

# Setting the Agenda in the British House of Commons

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In our book, *Setting the Agenda: Responsible Party Government in the US House of Representatives* (Cox and McCubbins 2005), we hypothesize that the majority or governing party in a legislature will seek to control the legislative process and, hence, its outputs (laws). A majority party can control the legislative process either by controlling floor votes (through party discipline) or by controlling the legislative agenda (by creating offices endowed with special agenda-setting powers and installing co-partisans in those posts), or both. We emphasize that the two different methods of control are to some extent substitutes for one another and elaborate several points about agenda control under the rubric of Procedural Cartel Theory.

We also present a simple spatial model of agenda control (Cox and McCubbins 2002, 2005), which we term the Cartel Agenda Model, built on similar models well known in the literature (Romer and Rosenthal 1978, Shepsle 1979, Shepsle and Weingast 1981, 1987). One of our model's predictions states that, to the extent that the majority or governing party has control over the agenda or has discipline over its members, and to the extent that its actions are certain and costless, the majority party will never be rolled at a critical agenda setting stage (e.g., on a final passage vote for a bill on the floor). By definition, a party is rolled if a majority of its members votes against a bill and the bill passes nonetheless. Such an event—unsuccessful opposition—would show that the majority or governing party lacked gatekeeping or veto power. Given a one-dimensional policy space, a corollary of the non-existence of majority-party rolls is that the majority party's median member will prefer any bill passed by the House to the reversionary policy (which we take to be the status quo policy). Thus,

bills considered on the floor will move policy in the direction of the governing party's median member.

In what follows, we define rolls, roll rates, and policy directions as we do in our 2005 book. Our target is the British House of Commons. We searched an online database ([www.publicwhip.org](http://www.publicwhip.org)) for final passage roll calls (vote divisions) and calculated rolls, roll rates and policy directions (we searched for all occurrences of the phrase "consideration and third reading," which yielded 90 votes; we then eliminated 2 after inspection). The list of votes that we studied is contained in Table 1. Our results are in Table 2.

As expected, the governing party in the House of Commons is virtually never rolled. Indeed, in the particular sample of votes we study, it is literally never rolled. We stress that there are two different ways to view this expected result. First, following standard theories of responsible party government, which stress party discipline, one might view the government's string of victories as simply and wholly a function of its leaders' ability to discipline their troops. Such a view, however, does not gibe with studies of backbench rebellion (e.g., Benedetto and Hix 2005), which show that there is indeed diversity of opinion within the majority and that the willingness to express such opinions varies systematically with each member's proximity to ministerial or junior ministerial office. Indeed, in the same time period of this study there were 63 rebellions in the House of Commons which had 60 or more members voting against their party. Moreover, if one really believes that discipline is the whole explanation, one is drawn naturally toward the notion that parliament might really be a nonentity, with the cabinet, or perhaps the prime minister, calling the shots. While the British cabinet does deploy comparatively abundant carrots and sticks, we are uncomfortable with the notion that the cabinet can count on "buying" votes to pass pretty much what it wishes, when it wishes.

This brings us to the second way of viewing the results displayed below. Even if the government had no bag of carrots and sticks at all, it could avoid rolls entirely if it could completely control the agenda (preventing bills that would split its Euro-skeptics from its Brussels-friendly members from being voted, for example). In the particular case of the U.K., of course, the opposition is given a regular chance to make motions and it uses this opportunity as best it can to embarrass and divide the government. The government must thus rely on party discipline in some cases of private members' bills or opposition motions. But, as is well known, the vast bulk of legislative time is controlled by the government (cf. Cox 1987). Thus, when one considers not just motions in general but bills, the government can typically throttle any it wishes via delaying tactics rather than by marshaling its voting power. Moreover, in using its own time, the government can rely to a considerable extent on agenda control, rather than brute voting discipline. Thus, for example, it can hold up bills in committee, or withdraw them temporarily, if its backbenchers are restive. Or, it can entirely avoid certain issues that it believes cannot be pushed through, given the finite budget of carrots and sticks that it has to dispense.

Our general belief is that agenda manipulation has been underappreciated in the literature on most legislatures. Even in cases, like the U.K., where party discipline looks comparatively strong, there are reasons for party leaders to economize on disciplinary carrots and sticks, in favor of the sometimes cheaper smoke and mirrors of agenda control.

The remainder of our results follow from the first. The roll rates of all the opposition parties is 100%, they vote against every motion and lose every time. It also follows that the proportion of policy moves that change policy in the direction of the governing, Labor, party is 100%. That is every motion changes policy to bring it closer to the median of the governing party.

**Table 1: UK House of Commons: Final Passage Roll Call Votes: M  
February 9, 2005.<sup>1</sup>**

No.	Date	Subject	Rebellions	Turnout
79	2005-02-09	European Union Bill (Programme)	0	458
34	2005-01-17	Constitutional Reform Bill [Lords] (Programme)	1	462
32	2005-01-13	Consumer Credit Bill (Programme)	0	360
31	2005-01-12	Child Benefit Bill (Programme)	0	499
30	2005-01-11	Road Safety Bill (Programme)	0	495
28	2005-01-10	Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Bill (Programme)	0	502
25	2004-12-20	Identity Cards Bill (Programme)	4	465
8	2004-12-08	Commissioners for Revenue and Customs (Programme)	0	483
7	2004-12-07	Serious Organised Crime and Police Bill (Programme)	1	409
6	2004-12-06	Railways Bill (Programme)	0	447
298	2004-11-01	Gambling Bill (Programme)	0	485
294	2004-10-28	School Transport Bill (Programme)	0	384
257	2004-10-12	Civil Partnership Bill [Lords] (Programme)	3	446
255	2004-10-11	Mental Capacity Bill (Programme)	0	399
241	2004-09-13	Children Bill [Lords] (Programme)	0	317
198	2004-06-21	Health Protection Agency Bill [Lords] (Programme)	0	270
172	2004-05-12	Age-Related Payments Bill (Programme)	1	460
85	2004-03-10	Justice (Northern Ireland) Bill [Lords]	0	468

<sup>1</sup> We found these 88 roll call divisions by searching the Public Whip data set on Commons vote divisions for the phrase 'consideration and third reading.' This yielded 90 bills. On inspection we found that not all of these were programme bills.

		(Programme)		
69	2004-03-02	Pensions Bill (Programme)	0	535
39	2004-01-27	Higher Education Bill (Programme)	6	596
32	2004-01-19	Civil Contingencies Bill (Programme)	0	428
31	2004-01-14	Employment Relations Bill	1	541
21	2004-01-06	National Insurance Contributions and Statutory Payments Bill (Programme)	0	455
20	2004-01-05	Traffic Management Bill (Programme)	0	489
18	2003-12-17	Asylum and Immigration (Treatment of Claimants, Etc.) Bill (Programme)	8	445
332	2003-10-21	European Parliamentary and Local Elect (Pilots) Bill (Programme)	0	486
298	2003-09-08	Water Bill [Lords] (Programme)	1	488
291	2003-07-15	Sexual Offences Bill	0	464
220	2003-06-09	Courts Bill [Lords] (Programme)	0	376
202	2003-05-19	Criminal Justice Bill (Programme) (No.	1	447
181	2003-05-08	Fire Services Bill (Programme)	1	379
179	2003-05-07	Health and Social Care (Community Heal and Standards) Bill (Programme)	1	534
153	2003-04-01	Crime (International Co-Operation) Bil [Lords] (Programme)	1	493
137	2003-03-26	Police (Northern Ireland) Bill [Lords] (Programme) (No. 4)	0	433
131	2003-03-24	Licensing Bill [Lords]	0	392
95	2003-02-25	Delegated Legislation – Local Governme Bill (Programme) (No. 3)	0	481
68	2003-01-28	Railways and Transport Safety Bill (Programme)	0	445
40	2003-01-07	Local Government Bill	0	505
32	2002-12-17	Planning and Compulsory Purchase Bill (Programme)	1	499
28	2002-12-16	Hunting Bill (Programme)	0	500

22	2002-12-09	Extradition Bill (Programme)	0	474
20	2002-12-04	Criminal Justice Bill (Programme)	0	407
16	2002-12-03	Communications Bill (Programme)	0	393
13	2002-11-28	Community Care (Delayed Discharges Etc Bill (Programme)	0	350
10	2002-11-27	Health (Wales) Bill (Programme)	1	417
9	2002-11-26	Regional Assemblies (Preparations) Bill (Programme)	0	500
225	2002-05-07	Police Reform Bill [Lords] (Programme) Programming Committee	0	532
221	2002-04-29	Tobacco Advertising and Promotion Bill [Lords] (Programme) – Consideration and Third Reading	0	490
219	2002-04-24	Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Bill (Programme) – Programming Committee	0	464
204	2002-04-10	Enterprise Bill (Programme) – Programming Committee	0	498
203	2002-03-25	State Pension Credit Bill [Lords] – Consideration and Third Reading	0	492
138	2002-01-21	Justice (Northern Ireland) Bill (Programme) – Consideration and Third Reading	0	456
129	2002-01-14	Office of Communications Bill [Lords] (Programme) – Consideration and Third Reading	0	385
123	2002-01-08	Commonhold and Leasehold Reform Bill (Programme) – Consideration and Third Reading	0	500
104	2001-12-10	Tax Credits Bill (Programme) – Consideration and Third Reading	1	473
102	2001-12-04	Education Bill (Programme) – Consideration and Third Reading	0	489
89	2001-11-27	Employment Bill (Programme) – Consideration and Third Reading	0	432
69	2001-11-20	National Health Service Reform and Health Care Professions Bill (Programme) –	0	505

		Consideration and Third Reading		
66	2001-11-19	Anti-Terrorism, Crime and Security Bill (Programme) – Programming Committee	11	396
55	2001-11-12	Animal Health Bill (Programme) – Consideration and Third Reading	0	485
46	2001-10-30	Proceeds of Crime Bill (Programme) – Consideration and Third Reading	0	509
45	2001-10-29	Adoption and Children Bill (Programme) Consideration and Third Reading	0	391
42	2001-10-24	Sex Discrimination (Election Candidate Bill (Programme) – Consideration and Third Reading	0	396
17	2001-07-10	Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Bill (Programme) – Consideration and Third Reading	0	375
16	2001-07-09	Export Control Bill (Programme) – Consideration and Third Reading	1	384
208	2001-05-10	International Criminal Court Bill [Lords] (Programme) (No. 2) – Consideration and Third Reading	0	332
185	2001-04-10	International Development Bill (Programme) (No. 2)	0	323
177	2001-04-04	Elections Bill and Election Publicity Bill [Lords] (Allocation of Time) – Miscellaneous	0	508
173	2001-04-03	International Criminal Court Bill [Lords] (Programme) – Lords messages	0	451
170	2001-04-02	Armed Forces Bill (Programme) (No. 2) Consideration of Lords Amendments and further messages from the Lords	0	420
168	2001-03-28	Private Security Industry Bill [Lords] (Programme) – Lords messages	0	402
166	2001-03-27	Social Security Fraud Bill [Lords] (Programme) – Lords messages	1	423
161	2001-03-20	Special Educational Needs and Disability Bill [Lords] (Programme) – Lords messages	0	409

159	2001-03-19	Regulatory Reform Bill [Lords] (Programme) - Lords messages	0	412
141	2001-03-06	International Development Bill (Programme) - Lords amendments and further messages from the Lords	0	445
130	2001-02-27	Hunting Bill (Programme) - Lords Amendments and Messages	0	467
129	2001-02-26	Criminal Defence Service (Advice and Assistance) Bill [Lords] (Programme) - Lords messages	0	306
123	2001-02-14	Health and Social Care Bill (Programme)(No.2) - Consideration of Lords Amendments and further messages from the Lords	0	527
117	2001-02-13	Tobacco Advertising and Promotion Bill (Programme) (No. 2) - Consideration of Lords Amendments and further messages from the Lords	0	466
112	2001-02-08	Children's Commissioner for Wales Bill (Programme) (No. 2) - Consideration of Lords Amendments and further messages from the Lords	0	392
111	2001-02-08	Social Security Contributions (Share Options) Bill (Programme) (No. 2) - Consideration of Lords Amendments and further messages from the Lords	0	377
109	2001-02-07	Homes Bill (Programme) (No. 2) - Consideration of Lords Amendments and further messages from the Lords	0	458
106	2001-02-06	House of Commons (Removal of Clergy Disqualification) Bill (Programme) - Lords amendments and further messages from the Lords	3	338
91	2001-01-30	Vehicles (Crime) Bill (Programme) (No. 2) - Consideration of Lords Amendments and further messages from the Lords	0	491
88	2001-01-29	Criminal Justice and Police Bill (Programme) - Lords amendments and further messages from the Lords	0	427

204	2000-05-22	Royal Parks (Trading) Bill and Televis Licences (Disclosure of Information) B (Allocation of Time) - Supplemental or	0	369
201	2000-05-22	Nuclear Safeguards Bill [Lords] and Se Fishing Grants (Charges) Bill (Allocat of Time) - Supplemental Orders	0	438
190	1999-05-20	Welfare Reform and Pensions Bill (Allocation of Time) - Miscellaneous	0	526

Data from:  7KH3XE0F : KIS (www.publicwhip.org)

**Table 2: UK House of Commons, Roll Rates and Policy Moves, May 1999 to February 2005**

	Rolls (Roll rate)	Policy Moves in Party Direction (leftward, for Labour; rightward, for the Conservatives.
Labor (Government)	0 (0)	88 (100)
Conservative (Opposition)	88 (100)	0 (0)
All Other Parties	88 (100)	0 (0)

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