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ARTICLE

## **A Bouncy House? UK Select Committee Newsworthiness, 2005-18**

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### **ARTICLE HISTORY**

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### **Abstract**

Traditionally, legislative committees have been regarded as quite unimportant in the UK. Some scholars contend that recent reforms have substantially increased the powers of select committees, rendering them genuinely important to policy and the scrutiny of government; others see little sign of change. We examine House of Commons select committees in regard to exactly one indicator of significance, their newspaper coverage. We detect significant gains in salience of some committees, as compared to the period just before the Wright reforms (2005-10). But committees vary dramatically in coverage levels and trends, and it is unclear if their newspaper profiles continue to grow.

**Keywords:** committees, House of Commons, newspapers, parliament, select committees, Wright reforms

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## 1. Introduction

How important are legislative committees in British politics? A conventional comparative-politics answer would be, 'not very.' Indeed, it is common to read analyses that treat Parliament itself as a rather marginal player within a government-dominated and power-hoarding legislative system (see, for example, King and Crewe 2013, 361 (footnote: 'the parliament of the United Kingdom is, much of the time, either peripheral or totally irrelevant. It might as well not exist'), King 2015; see also Russell and Gover 2018 and Flinders and Kelso 2011 who provide numerous examples of this approach to Parliament). In debates on where power lies in the UK political system, discussion of changes in recent decades often focuses more on whether or not Prime Ministers, and their staffs, have usurped power from Cabinet colleagues (e.g. Foley (1993), Hennessey (2000) and Dowding (2013)). In more recent times, however, some legislative scholars have sought to reinstate Parliament as a relevant and (sometimes) powerful actor (see, for example, Flinders and Kelso 2011; Goodwin and Bates 2016; Judge, 1993; Norton, 2013; Russell and Benton, 2011; Russell and Gover 2018; Russell and Cowley 2018, Thompson 2015). Central to this revisionist view is the role of parliamentary committees and, in particular, select committees. As Dunleavy and Muir opined in 2013, Select Committees have become 'a power in the land', suggesting to those who view the House of Commons as down and out had missed this shift. On the basis of surging media mentions of committees, they concluded that Parliament had 'bounced back.'

Hereafter, we follow their example, replicating and extending their analysis. We too examine whether House of Commons Select Committees seem to have gained in visibility over recent years. One might equate visibility with importance or power, and we cautiously propose that the concepts are related. However, for present purposes, we eschew analysis that directly demonstrates influence in passing or changing laws or their implementation. We will limit attention to the UK, and thus not provide a cross-nationally comparative analysis, but only one piece of that project. Nor do we undertake a comparative UK analysis that aims to evaluate visibility of Prime Ministers, Cabinet ministers, senior civil servants or other actors alongside committees and/or committee chairs, on a common metric. Our limited, but we think useful, ambition, is to gauge whether House of Commons committees themselves seem to have become more prominent in the wake of reforms aimed at increasing their significance.

The article has six sections. In the first, we provide an overview of the select committee system in the UK House of Commons. We then discuss our research design, our data and methods and our results in the third, fourth and fifth sections respectively. We conclude our article by reflecting on how our research can be extended comparatively and the methodological pitfalls that need to be avoided.

## 2. Select Committees in the UK House of Commons

While select committees have been in use in the UK House of Commons since the 16th century, it was not until 1979 that the modern system of oversight committees was established (Maer et al. 2009, 2; Rodgers and Walters, 303-305). In the subsequent four decades, parliamentary select committees have become one of the main sites of executive-legislative interaction, and have arguably become increasingly important with regard to the internal organisation of the House of Commons. There are three

main types of committee: *departmental select committees*, which mirror the make-up of government departments, and whose job is to scrutinise the corresponding department (e.g. the Health Select Committee scrutinises the Department of Health, etc.); *administrative/domestic select committees*, such as the Procedure Select Committee and the Backbench Business Select Committee, which focus on matters internal to the running of the House of Commons; and, *other scrutiny select committees*, such as the Public Accounts Select Committee and the Arms Export Controls Select Committee, which deal with specific aspects of government activity or issues which cut across government, and which can be joint committees of the House of Commons and the House of Lords.

In comparison with systems in other legislatures, the committee system in the UK is, in many ways, a 'deviant' case (Mattson and Strøm 1995, 260-7; see also Arter 2006, 75). Select committees are predominantly investigative bodies, and do not have a formalised role in initiating, scrutinising, or amending legislation. House of Commons Standing Order 152 states that the purpose of departmental select committees is 'to examine the expenditure, administration and policy of the principal government departments...and associated public bodies' (House of Commons 2017: 193). Since 2002, this rather broad outline of their role has been supplemented by a list of ten core tasks, which was revised in 2012 to be structured around strategy, policy, expenditure and performance, draft bills, bills and delegated legislation, post-legislative scrutiny, European scrutiny, appointments, support for the House, and public engagement.

The 1979 reforms to the Select Committee system have been regarded by some as a major milestone in recent Parliamentary history. Many contend that they have mainly succeeded in empowering the Parliament vis-à-vis the Government. For example, Brazier and Fox argue that select committees have become 'the principal mechanism through which the House of Commons holds the executive to account' (2011, 354; see also Norton 2013). The importance attached to the reforms derives in part from the absence of strong parliamentary processes for oversight and scrutiny prior to 1979. Effective scrutiny is vital to effective public policy, yet historically the UK Parliament has had relatively weak powers to scrutinise, and thereby hold government to account. Select committees were understood as an important measure to address this institutional weakness, and hence a significant innovation in the way that Parliament works. The effect of the 1979 reforms is generally understood as a re-balancing of the relationship between executive and legislature in favour of Parliament. As Russell and Cowley (2015) argue, the new Select Committee system emerged at the point that the development of semi-corporatist policy communities had eroded the legislative role to the point that Jordan and Richardson would describe Britain as a 'post-parliamentary democracy' (1979).

The select committee system underwent another series of major reforms in 2010 in response to 'Rebuilding the House', a 2009 report by the Committee on Reform of the House of Commons, more commonly known as the Wright Committee (after its Chair, Labour MP and Chair of the Public Administration Select Committee, Tony Wright). The Wright reforms contained important changes to the scrutiny and accountability functions of Parliament, and in particular to the functions of Select Committees. Among the key reforms recommended by the Wright Committee and subsequently adopted in the wash-up prior to the 2010 General Election, were: the election of departmental and some other select committee chairs by the whole of the House of Commons by secret ballot; the election of departmental and some other select committee members through internal elections within parties; ensuring that the nomination of select committee members would take place within six weeks of

the beginning of the session in a new Parliament; the standardisation of the size of departmental select committees at 11 members (with the exception of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee which retained 13 members); and the introduction of a mechanism to discharge and replace a member whose attendance fell below 60 per cent over a parliamentary session (House of Commons Reform Committee, 2009, pp. 5–6 and 15; Liaison Committee, 2013, p. 5). These reforms were designed to improve the independence and work of select committees both by loosening the grip of party managers over Committee chairship and membership, and by increasing the desirability of select committee work for backbench MPs.

The conventional and widespread view of the reforms is that, since 2010, Select Committees have become (even) more assertive, prominent, authoritative, ambitious and effective (see, for example, Parliamentary & Constitutional Reform Committee 2013). Select committees are often and increasingly viewed as Parliament at its best with one of the main conclusions of the Liaison Committee's 2015 Legacy Report being that 'Public opinion, commentators and academic critics have all recognised that select committee work is the most constructive and productive aspect of Parliament' (2015, p. 40; see also Fisher 2015).

Yet findings from academic research on the impact of the reforms is mixed. On the one hand, O'Brien (2012) finds that the new system of selecting members has improved the gender balance on select committees and favoured the election of female Chairs, and Dunleavy and Muir (2013) argue that the Wright Reforms contributed to a substantial growth in media visibility for select committees (see also Kubala (2011) on pre-Wright Reform media visibility of select committees). On the other hand, Bates et al. (2017) find that the impact of the reforms on MPs' engagement with select committees has been minimal to non-existent. Moreover, it is becoming increasingly recognised that measuring (changes in) select committee effectiveness is not necessarily a simple exercise (see Hindmoor et al. 2009; Benton and Russell 2013; Brazier and Fox, 2011; White, 2015), not only for methodological reasons regarding the availability and quality of data, but also because of the 'deviant' status of the UK system, the different audiences select committees must cater for (for example, parliamentarians, policy networks, interest groups, the public, etc.), and the wide variety of core tasks select committees are expected to undertake.

Thus, to produce a comprehensive understanding of select committee effectiveness and the impact (or lack thereof) of the Wright Reforms requires targeted analyses of specific aspects of select committee work and their roles in the UK parliamentary system. To these ends, we are interested here in a core task which was introduced in 2012: 'To assist the House of Commons in better engaging with the public by ensuring that the work of the committee is accessible to the public' (Task 10).

### **3. Design**

Our approach to assessing how important Select Committees seem to be and how successful they are in making their work accessible to the public is to outsource the measurement of their significance and accessibility to others. One might canvass pundits, political scientists, or other scholars interested in politics and the media, asking for rankings, perhaps even across time. Instead, we rely on newspaper editors and reporters, and infer that political entities receiving more attention are, *ceteris paribus*, more significant. We don't assume that coverage is positive: we count glowing reviews, offhand mentions, and scathing denunciations equally as cover-

age. In regard to gauging importance, we assume that ‘there is only one thing in the world worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about.’<sup>1</sup> If committees make the paper, they are perceived to be worthy of attention by editors and reporters, and insofar as those actors have an incentive to give the readers what they want, press coverage is an indirect indicator of public interest.

Newspapers have been central information sources in politics for more than a century, but, arguably, they are lately showing signs of age. Younger cohorts get more and more news from online sources, never smudging their hands with actual newsprint (Tewksbury and Althaus, 2000). Our data source includes some online versions of newspapers in recent years, but it is overwhelmingly a record of what was in actual, physical papers. For a time-series analysis, comparing incidence of stories in blogs or tweets is impractical if one wishes to stretch backwards more than a few years. We will be attentive, below, to the possibility that the universe of stories we search (which will be stories from actual newspapers or newspaper websites) might be changing in size. A great advantage of newspaper stories for systematic comparison is that large, comprehensive databases already exist but it is also probably true that future studies will increasingly require adjustment to reflect the diminishing status of newspapers as political information sources in the digital world.

#### 4. Data and Methods

In the spring of 2019, we compiled a data base of newspaper stories featuring mention of House of Commons Select Committees using the Lexis-Nexis database. Our protocol was the following. Using Nexis Uni®, we searched for news items referencing each committee, one at a time. We restricted attention to committees in existence between 2005 and 2018, with the start date based on when Lexis Nexis UK coverage seems to have become broad. An appendix lists the committees we studied. We filtered the ‘publication type’ to include only newspapers, and set the ‘location by publication’ to the United Kingdom (i.e. international - Europe - United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland). Because Lexis-Nexis caps downloads at 1000 rows, we compiled a database with dates, headlines, and publications, by searching calendar years, except where the calendar-year totals were much smaller than 1000, in which case we combined years, or when they exceeded 1000, in which case we used more, smaller time intervals, such as quarters, to avoid truncation. We then merged records.

To be clear, we did not retain the full articles, and we make no attempt to execute any real content analysis hereafter. Unlike Kubala (2011), we did not aim to extract or infer the ideas expressed in the articles, either by arduous hand-coding or by automated textual analysis. Our goal is quite simply to measure the gross attention given to committees by counting articles, without regard for precise topics, tones, scope, nuance, etc. An alternative metric is words, and that approach should be possible with Lexis-Nexis; however, we note that the article word counts include many suspect values and some missing data. Or, again, one might weight articles for their prominence, according to page and section. We do not employ any such schemes in the analysis that follows.

Choosing search terms for subject coverage is not simple. Some obvious possibilities here include: (a) ‘X Select Committee’; (b) ‘X Committee’; and, (c) ‘X’ AND ‘Se-

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<sup>1</sup>The maxim is voiced by Lord Henry Wotton to the painter Basil Hayward in Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

lect Committee', where X is the substantive label, such as 'Treasury' or 'International Development'. From experimentation, option (a) is the most conservative, producing very few false positives, but also missing many articles, including the many that omit 'select' when describing the committees. Option (b) omits all of the results caught by option (a), but catches other common phrases employed for Select Committees, including 'all-party X committee', 'Commons(') X committee', 'House X committee', and 'Westminster X committee.' Approach (b), however, also generates some false positives, more so when the committee name is a common name for committees of parties or other organizations. For instance, many legislative chambers worldwide have 'Foreign Affairs' committees, so even when restricting attention to newspapers distributed in the UK, one is likely to over-estimate the prominence of the Foreign Affairs Select Committee if using option (b) without validating the results, story by story.<sup>2</sup> Health and Defence are also committees prone to this risk. Option (c) can generate false positives as well. One example is articles about a given select committee that also include the committee's name in the text, but not in reference to that committee. Thus, an article mentioning both the 'Treasury' and the 'Home Affairs Select Committee' would, under approach (c), be mistaken for an article referencing the Treasury Select Committee. A search for (a) OR (b) seems likely to produce an over-estimate, with exaggeration proportional to the commonality of the name. A search using only (a) is likely to generate an under-estimate.

An immediate qualification to that conjecture, however, is that it is also not trivial to avoid over-counting because of duplicate records. We de-duplicated the database by locating and eliminating exact matches of headlines for each publication on a given date. Note that this procedure is imperfect, because Lexis-Nexis often contains multiple copies of a given story, sometimes with slight variations, such as early or late edition, domestic or foreign edition, National or Scotland edition, print or online edition, etc., or when a correction was made. For instance, a search for 'Treasury Committee' in 2009 yields four February 10 articles with the peculiar headline 'We're Say Bank Chiefs; Banks "Fired Too-Honest Risk Adviser."' Two of these are from the now-defunct, free *London Lite*, marked '2ND Edition' with word counts of 322. A third is from the same source, but is 320 words and from 'Edition 2, National Edition.' The fourth record is from *The Times (London)*, with the same byline (Paul Waugh) and a word count of 320. It thus matches on headline and date, but not, of course, newspaper. Another four articles from the same date originate in correction of the clearly botched headline. Exact matching fails both because the accidentally omitted word 'Sorry' was added and because the second portion of the headline was altered in the revision: 'We're Sorry, Say Bank Chiefs; Bankers: We Were the Victims Too.' For this revised headline, Lexis-Nexis produces three more records for *London Lite*, two labelled 297 words and one labelled 299 words, plus one for *The Times*, also tagged 299 words. These eight records should probably be counted as either one or two articles. Our decisions were not to eliminate duplicates from alternative papers, but also not to count multiple editions or corrections. In this case, those rules produce counts of four articles, rather than two, because of the altered headline. Approximate matching on headlines could catch these tweaks, but at the risk of erroneously matching distinct articles. We leave exploration of that avenue to future work. We also subjected the data for one committee, Foreign Affairs, to a full 'hand' recoding based on inspecting each case. Whereas the exact match duplication rate was about

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<sup>2</sup>We selected 50 stories at random from roughly 5000 results for 'Foreign Affairs Committee' over the period 2005-18. Sixteen stories were not at all about British politics or the Foreign Affairs select committee of that name; the remainder were 'true positives', employing wording that omitted 'select' for the committee.

five per cent, it increased to roughly eight per cent from the broader treatment. To be clear, those values omit the duplication that arises from merging data generated by distinct searches. Thus, if one article employs both the phrase 'Foreign Affairs Committee' and 'Foreign Affairs Select Committee', distinct searches would each save it, and a merged file would then contain two records. Our rough estimates of 5-8 per cent duplication above are based on duplication from single searches, not that originating in mergers.<sup>3</sup> Because multiplicity of records is rather complicated, below we explore an alternative measure to simple counts, not affected by multiple records.

Renamings can require extra care. The Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee was re-named Digital, Culture, Media and Sport midway through 2017. Because the old name is nested in the new one, adopting the new full name as the search term is not strictly necessary. By contrast, as the Business and Enterprise Select Committee (founded in 2007) was renamed Business, Innovation and Skills (in 2009) then Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (2016), mirroring changes in the relevant governmental department, one must revise search terms accordingly. For convenience, we treat all of those entities as a single committee in the data analysis below.

A given event such as a hearing might generate many nearly identical articles, but we did not aim to count events, but rather stories. In turn, the only duplicates we removed from our counts are those exactly matched headlines from the same date and source. We deliberately regard more coverage, across many outlets, of a single event as a high level of salience or newsworthiness. To return to February 10, 2009, that particularly Treasury Committee hearing, during which the heads of some major banks apologised for past actions, generated a great deal of press coverage. We obtained 82 stories from Lexis-Nexis, 58 of which were coded as non-duplicates.

Another major issue with interpretation of this kind of data is that Lexis-Nexis coverage is generally growing. More papers are added, with retroactive coverage, in each successive year; those that are dropped are typically dropped because they cease to exist. So one should not expect an exact replication of results when repeating a search first done in some prior year (2012, say) years later (2019), even if using an identical search protocol.<sup>4</sup> Critically, time trends in coverage levels can thus reflect both changes in newsworthiness and in the scope of the database being searched. Collecting counts of articles, rather than proportions of all articles available is particularly prone to spurious time trends. In other words, with no denominator of all articles searched, we risk mistaking a bigger database for more news coverage. Instead of trying to convert our counts into (minuscule) proportions, with estimates of the total size of the relevant portion of the Lexis-Nexis database for each year, hereafter we employ a simple check wherein we examine for each committee some additional times series, limiting attention to a few select, prominent outlets.

On balance, we are inclined to think of our article-count totals as estimates that are somewhat biased downward, to an unknown degree, even though we did not systematically remove all false positives (articles including the given phrase but not in reference to the UK House of Commons Select Committee) or catch the more slippery duplicates, as in the example broached above. Because our primary interests are in comparing coverage levels of given committees across time, and in comparing across

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<sup>3</sup>We also uncovered isolated examples of seemingly botched dates, which can also foil de-duplication. For instance, we found two Lexis-Nexis records of an *Observer* article that made reference to the Foreign Affairs Select Committee, 'David Cameron Under Fire over "Paltry" £50,000 Aid to Libya...'. One is dated April 2, 2016 and the other June 24, 2016. The former date appears to be correct; the latter could be a data-entry error wherein a stray '6' corrupted '2.4.16'.

<sup>4</sup>In this case, we do not claim to be matching the protocol of Dunleavy and Muir, as we did not locate or obtain a description of their exact search procedure.



committees, we are somewhat unbothered by the prospect that we may under-count (or even over-count) stories. It is not obvious that any bias in our searches, except from the growth in the database, should be changing (increasing or decreasing) over time.

## 5. Results

### 5.1. Counting Stories

Our searches located over 150 thousand articles over the 2005-2018 period, about 10,000 of which were exact duplicates, and so were discarded. Figure 1 shows time trends over the period for the nine most-covered Select Committees, as of 2012, according to Dunleavy and Muir (2013). The overlaid red lines show the story counts reported by those authors for the five years they examined, 2008-2012. The Energy and Climate Change committee was not created until 2008, in response to the establishment of a government department of that same name. It convened in 2009, then ceased to exist in 2017, when the department was merged with Business, Innovation and Skills. Gray vertical bars mark its shorter lifespan. (We did, however, search in 2018, as defunct committees can still merit mention in newspaper articles).

**Figure 1. Total Newspaper Stories for Nine Select Committees, 2005-2018** [about here](#)

At a glance, it seems that our series sometimes roughly match, and sometimes do not strongly resemble those collected by Dunleavy and Muir. In Figure 1, the least consistent series are Treasury and Transport, standing out for having much higher levels of coverage than our predecessors detected; the others look quite similar over the five-year overlap period, in trend, and sometimes even in levels. (Note that the vertical axes are not identically scaled for all of the figure's panels, but are, instead, decreasing from top left to bottom right.) Roughly speaking, these nine committees fall into four categories: Public Accounts and Treasury have received the most attention; Home Affairs is next most visible; Culture, Media, and Sport and Transport are comparable, and rank next; and the other four trail, but usually get more attention than another fourteen committees, whose data are not portrayed in the figure.

There is some hint in Figure 1 that 2012, the end point for the Democratic Audit study, might have marked a local peak in reporting on these committees. Only two of the nine—Transport and International Development—recorded their highest story count in 2018 (although two more, Treasury and Digital, Culture, Media and Sport have 2018 values near their maximum scores). By contrast, Home Affairs, in their data and ours, was rocketing upwards in media mentions as of 2012, only to slip gradually downwards over ensuing years, perhaps due to a change of chair. Public Administration displays that same pattern, albeit at a reduced level.

The motivation for Dunleavy and Muir's analysis was to explore whether these committees increased in visibility after the implementation of the Wright reforms. We too are especially interested in whether there are signs that select committees gained in prominence after the introduction of reforms at least partly premised on the promise of making the committees more powerful and, thus, worthy of attention. So, a natural question is whether the data exhibit signs of an upward shift after 2009, or perhaps after 2012, when their core tasks were revised and Task 10, as described

above, was introduced, with the result that more emphasis was placed on publicity. As a first cut, we simply compare mean coverage levels. The pre- versus post-Wright comparison is 2005-10 versus 2011-18.<sup>5</sup> To explore whether the new Task 10 modified committee newsworthiness, we can instead cut the data into three pieces, comparing 2005-10 versus 2011-12, and 2011-12 versus 2013-18. Both of those comparisons involve one mean from only two observations, and so our power is limited. In turn, one might prefer to compare 2005-10 to 2013-18, discarding the omitted period as a transition phase. Of course, we could also estimate trends over the whole period, and look for interruptions or breakpoints between 2010 and 2011 and/or between 2012 and 2013. However, it is perfectly clear from Figure 1 that there is substantial heterogeneity in the time-series patterns, at least for those nine cases. The hypothesis of greater newsworthiness, post-Wright-reforms, is simple and directional, and estimating some variety of highly flexible dynamic panel model, to pool the cases, but permit divergent trends, might be tempting, but would also be theory-free. So, here we stick with basic tests, focusing on otherwise unconditional period means (without covariates).

Table 1 shows mean story counts for each committee in each period, pre-Wright (2005-10), early-Wright (2011-12), and late-Wright (2013-18) (where 'early' and 'late' are shorthand for before and after the articulation of Task 10, relating to publicising committee work to inform the public). The vertical bars between the first and second or second and third mean represent statistically significant differences at the  $p < 0.05$  level. The final column includes an asterisks whenever there is a statistically significant difference between the first and third period (ignoring the second). In each case, these are from difference-of-means tests not assuming common variance for the periods.

For 17 of the 25 committees we examined, the final period's count is significantly higher than that from the first period. This result is strongly inconsistent with random drift; the probability of 17 or more increases out of 25 test cases is about 0.02. On the other hand, when comparing all three periods, the most common pattern is neither period-to-period change being statistically significant (12/25). Four of those 12 committees also exhibit no substantial first-to-third jump: Commons Liaison; Public Administration; Science and Technology; and, perhaps surprisingly, Treasury. In Figure 1, Treasury, the most covered committee of the whole set, seems to have garnered dramatically more attention after about 2007, almost certainly because of the global financial crisis; the insignificance of these formal tests is a function of its coverage having jumped up comparatively early, before Wright, and of the importance of high variance within periods, given the small number of years being averaged. These are fairly coarse tests, and the precise definition of the cutpoint sometimes matters. Only one committee, Environment, Food and Rural Affairs displays the expected pattern of having significant gains across each transition (and from first to last period). A large difference between the pre- and early-Wright years, without any detectable difference between early- and late-, was much more common. Note too that about a third of the committees have lower story counts in the final period than in the second period, and the drop is statistically significant for Standards and Privileges<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup>As the reforms were implemented in 2010, it is not obvious how to break annual data. Media mentions can be counted for finer units of time, such as months, but the added granularity is of little assistance for such a simple test. Here, we take the conservative approach of potentially mixing a small number of 'treatment' cases (late 2010) in with our 'control' period.

<sup>6</sup>This drop is almost certainly a function of the fact that this committee has heavily involved in attempting to deal with the aftermath of the 2009 parliamentary expenses scandal

	2005-10	2011-12	2013-18	
Business,... (2007-18)	82	250	405	
Commons Liaison	62	52	76	
Communities, Local Gov't	40	70	144	*
(Digital,) Culture, Media and Sport	505	1850	1238	*
Defence	200	318	363	*
Education	124	368	354	*
Energy and Climate Change (2008-17)	79	271	246	
Environment, ...	41	92	198	*
Environmental Audit	106	162	335	*
Foreign Affairs	249	254	573	*
Health	194	446	523	*
Home Affairs	448	1664	1485	*
International Development	57	196	243	*
Justice (2007-18)	18	152	187	*
Northern Ireland Affairs	48	42	153	*
Procedure	14	50	69	*
Public Accounts	1062	2303	2624	*
Public Administration	137	253	180	
Science and Technology	180	186	221	
Scottish Affairs	110	371	418	*
Standards (and Privileges)	230	168	50	
Transport	418	860	918	*
Treasury	1314	3182	2669	
Welsh Affairs	65	140	105	
Work and Pensions	44	102	583	*

Table 1. Mean Annual Story Counts, All Sources, By Period

So, the data might be said to be broadly consistent with the qualitative hypothesis that the Wright reforms set in motion more visible select committees, with important qualifications.

Of course, we have already cautioned that total story counts potentially conflate increased attention and increasing numbers of sources. Accordingly, we now repeat the analysis using only stories found in, first, *The Guardian* or its Sunday analog *The Observer* and, second, *The Times (of London)*, including the Sunday edition. Insofar as those particular newspapers might have changed their average issue or story length over time, there can still be some small variation in the invisible denominator (total newspaper articles checked) across years. But such variance should be secondary or tertiary, and these well-known, national papers are both covered by the Lexis-Nexis database for this whole period. Hence, when we restrict our attention to those outlets, we are much more confident that time dynamics are not being generated by a greater volume of content, but, rather, by actual changes in the newsworthiness of the committees.

**Figure 2.** *Guardian* Stories for Nine Select Committees, 2005-2018 [about here](#)

**Figure 3.** *Times* Stories for Nine Select Committees, 2005-2018 [about here](#)

Figures 2 and 3 show newspaper-specific times series of story counts for the same

nine committees as Figure 1. To facilitate comparison, the superimposed grey lines show the shape of the total-story series, re-scaled to reflect the smaller vertical axis range. With no precise standard of similarity, it is difficult at a glance to say if the figures look a little or a lot like Figure 1. While both *The Guardian* and *The Times* seem to devote proportionally less attention to some of the committees (e.g. Transport and Public Accounts), there is little sign of greater discrepancies later in the series than earlier.

	all	<i>Guardian</i>	<i>Times</i>
Business,... (2007-18)	+..	...	+..
Commons Liaison	...	-..	...
Communities, Local Gov't	.++	.++	.+.
(Digital,) Culture, Media and Sport	..+	...	+.+
Defence	+.+	...	..+
Education	..+	...	..+
Energy and Climate Change (2008-17)	+..	...	..+
Environment, ...	+++	..+	+++
Environmental Audit	.++	..+	+++
Foreign Affairs	.++	...	+++
Health	+.+	..+	+++
Home Affairs	..+	+.+	..+
International Development	..+	..+	..+
Justice (2007-18)	..+	+.+	+.+
Northern Ireland Affairs	.++	.+.	+++
Procedure	+.+	...	...
Public Accounts	..+	..+	..+
Public Administration	...	...	..+
Science and Technology	...	...	...
Scottish Affairs	..+	..+	..+
Standards (and Privileges)	-..	-..	...
Transport	+.+	..+	..+
Treasury	...	...	..+
Welsh Affairs	+..	...	...
Work and Pensions	..+	...	...

Table 2. Difference-of-Means Results, By Period and Article Source

Table 2 extends the analysis from Table 1, by comparing results from the analysis using all stories to those limiting data to stories from *The Guardian* or *The Times*. We use a shorthand notation wherein a plus sign designates that there is a statistically significant increase, a minus sign marks a significant decrease, and a period reflects no statistically significant difference (again, by a  $p < 0.05$  threshold, in each case). The three symbols correspond to the same comparisons made in Table 1: first, between 2005-10 and 2011-12; second, between 2011-12 and 2013-18; and, third, between 2005-10 and 2013-18, (with truncation where committees were not in existence for some of a period). So, for example, the '+++' entry for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs row in the 'all' column corresponds to the observation made above that only that committee showed statistically significant increases of each kind, using the full dataset.

On the whole, the table further qualifies the general conclusion that committees

are, more often than not, gaining in media coverage. For instance, whereas 17 of 25 committees had substantially higher means for the large data set, only 10 pass that test when we confine our analysis to *The Guardian*. Perusal of rows shows that we would, with any of these data sets, see much more evidence of growth than decline, but also that the precise set of committees that support the hypothesis of greater exposure shifts with the measurement source. When we try to correct for changes in Lexis-Nexis coverage, how we do so matters. Lacking any particular theory of coverage in these particular newspapers, we merely emphasise that this approach to gauging exposure can clearly be dependent on data availability, in non-obvious ways. Appendix B uses the Treasury Select Committee as a case for slightly more investigation of source (i.e. newspaper(s) searched) effects.

## 5.2. From Stories to Days

Another of our concerns was that duplication or near duplication can make the newspaper-story tabulations an ambiguous variable. On the one hand, many papers carrying an identical column about a select committee is indisputably a sign of greater visibility. A column appearing only in, say, *The Times*, will reach fewer readers than if it is also found in regional papers, *City A.M.*, *London Lite*, and other outlets. And the more editors who deem a column worthy of scarce space, the more confident we feel that this story-count variable should be accurately reflecting a belief that committees are important and merit following. On the other hand, the generation of Lexis-Nexis records from actual newspaper content is somewhat mysterious, and we note many duplicate records that are either puzzling or simply reflect minor variation across editions, small corrections, and so on. That sort of duplication is perhaps indicative of the complexity of modern media distribution, but it is not the kind of multiplicity we wish to treat as a signal of importance. An intermediate case arises when newspapers routinely alter headlines (and some content) for online editions. One might or might not prefer to treat, for instance, `thetimes.co.uk` as a distinct source from its physical analogue, *The Times*, perhaps on the logic that it seems likely to reach a different audience. To sidestep the difficulty of thoroughly and consistently de-duplicating the data, we now introduce a second variable operationalising level of media attention. Figure 4 shows what proportion of the total *days* in each year, from 2005-2018, had at least one story about the given select committee in *either The Guardian or The Times*. By limiting attention to only those outlets, we avoid mistaking inflation of the Lexis-Nexis database for greater coverage levels. And by counting days, not articles, we solve the problem of bogus or fuzzy duplicates, albeit at the cost of dulling our primary variable somewhat. The figure also shows, for each committee, the mean proportions for 2005-10, 2011-12, and 2013-18. (For Energy and Climate Change, the first mean is computed from the only pre-Wright values, 2009 and 2010, and the final period omits 2018.)

**Figure 4. Annual Coverage Rates for *Times* or *Guardian* Stories, Nine Select Committees, 2005-2018** about here

In Figure 4, only Public Accounts and International Development (barely) exhibit the hypothesised step increase, with each successive period having higher newspaper profiles (as measured by proportion of the year's days featuring any *Guardian* or *Times* coverage). Moreover, contrary to the growth hypothesis, values for the final

period are usually lower than those for the first two post-Wright years.

Table 3 shows for 25 select committees the mean proportion of days in a year featuring at least one story in either *The Times* or *The Guardian*, or both. Again, the three periods being compared relate to our understanding that the Wright reforms altered committee activities starting in 2011 and then the revision of core tasks potentially further changed their incentives in 2013. The means for the first period cover 2005-10, except for committees that came into existence later than 2005. As in Table 1, we mark statistically significant differences between the first and second and between the second and third periods with bars, and between the first and third with asterisks, in the far right column.

	2005-10	2011-12	2013-18	
Business,... (2007-18)	0.03	0.09	0.14	
Commons Liaison	0.02	0.02	0.03	
Communities, Local Gov't	0.01	0.01	0.05	*
(Digital,) Culture, Media and Sport	0.27	0.57	0.41	*
Defence	0.07	0.13	0.15	*
Education	0.09	0.21	0.19	*
Energy and Climate Change (2008-17)	0.07	0.09	0.08	
Environment, ...	0.01	0.01	0.05	*
Environmental Audit	0.06	0.08	0.12	*
Foreign Affairs	0.13	0.13	0.24	*
Health	0.1	0.2	0.21	*
Home Affairs	0.22	0.47	0.46	*
International Development	0.03	0.11	0.11	*
Justice (2007-18)	0.03	0.08	0.12	*
Northern Ireland Affairs	0.01	0	0.04	*
Procedure	0.01	0.02	0.04	
Public Accounts	0.35	0.55	0.68	*
Public Administration	0.08	0.14	0.11	
Science and Technology	0.13	0.13	0.09	
Scottish Affairs	0.02	0.11	0.09	*
Standards (and Privileges)	0.08	0.07	0.03	
Transport	0.09	0.2	0.19	*
Treasury	0.33	0.65	0.63	*
Welsh Affairs	0	0.01	0.01	
Work and Pensions	0.01	0.02	0.19	*

Table 3. Mean Annual Coverage Rates for *Times* or *Guardian* Stories, by Period

Over the whole 14-year period, the crude dynamics in this variable look rather similar to those for gross counts, discussed above. For 17 of 25 committees, the mean proportion of days in which they make the papers in the 2013-18 period is statistically significantly higher than its companion proportion for 2005-08. But when we explore finer changes, across three periods, the data offer less support for a hypothesis of steady or universal growth. There is no instance, in the 25 committees described here, of two successive, statistically significant jumps in mean press-coverage levels operationalised by day. Whereas the Public Accounts series in Figure 4 looked to be the unique instance of the expected pattern, comparatively high within-period variance conspired against statistical significance in either comparison (though not

in the first-to-last period comparison). Nine of the 25 committees show a substantial (statistically significant) increase in one of two comparisons, while two (Standards and Privileges and Science and Technology) see sharp enough declines to qualify as significant drops, since the introduction of Task 10.

In these tests, we reduce a large volume of data to a small number of annual data points, thereby reducing statistical power. Thus, the somewhat weak evidence for growing committee salience is partly a function of the construction of a stringent test. We would certainly never claim that these tests exhaustively characterise the dynamics of recent press coverage of Select Committees. At minimum, we can say that the data are more consistent with a selective growth in select committee prominence, rather than a regime change wherein these committees, as a set, have become different in kind from their pre-Wright predecessors.

## 6. Conclusion

We can offer two forms of conclusion to this work. In regard to the substantive matter of whether House of Commons select committees have gained and/or are still gaining in media visibility, we offer a qualified ‘yes.’ The qualifications are many. The committees vary greatly in how often they make the papers. Some have experienced bursts of attention precipitated by highly newsworthy hearings on major scandals (e.g. newspapers illegally hacking phones and engaging in bribery to obtain private information, and inquiries into deceptive banking practices following the 2008 financial crisis). The Lexis-Nexis data are not well-suited, at present, to examining the whole 1979-2018 lifespan of these committees. When we compare only the last 14 years, there is a clear pattern of higher visibility later in time. But whether we should see the Wright reforms as having boosted committee visibility, in a single step, or, instead, having set in motion a process wherein they continue to gain prominence is not obvious. Our conjecture that Task 10 might have been critical to changing attention is only very weakly backed up in these data.

Whether more newspaper stories or more days with any press coverage is a good way to measure the importance of a committee or any political figure is an open question that we sidestep for now. Arguably, visibility of almost any kind is useful, as advertisers ceaselessly stress. If this is indeed the case, then, when focusing on only *The Times* and *The Guardian*, our results indicate that the Public Accounts and the Treasury Select Committees are the most important committees and the Welsh Affairs Select Committee the least important, at least at a UK-wide level if not a regional one. These findings fit both with intuitive understandings of committee importance within the UK House of Commons and with scholarship concerning the prestige of ministries and policy areas (for example, Krook and O’Brien 2012). However, some of our other results do not fit so well with either intuitive understandings or extant scholarship. For instance, the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee was one of the most visible committees within the media according to the evidence we present here. To be sure, during the period under consideration, this committee dealt with some high-profile and important issues and events, such as the phone hacking scandal and fake news, which impacted and impact on the health of liberal democracy both in the UK and beyond. However, the prominence of this committee, which covers a relatively low prestige policy area, may also be due to the (UK)

media's self-absorption<sup>7</sup>

A very natural follow-up would be, therefore, to see what, if any, correlations there are between the measures of media visibility used here and data on direct access to select committee reports and other outputs collected by the House of Commons staff. This would allow us to see whether and the degree to which the importance of select committees as determined by the choices of editors and reporters (and using media visibility as a proxy measure) matches the importance of select committees as determined by citizens, lobbyists and policy communities who engage with their work and outputs unmediated.

Another very natural follow-up would be to explore the degree to which committee activities—hearings and the issuance of reports—statistically predict media-based measures of salience. On the one hand, that association might seem almost tautological. There cannot be a news story about a committee unless the committee (or some member thereof) has done something to be reported. But we believe that studying which events generate the most coverage, and when coverage is attached to committees as against members thereof, especially Chairs, is promising. Likewise, exploring the degree to which select committees are mentioned in *Hansard* and tagged in debates would permit a comparison of their newspaper<sup>8</sup> and debate profiles, which might or might not move in parallel.

On the methodological side, we view Lexis-Nexis and like databases as a great resource for novel studies of political figures. Our textual analysis here was deliberately simple, and we would not claim to be proposing any particular advance to the text-as-data approach. However, it is an exciting time to be interested in media coverage, given the growth in accessible records thereof. Meanwhile, we have stressed some simple points about pitfalls to a quick-and-dirty count, related to variation in press norms for exact phrases, difficulties in treating exact and approximate duplicates, and taking account of time-series variance in the search pool. Extracting meaningful data even from very large databases can be tricky.

As such, we would not wish to suggest that this database or these analyses offer the final word on House of Commons Select Committee salience. Many others have made clever use of searchable newspaper archives (e.g. Althaus and Largio 2004) and more work in this vein would be very welcome. However, we do hope to have built on Dunleavy and Muir's analysis. We believe our research helps provide a fuller picture of the salience and media visibility of select committees and the impact of the Wright reforms and revisions to the core tasks. Moreover, we believe the approach used here offers a useful pathway for comparable work across other cases of national and sub-national legislative chambers, to help bring the comparison of committee visibility to the fore.

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<sup>7</sup>Concomitantly, the relative lack of prominence given to the Foreign Affairs and the International Development Select Committees may be due to the (increasingly) parochial nature of (much of) the UK media (and politicians).

<sup>8</sup>Of course, newspapers are not synonymous with media. Further replication and extension to broadcast and online-only coverage would also be very useful.



## Appendix A. Committee Names and Search Targets

Our figures above sometimes employ abbreviations, and we note in the main body of the paper that committee name changes complicate searches for media mentions. This paper reports analysis for the period 2005-18, and because we were particularly interested in comparing media profiles before and after 2010, we ignored some committees of recent vintage, as well as some old, defunct ones. We also ignored a few other anomalies. Our targets for searches, for 2005-18 except as indicated, were: 1a.Business and Enterprise (2007-08); 1b.Business, Innovation and Skills (2008-17); 1c.Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (2017-18); 2.Communities and Local Government; 3a.Culture, Media and Sport (2005-16); 3b.Digital, Culture, Media and Sport 2017-18; 4.Defence; 5.Education; 6. Energy and Climate Change (2008-17); 7.Environment, Food and Rural Affairs; 8.Environmental Audit; 9.Foreign Affairs; 10.Health; 11.Home Affairs; 12.International Development; 13.Justice (2007-18); 14.Northern Ireland Affairs; 15.Procedure; 16.Public Accounts; 17.Public Administration; 18.Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs; 19.Science and Technology; 20.Scottish Affairs; 21a.Standards and Privileges (2005-13); 21b.Standards (2012-18); 22.Transport; 23.Treasury; 24.Welsh Affairs; 25.Work and Pensions.

## Appendix B. Treasury Committee Coverage in More Detail

To control for changes in Lexis-Nexis coverage, one can take into account exactly what years are covered for each publication, or, more simply, compare gross results with those from select sources with known coverage periods. We chose *The Times* and *The Guardian* as prominent, national sources, indexed by Lexis-Nexis over the period of study, but we have no theory about how they might differ from each other, or from other sources. Figure B1, below, shows a little more decomposition of newspaper-story data for the Treasury Select Committee data. The first panel relates to the alternative search strategies described in the paper. Comparison of results from strategy *a* (find stories that reference 'Treasury Select Committee') and those from *a* and *b* (combining the results from *a* with (distinct) results when searching for 'Treasury Committee') gives a rough sense for the possible size of the false-positive problem when using the larger series, or, conversely, the missing-data problem from the smaller. The '4' series, which seems mildly flatter, is a summation of the time series from the four sources shown in subsequent panels. In this case, it is striking the degree to which *The Times* generates the main dynamics in the overall series. By contrast, *The Financial Times* has given Treasury steady, possibly slightly declining, coverage from 2007 onward.

**Figure B1. Treasury Committee Stories, Select Sources**[about here](#)