320780 (196404)	<i>Labour party, Labour Government, Conservative party, Conservative Government", party parliamentary, party group, Conservative Benches, Labour Member, etc.</i>
Antagonism of Government and Opposition	548280 (332350)	<i>Home Office, Home Secretary, Attorney General, Foreign Secretary, British Government, Opposition Members, Social Security, Welsh Office, Downing street, Commonwealth Office, Secretary said", Opposition parties, etc.</i>
Total Number of Mentions (and Speeches)	4341753 (2188457)	

To validate our initial list of expressions, we selected a sample of five years (1991, 2000, 2007, 2013, and 2019) and examined all noun (or adjective) phrases that co-occurred more than 100 times each year. In addition, we use the co-occurring network to visualize the co-occurring text at different levels of frequencies in order to comprehensively examine the words that often appear together in a given context. This validation strategy was used to avoid missing important expressions that occurred less frequently. Our analysis confirmed that the additional bigrams and trigrams representing collective

agency or partisanship were largely variations of the ones occurring at least 500 times.

After updating our dictionary of expressions, we counted the occurrence of all relevant bigrams and trigrams in the entire corpus, aggregating them for three-month intervals per MP. This allowed us to further analyze the data by calendar year, parties, and other units of analysis. Finally, we calculated the ratio of expressions of collective agency, on the one hand, (a-c) and partisanship (d-e) on the other for each MP and party in three-month intervals. This approach enabled us to examine the language used by MPs over time and identify patterns in their references to the House of Commons as a collective actor.

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## 6. Findings

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To see how frequently debates include references to expressions of collegiality or terms referring to Parliament as a collective actor, we started with a very simple strategy and examined the most frequent combinations of words in the corpus of Parliamentary debates in the 31 years between 1988 and 2019. We identified the frequency of combinations of two words/tokens (“bigrams”) and three words/tokens (“trigrams”). Table A.2 and Table A.1 in the Appendix show how often all bigrams and trigrams were used in the years 1989, 1999, 2009 and 2019 (as illustrations). The numbers refer to the number of speeches that included the n-grams. The bigram “right honourable” (in various permutations and spellings) invariably appears in the largest number of speeches by far (frequently more than once). The bigrams “honourable Friend” and “honourable Gentleman” also appear in thousands of speeches. This is also confirmed if we inspect the most frequent trigrams: the expressions “Gentleman give way” and “right honourable Friend” are also included comparatively frequently in MPs’ speeches.

In addition, there are frequent addresses of “Mr Speaker” (bigram) or “Madam Deputy Speaker” (trigram) among the top 20 bigrams and top 10 trigrams. This demonstrates quantitatively the observations made by Crewe (2015b) referred to above. In each year, there are also very frequent references to the Select Committees of the House, which have evolved from experimental bodies in the 1980s to well-established bodies fostering non-partisan approaches to executive scrutiny (Fernandes, Morales and Saalfeld, 2016).

In a subsequent step, we constructed a dictionary for references to the House of Commons as a collective actor. The tokens included in this dictionary can be inspected in Table 1.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> A dictionary object is in the form of a named list, where each name corresponds to a key and the corresponding list element contains the value.



Figure 1 presents information on the use of expressions of collective agency in the House of Commons between 1988 and 2019. The counts for relevant expressions are calculated for each MP and three-month period (January–March, April–June, July–September, and October–December). We aggregate the number of expressions per three-month period by party focusing on the three parties that were in government during that period (Conservative Party [before June 1997 and since June 2010], Labour Party [between June 1997 and May 2010], and Liberal Democrats [between June 2010 and May 2015]). To reduce any bias introduced by the size of the relevant party, we calculate this index as a ratio:

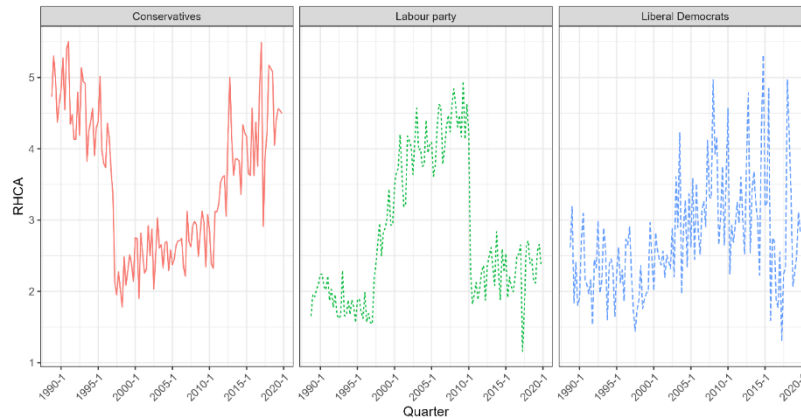
$$RHCA = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^3 C_i}{\sum_{j=1}^2 P_j}$$

where the index of collective agency (RHCA) in legislative speech represents the sum of the expressions of collegiality ( $C_1$ ), references to the House and its bodies ( $C_2$ ), and references to rules ( $C_3$ ), divided by the sum of references to parliamentary parties ( $P_1$ ) and to the conflict between government and opposition ( $P_2$ ).

Briefly remember the types of expressions captured by the different C (collective agency) and P (partisanship) terms: Among the expressions of collegiality ( $C_1$ ), the bigram “right honourable” in its various permutations is by far the most frequent pair of tokens in the corpus. Type  $C_1$  also includes expressions such as “honourable Friend,” “Gentleman will,” “Friend will,” “honourable Gentleman,” “Gracious Speech,” or “honourable Members.” By addressing each other in this way, MPs recognize each other as equals – and do so in a way that sets them collectively apart from other groups. The number of expressions of type  $C_1$  were summed up with the number of references to the House and its bodies such as “Mr Speaker,” “Select Committee,” “in Committee,” or “private Member,” and the number of references to the House’s rules and procedures such as “will vote” or “give way.”

The sum of these expressions was divided by the sum of expressions of partisanship (P). This includes expressions such as “Labour party,” “Conservative party,” “party group,” “Conservative Benches,” or “Labour Member” ( $P_1$ ). These expressions are taken to represent an absence of collective agency and a recognition that parliamentary parties are the key collective agents in the Chamber. The same is true of expressions of type ( $P_2$ ), which represent the antagonism between government and opposition, such as “Labour Government,” “Conservative Government,” “Home Office,” “Home Secretary,” “Foreign Secretary,” “British Government,” “Opposition Members,” “Downing Street,” “Secretary said,” or “Opposition parties.” These expressions suggest that the speaker refers to the stark divide between government and opposition in a Westminster system.

**Figure 1** Average Ratio of References to the House of Commons as a Collective Actor, 1988-2019



Each data point in Figure 1 represents the ratio RHCA for the Conservative Party, the Labour Party, and the Liberal Democrats, the only three parties in government between 1988 and 2019. To account for the influence of the number of speakers from each party in each quarter, we divided the weighted collegiality ratio by the number of speakers from each party during that interval. The values shown in the figure represent the average collegiality of each party in the Parliamentary debates. It is based on aggregated individual ratios (see above) for the Members of each parliamentary party per three-month interval divided by the total number of MPs speaking for that party during the same period. As such, our measure represents the party average in the ratio of horizontal collective agency. The labels on the x-axis mark the first three months (January–March) of each calendar year between 1988 and 2019. The y-axis represents the ratio RHCA per three-month period for each of the three parties standardized by the number of MPs from that party speaking during the same interval. A value of 2 on the y-axis means that – in the average speech of a Member of the respective party during that three-month interval – the ratio of references to the House of Commons as a collective actor on the one hand to partisan references on the other (see above) was 2:1.

Several findings reflected in Figure 1 are striking. Firstly, there is a strong preponderance of n-grams expressing collegiality over n-grams expressing partisanship (as the ratio never drops below 1, the value that would indicate a balance between expressions of collegiality and partisanship). This confirms the observations of anthropological studies emphasizing the importance of rituals and ceremony in the House. Second, there is a difference in the patterns we observe for the Conservative and Labour Parties on the one hand and the Liberal Democrats on the other. This is largely a result of the

relatively small size of the Liberal Democrats' parliamentary party. With fewer MPs and fewer speeches, the ratio oscillated more strongly than is the case for the two major parties. Third, there seems to be a clear correlation between government status and the ratio of expressions referring to collegiality and collective agency on the one hand and partisanship on the other. For example, when the Labour Party moved from the opposition to the government benches in 1997, the ratio increased steadily from less than 2 in 1997 to nearly 5 in 2010. A similar development can be discerned for the Conservative Party and – with stronger oscillations – the Liberal Democrats in 2010, i.e., when the Cameron-Clegg coalition government of Conservatives and Liberal Democrats took office. Conversely, the collegiality-to-partisanship ratio dropped equally starkly from over 4.0 to less than 2.0 for the Conservative Party in 1997 (when it lost government power) and from a value between 4.5 and 5.0 to a ratio under 2.0 for the Labour Party in 2010 (when the latter moved from the government to the opposition benches).

We additionally estimate a time and party fixed-effects regression model, as summarized in Table 2. The multivariate analysis lends further support to the existence of a government-opposition divide in levels of collegiality. There is a positive and significant effect of being in government on the ratio of collegiality in all models. We take this as evidence that there is a strategic element in the adoption of a collective actor perspective. Opposition parties always have a strong incentive to criticize the government and in turn are more likely to emphasize the party perspective over the collective actor one. Governing parties on the other hand could profit from using language that supports the role of the parliament, as this might serve as a signal to voters that they are not just following their own party-specific goals, but instead are acting as representatives of the whole country.

Furthermore, the results show that when there is a larger share of new MPs in parliament, collegiality tends to be lower.<sup>4</sup> This suggests that new MPs use less collegial language. This indicates that MPs get socialized into adopting a collective actor perspective. The observed effects also remain stable once we additionally control for MPs ideological position in Model 4. Furthermore, our models explain a large amount of the variation in our dependent variable ( $R^2 = 0.72$  in Model 5). The largest increase in increased variation can be observed in Model 2 once we include a government-opposition dummy. This further supports the notion that RHCA is to a large degree driven by strategic incentives that differ between government and opposition parties.

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<sup>4</sup> As the results of these models are based on aggregated data, one should be careful with causal interpretations. Future research should aim to identify the mechanisms behind these initial findings.

**Table 2** Determinants of Collegiality (Fixed-Effects Regression)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
<i>Party differences</i>				
Labour	-0.715*** (0.116)	-0.453*** (0.072)	-0.451*** (0.071)	-0.461*** (0.083)
Liberal Democrats	-0.763*** (0.116)	-0.100 (0.077)	-0.097 (0.076)	-0.110 (0.095)
<i>Independent variables</i>				
Cabinet Party		1.564*** (0.066)	1.571*** (0.065)	1.567*** (0.068)
Share of new MPs			-2.886** (0.920)	-2.889** (0.921)
Ideological position				-0.017 (0.075)
Constant	3.494*** (0.532)	2.664*** (0.330)	3.272*** (0.379)	3.296*** (0.394)
Num. Obs.	375	375	375	375
R <sup>2</sup>	0.245	0.714	0.722	0.722

+ p < 0.1, \* p < 0.05, \*\* p < 0.01, \*\*\* p < 0.001

Notes: Models include time-fixed effects; The Conservative Party is used as a reference category.

All in all, these findings suggest that parliamentary debates in the British House of Commons are characterized by a very high level of ritualistic references to the House as a collective actor steeped in a long and dignified history. Being a Member of the House involves adherence to a language code that sets MPs apart from ordinary citizens thus reinforcing the impression of an elite group. While this finding in itself is not new, our quantitative approach allows us to examine variations between sub-groups of MPs across time. In the present study, we are able to demonstrate that there are partisan differences in the language Members use to express their different roles in the House: as members of a collective actor on the one hand and as participants in a strategic game for individual and partisan advantage on the other. In line with our working hypothesis, we find clear evidence that the ratio in which Members on the government side refer to the House as a collective actor (as opposed to the House as an arena for party competition) is far higher than the ratio we observe for opposition parties. The latter also make frequent references to the House as a collective actor, but the ratio is considerably lower. The estimated regression models further suggest that these variations are unlikely to reflect differences in political ideology or any party-specific form of institutional conservatism. The patterns we observe suggest that the different language government and opposition parties use reflects differences in their strategic environment.

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## 7. Conclusion

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The British House of Commons can be assumed to have emerged as a collective actor several centuries ago in a series of constitutional conflicts that pitched Parliament against the Monarchy. This pattern can be observed in many other European democracies. It is also possible to recognize a similar constitutional “moment” in the American Revolution. The British House of Commons is particular in that it has retained many of the linguistic vestiges of this pre-democratic period long after the British constitution had turned into one characterized by “responsible party government” where Parliament is essentially an arena for competing political parties which – as Michels and Ostrogorski demonstrated at the turn from the 19th to the 20th century (see Michels 2017; Lipset, Ostrogorski, and Iakovlevitch 1982) – are anything but “non-hierarchical” and collegial. Nevertheless, Parliamentary language has retained much of the pomp and circumstance of a historical period in which Parliament may have been more of a collective actor than it is today.

This paper makes several innovative contributions. In the context of capturing collective agency in the language of political actors, it makes a first attempt to develop quantitative indicators at the individual level, which can be aggregated to characterize political organizations (parties) and bodies (parliaments) capturing variations between sub-groups and across time. In the context of legislative studies, it contributes to the discussion why legislatures and legislators use symbols and rituals both habitually and strategically at the same time. The quantitative measurement of expressions of collective agency demonstrates a considerable amount of face validity and allows us to show that these expressions are very likely to be used strategically in political communication. Therefore, we conclude that it would be premature to dismiss them as cheap talk.

While it may be difficult to link variations in ritualistic speech to specific legislation or other policy outcomes, it is likely that collective agency serves as one legitimate way of framing political arguments, mobilizing support, weakening opposition, and generating support beyond the majority a government may control in the Chamber. The language sets rhetorical limits to the level of political conflict in the chamber without necessarily reducing the level of policy disagreement. This, in turn, facilitates controversial debates over public policy and the alternation of power between competitors rather than fueling hostility and the language of war between good and evil typical of populist politicians and parties.

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## Appendix

**Table A.1** Twenty Most Frequent Bigram Keyword Extracted via Textrank in House of Commons Speeches on the Floor in Selected Years, 1989–2019

Rank	1989		1999		2009		2019	
	Trigram	N	Trigram	N	Trigram	N	Trigram	N
1	right hon	16927	right hon	18675	right hon	11080	right hon	15192
2	per cent	7755	per cent	6035	per cent	6742	European Union	5792
3	Government 's	7204	per cent.	4178	per cent.	5098	young people	4402
4	per cent	5799	this country	3375	am sure	3646	no deal	4000
5	right hon.	4302	give way	2875	local authorities	3540	Mr Speaker	3983
6	local authorities	4183	Home Secretary	2732	young people	3417	am sure	3974
7	Labour party	3696	right hon.	2665	people in	3252	people in	3688
8	am sure	3575	local authorities	2521	â€	3117	mental health	3560
9	Select Committee	2791	European Union	2513	in place	2528	mental health	3560
10	local authority	2744	Select Committee	2441	set out	2304	in Northern	3066
11	Gentleman 's	2712	previous Government	2410	would like	2171	in place	2813
12	give way	2693	new clause	2377	right hon.	2119	set out	2766
13	Home Secretary	2634	Conservative party	2214	last year	2027	right hon.	2659
14	Conservative Members	2593	health service	2191	give way	1996	would like	2658
15	Friend 's	2263	Conservative Members	1948	way in	1954	withdrawal agreement	2633
16	Opposition Members	2204	this year	1913	Select Committee	1884	local authorities	2517
17	last year	2148	Labour Members	1795	been made	1820	last year	2448
18	hon. Friend	2144	Government will	1722	climate change	1745	hon. Friend	2330
19	new clause	2110	hon. Friend	1717	much more	1731	very much	2328
20	British Rail	1986	local government	1666	increase in	1718	pay tribute	2234

\* The garbled text resulted from an encoding issue. Based on the original state of the text, we have chosen to present it as it is. Note: N represents the number of speeches per year containing the bigrams listed, corpus not cleaned and stemmed.

**Table A.2** Ten Most Frequent Trigrams Keyword Extracted via Textrank in House of Commons Speeches on the Floor in Selected Years, 1989–2019

1989			1999		2009		2019	
Rank	Bigram	N	Bigram	N	Bigram	N	Bigram	N
1	Gentleman give way	624	families tax credit	932	set out in	622	right hon. Friend	865
2	Madam Deputy Speaker	592	working families tax	927	per cent. in	545	party parliamentary group	783
3	right hon. Friend	567	Gentleman give way	922	in recent years	518	Madam Deputy Speaker	686
4	Labour party's	460	national health service	887	Sri Lankan Government	496	set out in	612
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