Do voters reward rebellion? The electoral accountability of MPs in Britain

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Abstract

Do British voters hold their MPs individually accountable for their legislative behaviour? To do so, constituents would need to base their decision to vote for an MP at least partially on the extent to which the MP's legislative voting behaviour deviated from that of the MP's party leadership. We argue that voters should evaluate this deviation contingent on their views of the party leadership. MP rebellion can signal that voter-MP congruence is greater than that of the voter and the MP's party leadership. We analyse the British Election Study 2005 and find that only constituents with negative attitudes toward the Labour government reward rebellious Labour MPs, albeit to a limited extent. A similar conditional association is not observed on a single issue, Iraq. The policy accountability of MPs is relatively weak and general rather than issue-specific. Our findings contribute to debates on British electoral reform and electoral accountability.

Introduction

Accountability is central to representative government. The ability of citizens to choose the political actors who will undertake desirable policies, or to reward and punish the past behaviour of political actors, is a key requirement for effective representative democracy (Strøm, 2000). Yet in parliamentary systems, there is an inherent tension between two types of accountability: that of parties and that of individual representatives. On the one hand, strong and cohesive parties help voters hold governments accountable for political outcomes, implying that individual legislators should subordinate their own views to those of their parliamentary group (Bowler et al., 1998; Kam, 2009; Müller, 2000). On the other hand, there are normative arguments that individual representatives should also respond to the interests and demands of their constituents instead of always toeing the party line (Carey, 2003).

Electoral systems differ in the extent to which they favour one notion of accountability or the other. Under Britain's First-Past-The-Post (FPTP) electoral system, citizens use the same vote to choose a government and a representative for their constituency. Because of the power of the executive in a Westminster system (Kam, 2009), it has been argued that British citizens have a strong incentive to think of this single vote as a choice between parties competing to form a government rather than as a choice of an individual MP to represent their constituency (Mitchell, 2000). Perhaps unsurprisingly, the prevailing view of political scientists is therefore that individual MP accountability in Britain is weak at best (Cowley and Stuart, 2005a; McAllister and Studlar, 2000; Pattie et al., 1994).

Nevertheless, the direct link between a specific geographic area and an individual Member of Parliament (MP) that exists under the FPTP system at least allows for the possibility that constituents may hold MPs individually accountable for their behaviour. Indeed, among the political elite and political commentators at Westminster, the direct electoral connection between constituents and individual MPs is often held to be one of the principal virtues of Britain's FPTP system, to the extent that it has "framed and limited much of the debate about alternative systems in Britain" (Norris,

2001: 883). For example, an official review has suggested that FPTP provides MPs with a certain degree of freedom from party control and strengthens voter-MP linkages (Independent Commission on the Voting System, 1998). In addition, in the 2011 referendum campaign on introducing the Alternative Vote (AV) electoral system, its supporters have been careful to emphasise that it would preserve the geographical link between each individual MP and a particular constituency.

So do British citizens use their vote to hold MPs individually accountable for their behaviour under the current FPTP system? In this paper we bring new evidence to bear on this question, focusing on citizens' ability to hold MPs individually accountable for one key policy-related type of MP behaviour: his or her voting record in the House of Commons. Though parties tend to vote in relatively cohesive blocs in the Commons, MPs can and do differentiate themselves from their party by rebelling on certain divisions (Cowley and Stuart, 2005b). Such rebellions are a signal to voters that an MP disagrees with the policies supported by his or her party leadership. A constituent can use this information to evaluate the relative congruence of their own policy stance with that of the MP and that of the MP's party leadership, respectively. We argue that a constituent can be said to hold MPs individually accountable for their policy-related behaviour if the constituent is more likely to vote for an incumbent MP when that MP's stance is more congruent with the constituent's views than is the stance of the MP's party leadership.

To examine whether and to what extent this individual policy accountability operates in Britain, we formulate and test three hypotheses about the effects of MP rebellion on constituent vote choice. First, the *general policy accountability* hypothesis predicts that greater rebelliousness by an MP only increases a constituent's probability of voting for that MP when the constituent also disapproves of the general policies advocated by the leadership of the MP's party. Second, the *specific policy accountability* hypothesis predicts that a specific instance of rebellion by an MP on a highly salient issue increases a constituent's probability of voting for that MP when the constituent also disapproves of the specific stance advocated by the leadership of the MP's party on this issue. These two hypotheses imply individual MP policy accountability, since the response of a constituent

to MP rebellion depends upon the constituent's relative evaluation of the policy stance taken by their MP on the one hand and by the party leadership on the other. Finally, the *profile effects* hypothesis predicts that greater rebelliousness by an MP increases the profile of an MP among his constituents, thereby increasing the probability that any constituent votes for that MP. This alternative hypothesis does not imply individual policy accountability, since the constituent unconditionally rewards MP rebellion under this logic.

To test for the presence of these three potential effects of rebellion, we examine the link between Labour MP voting behaviour during the 2001-5 parliament and the reported vote choices of British Election Study (BES) respondents. To our knowledge, this is the first time voter-level data has been used to examine the effects of MP parliamentary rebellion on constituent vote choice in Britain. Furthermore, we contend that this voter-level approach has key methodological advantages over existing approaches, which focus on constituency-level election results.[1]

Contrary to the prevailing view of political scientists, we find that constituents *do* condition their voting behaviour to a non-trivial degree on their MP's parliamentary voting record, and that they do this in a manner consistent with general policy accountability rather than specific policy accountability. However, this general policy accountability of MPs is weak in magnitude, so there is not a strong MP-constituent policy accountability link under the UK's FPTP system. To be precise, among voters who evaluated the Labour leadership very negatively but were favourably inclined to the Labour Party more generally, those who were represented by a somewhat rebellious Labour MPs were about 8 per cent more likely to vote for their incumbent than those who were represented by a non-rebellious Labour MP. In contrast, MP rebellion is not associated with vote choice among voters who evaluated the Labour leadership more positively. For a typical Labour-held constituency, a somewhat rebellious MP is predicted to have received a constituency vote-share about 1.5 per cent higher than a loyal MP.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows: first, we discuss the scope for individual policy accountability in the British FPTP system and provide a theoretical description of the circumstances

that might lead voters to reward rebellious representatives. Next, the set-up of the test for the 2005 election in Britain is described, after which the results of the test are presented and discussed.

Theoretical background

The extent to which British voters take into account the record of their MPs has generally been seen as very limited (Spirling, 2008). Voters tend to consider their vote as a choice of the party they would prefer to form a government. In addition, voters in each constituency are presented with just one candidate for each party, so they only have a limited ability to decide who within their preferred party should represent them in the House of Commons (Carey and Shugart, 1995). Finally, even if MPs wanted to carve out a personal reputation, they might not have the means to do so. The level of local campaign spending is low by international standards and the British local media notably weak (Cain et al., 1984; Pattie and Johnston, 2004: 798). Indeed, voter knowledge regarding candidates is low in the United Kingdom in comparison to other countries (Pattie and Johnston, 2004).

But despite these potential limitations on individual accountability, there are good reasons to re-examine the possible impact of MPs' parliamentary voting behaviour on their electoral fortunes. First, the existence of single-member districts means that there is a clear relationship between a geographically defined group of voters and 'their' representative (Grofman, 2005; Mitchell, 2000). This at least allows for a more personal and direct link between MPs and their constituents than, for example, closed-list proportional representation systems with large district magnitudes. Furthermore, given the decrease in party attachments and class voting (Clarke et al., 2004, 2009; Franklin, 1985), citizens may also now be more willing to take individual MP behaviour into account when casting their vote (Kam, 2009; Zittel and Gschwend, 2008). Previous research indicates that district-specific factors such as constituency campaigns and constituency service are associated with electoral outcomes (Cain et al., 1984; Cutts and Shryane, 2006; Denver and Hands, 1997; Fisher, 1999; Johnston and Pattie, 2008; Norton and Wood, 1990; Pattie et al., 1995; Whiteley and Seyd, 1994). Finally, the well-documented rise in the rebelliousness of MPs over the last decade (Cowley and

Stuart, 2005b) raises the important question of whether British voters respond to such MP rebelliousness.

To do so, constituents would of course need to take notice of their representatives' voting behaviour in the first place. It should not be expected that the majority of voters pay explicit attention to the voting behaviour of politicians (Spirling, 2008). Rather, the way in which parliamentary voting behaviour may filter through to voters is more indirect (Arnold, 1993). First, as in the US, representatives will 'work hard to publicize … those [policy positions] they think will help generate support' (Arnold, 1990: 55). Individual votes may therefore be emphasised in campaign advertising by MPs trying to distance themselves from an unpopular party decision. For example, rebel Labour MPs made use of their dissent on the vote on the war in Iraq in their 2005 re-election campaigns. Seventeen such representatives signed a declaration stating:

> 'I was and remain totally opposed to the war on Iraq. If elected as your parliamentary
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> representative in the forthcoming general election, I will do everything in my power to bring
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> the occupation of Iraq to an end' (The Independent, 30 March 2005).

Second, other political actors may also publicise MP voting records, and there is growing evidence that this occurs in the UK (Cowley and Stuart, 2005a). For example, challengers will point out those decisions where MPs may have endorsed a disliked policy.[2] In the UK, such a localised strategy is often pursued in the intense constituency campaign in the weeks before the poll, for example in leaflets distributed to every household. Interest groups and the media play a similar role in advertising disadvantageous voting records.[3] For example, in 2005 the magazine *New Statesman* published a list of Labour MPs to whom left-of-centre voters should deny the vote. Finding information about MPs' activities has become easier for voters through websites such as publicwhip.org.uk or theyworkforyou.com; the former received over 160,000 hits in the 2005 election campaign. The existence of these information channels suggests that a non-trivial portion of constituents may learn about their MP's parliamentary voting record.

Specifically, rebellion in parliament provides voters with an 'observable signal' concerning their MP (Kam, 2009: 106). This signal can supply the voter with two types of information. First, *specific* instances of rebellion indicate when an MP disagrees strongly with their party leadership on a particular issue. Second, MPs' *overall* level of rebellion in parliament can indicate the extent to which they generally disagree with their party leadership and are willing to record this disagreement in the form of dissent (Tavits, 2009). Given some non-trivial amount of constituent knowledge about MP voting behaviour, we suggest three possible effects of these signals on constituent vote choice: profile effects, general policy accountability and specific policy accountability.

Profile effects of MP voting behaviour

A first way in which MP voting behaviour could have an effect on their electoral success is not directly related to the policy content of their legislative actions: part of the effect of rebellion may be on the overall profile of the MP in the constituency (Kam, 2009). Rebellion would be just one way in which an MP can get local attention, on top of newsletters and meetings in the constituency and early-day motions (proposals for debate) and private member's bills (legislative initiatives) in parliament. The fact that an MP rebels regularly can filter through to voters through the higher media coverage and attention such frequent rebels tend to receive. Rebellious MPs can build up a local reputation as an independent and active representative in parliament. Voters may be inclined to reward such representatives simply because they see independence from party control as a positive attribute in itself (Johnson and Rosenblatt, 2007; Kam, 2009: 106). In sum, MP voting behaviour may affect electoral outcomes through its impact on name recognition and non-policy personal reputation. We call this the *profile effect* of rebellion. Importantly, such profile effects are not conditional upon any policy congruence between the MP and his or her constituents, so in this case we could not speak of policy accountability of representatives. Our first hypothesis is therefore:

H1 (profile hypothesis): Greater rebelliousness by an incumbent MP has a positive impact on a constituent's likelihood of voting for that MP.

General policy accountability

Turning to electoral consequences of MP voting behaviour, two types of accountability need to be distinguished. First, constituents may consider the overall ideological stance of their MP: voters will prefer an MP who more closely represents their policy preferences. Representatives are arguably accountable to voters if the latter evaluate the policy content of MPs' voting and reward and punish them accordingly (Key and Cummings, 1966). If constituents condition their vote choice based on their overall congruence with MP preferences (as expressed in parliamentary votes), we can speak of *general policy accountability*.

In a Westminster-type FPTP system citizens have one vote that simultaneously elects their MP and helps to determine the strength of parties in a parliament that supplies the government. Thus the electoral effect of an MP's general rebelliousness depends on the voter's view of the party as a whole. Specifically, the influence of rebellion depends on both the relative congruence of party stance with constituent stance *and* of rebellious MP stance with constituent stance. For example, a voter may disapprove of a party's general policy position aggregated across many issues. As a result he or she should on balance be less likely to cast a vote for that party. However, the representative of that party in the voter's constituency may be someone who has highlighted personal policy differences by rebelling frequently against the party leadership. The MP's rebelliousness is a signal that he or she agrees with the voter that the party has made wrong decisions. Voters who dislike a party's overall policy will thus be more inclined to support MPs who have expressed their own disagreement with it. It could also be that voters respond negatively to rebellion if they are in favour of the party leadership's policy choices. Rebellion may therefore be unpopular with those constituents who agree with the party overall. In sum, overall rebelliousness will have an influence on the voting behaviour contingent on a voter's opinion of the party leadership. Our second hypothesis is therefore:

H2 (general policy accountability): Greater rebelliousness by an incumbent MP has a positive impact on a constituent's likelihood of voting for that MP only if the constituent generally disagrees with the policies advocated by the leadership of the MP's party.

Specific policy accountability

Constituents may also condition their vote choice on whether a specific policy stance taken by their MP in the Commons is congruent with their own views on this issue. We call this effect *specific policy accountability*. In this case, voters may disagree with a party's parliamentary stance on a particular issue that is highly salient to their vote choice. However, the voter's representative may have signalled specific policy congruence by rebelling on that issue. It is possible that some voters who disagree with a party on one policy will nevertheless endorse an MP who has demonstrated an issue-specific preference that is congruent with the voter's views (Kam, 2009: 25). Again, the inverse relationship may also exist, as voters may wish to punish an MP for disloyalty on a specific party decision they endorse. Our final hypothesis is thus:

H3 (specific policy accountability): Rebellion on a specific issue by an incumbent MP has a positive impact on a constituent's likelihood of voting for that MP if the constituent disagrees with the stance taken by the leadership of the MP's party on that specific issue.

Are constituents more likely to hold MPs to account for their general legislative voting record or will they only condition their vote on specific salient policies? Of course, not every parliamentary vote is equally likely to have electoral effects. Evidence from the US suggests that controversial and salient legislative votes have a particularly strong electoral effect (Arnold, 1990; Bovitz and Carson, 2006; Kingdon, 1989; Pattie et al., 1994). However, the informational requirements of specific policy accountability on individual issues are very high. Moreover, the weight of one single issue in a voter's decision calculus is likely to be mostly small. It is more plausible that over the years an MP's voting behaviour filters through to constituents, allowing constituents to form some general understanding of their MP's position compared to his or her party (Arnold 1993). We therefore

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regard the hypothesis of general policy accountability as the more likely of the two types of MP-constituent accountability.

The existing empirical evidence on this issue is inconclusive. Four studies have examined whether the parliamentary voting record of an MP is associated with his or her subsequent electoral fortunes. All use constituency-level data exclusively. Pattie et al. (1994) find that constituents do respond to MP's votes on high-salience issues, but that the effect is small. McAllister and Studlar (2000) argue that Eurosceptic Conservatives may have gained a small bonus at the 1997 election. Cowley and Stuart (2005a) find that MP rebellion had no effect in the 2005 election, with the partial exception of the top-up fees vote. Finally, Spirling (2008) finds evidence that MP rebellion is only viewed positively by voters if it occurs on less important issues.

Modelling the electoral impact of MP rebelliousness in the 2005 election

We focus on the 2005 general election, which provides a suitable context for this study for two reasons. First, in 2005 many voters, and particularly those normally sympathetic to Labour, had reason to re-consider their party choice carefully. While the Labour government was seen as competent on the economy and public services, the party was weakened by the unpopularity of their leader, Tony Blair. His government had alienated many traditional Labour voters with the decision to follow the United States into war with Iraq, and with controversial market-oriented reforms in domestic policy areas such as education and health (Clarke et al., 2009: 10ff.). Second, the period from 2001 to 2005 saw an increase in the rebelliousness of Labour MPs. They defied their whips 259 times or on 20.8 per cent of parliamentary votes, the highest percentage in any parliamentary term since 1945 (Cowley and Stuart, 2005b: 1). The existence of frequent and often prominent rebellion means that the 2005 election 'was probably the most conducive environment for an electoral reward/punishment of MPs for their behaviour in the House of Commons since the establishment of the modern British party system over a century ago' (Cowley and Stuart, 2005a: 5).

While existing studies focus on *constituency*-level vote shares, our empirical test focuses on the association between MP voting behaviour and the reported vote choices of *individual* constituents from the internet survey of the British Election Study. This survey is particularly well-suited for a voter-level analysis of constituent responses to MP rebellion. First, the sample size is large ($N = 7793$ for the pre-election and $N = 5910$ for the post-election wave), so that we can look at only respondents with Labour incumbents and still retain a large sub-sample of 3237 voters for the analysis. Second, the sub-sample we analyse includes respondents from 333 of the 351 Labour seats where the incumbent stood for re-election, and the mean number of respondents per seat is 12.5.[4] Finally, there is evidence that substantive results obtained from analysis of the 2005 BES internet and face-to-face surveys are overwhelmingly similar (Sanders et al., 2007).

More generally, the use of voter-level data has two important advantages over the constituency vote-share approach. First, it is only possible to test whether different types of constituent respond differently to rebellion by using voter-level data. This is necessary if we want to properly discriminate between the profile effects hypothesis and the general or specific policy accountability hypotheses. Second, our voter-level approach allows us to control for a greater number of potentially important confounding variables than does a constituency vote-share approach. After all, levels of MP rebelliousness are not randomly assigned to constituencies. Indeed, the social and political characteristics of a constituency may drive both levels of MP rebelliousness and electoral support for the MP. For example, constituencies populated predominantly by traditional Labour identifiers may tend to elect rebellious MPs with 'old Labour' values that clash with those of the party leadership. But these types of constituencies may also be predisposed toward higher electoral support for any Labour candidate regardless of how rebellious they have been. It is very difficult to measure these types of constituency characteristics. Because of this, we would not be able to control for important confounding covariates if we were to compare the constituency vote shares received by incumbent Labour MPs who exhibit different levels of rebelliousness. In contrast, if we compare the vote choices of individual survey respondents exposed to different levels of MP

rebellion, we can measure and control for a wide variety of individual characteristics that may be associated both with vote choice and the level of MP rebellion to which a respondent was exposed.

Of course, no observational study of this topic can escape the fact that voters exposed to different levels of MP rebellion are by definition drawn from different constituencies. As a result, the validity of our inferences rests on the assumption that, conditional on controls, there is nothing systematically related to voting behaviour that differentiates respondents from high-rebellion and low-rebellion constituencies; however, we believe that given our extensive controls this assumption is reasonable. Furthermore, inspection of the distribution of each control variable across respondents exposed to different levels of MP rebellion suggests considerable overlap in the observable characteristics of respondents in high-rebellion and low-rebellion constituencies. That is, voters exposed to higher levels of MP rebellion do not appear to be fundamentally different from those exposed to lower levels of MP rebellion.

Key variables

The dependent variable in our analysis is a dichotomous measure of whether a respondent reports voting Labour (1) or for another party (0). We model this response using binary logistic regression.

The profile effects hypothesis would predict that the overall level of Labour MP rebelliousness has a positive effect on a constituent's probability of voting Labour, while the general policy accountability hypothesis would suggest that this is only the case when the constituent disapproves of the policies undertaken by the Labour leadership. Therefore, the main explanatory variables of interest in discriminating between these two hypotheses are a measure of respondent disapproval of the Labour Party leadership, the overall rebelliousness of his or her MP, and the interaction between the two.

The main measure of disapproval of the Labour Party leadership used is a respondent's assessment of Tony Blair on a 0-10 like-dislike scale (to make the results below easier to interpret, the original 0-10 like-dislike scale was rescaled to -5 to +5 and reversed, so larger values indicate

greater dislike of Blair). The evaluation of the party leader is a useful proxy for voter opinion on the party leadership in general. This is perhaps especially true in the Westminster system, where the leadership of a governing party dominates the policy-making agenda. While this measure may partly reflect dislike of Blair based on personal characteristics unrelated to policy, it seems reasonable to assume that a respondent's dislike of Blair is primarily driven by the extent to which they disagree with the general policies advocated by the Labour Party leader and Prime Minister. The measure is also better suited to our purposes than questions that refer directly to the Labour Party. Such questions do not isolate respondents' opinions of the leadership from the party as a whole, so responses may be coloured by more traditional notions of what the party generally stands for (notions which a rebellious MP may be trying to uphold).

As a measure of the general rebelliousness of an MP we calculated the total percentage of times each Labour MP voted against the majority of the Labour party during the 2001-2005 Parliament.[5]

To test the specific policy accountability hypothesis, which predicts that constituent vote choices respond to specific instances of MP rebellion, we use the 18 March 2003 Commons vote on the Iraq War. In this division, 138 Labour MPs defied the party whip and supported an amendment stating that 'the case for war has not been established' (Benedetto and Hix, 2007: 764). Iraq was a highly salient issue in Great Britain and the parliamentary rebellion very public. In addition to being salient, Iraq was a Blair government policy that many disagreed with: in the sample, two-thirds of voters express disapproval with this decision. It can also be classified as a relatively 'easy' issue: it involves a binary choice, whether to go to war or not; it is relatively symbolic; and it is related to policy ends rather than means (Carmines and Stimson, 1980). In sum, if electoral effects from a single division in the 2001-05 parliament are to be found, it would arguably be on this vote.

The other two large rebellions in the 2001-05 parliamentary term occurred on complex technical issues dealing with policy means, university tuition fees and NHS foundation hospitals. It would be more difficult for electoral accountability to develop on these votes. Moreover, unlike with

Iraq, no BES questions asked for respondent views on foundation hospitals or tuition fees, and there are no suitable proxies to measure respondent views on these specific topics as distinct from their views on Labour's policy on education and health care more generally.

We examine whether rebellion over Iraq has a positive impact on the probability of voting for Labour for those constituents who disagreed with Britain's involvement in the war in Iraq. Two measures of disapproval with the war are used. First, simply whether the respondent approved or disapproved of British involvement in the Iraq war and, second, whether the voter claims to be 'angry' and 'disgusted' by the war.[6] The second measure is used in order to capture possible differences based on the importance of the issue to the respondent. In short, the main independent variables in the model testing specific policy accountability are Iraq disapproval, the MP's Iraq vote and the interaction between the two.

Voter- and constituency-level controls

At the voter-level, we use five conventional socio-demographic controls: age, gender, ethnicity, region, employment as a manual worker and income.[7] In addition, we control for party identification, the party identified as best able to handle the most important issue and spatial proximities to the main parties on taxes and public spending.[8] Finally, we control for voter assessments of MP constituency service in order to separate out the effect of MP voting behaviour and non-policy MP-related considerations.[9]

We also try to control for constituency-level observable variables which could plausibly influence both the rebelliousness of an MP for a constituency and the average probability of voting Labour in that constituency. First, the more a Labour MP anticipates his or her seat to be electorally vulnerable, the greater the inducement may be to distance themselves, via parliamentary rebellion, from a government perceived to be unpopular. At the same time, opposition parties are likely to target campaign resources on more vulnerable seats, which may reduce the average propensity to vote Labour in these seats. Therefore, we include two proxies for the vulnerability of a respondent's

incumbent Labour MP: the size of the Labour majority at the 2001 election (*Majority Size*), and the gap in campaign spending between the Labour incumbent and their closest challenger in 2005 (*Spending gap to main challenger*).[10]

Second, Benedetto and Hix (2007) find that parliamentary rebelliousness is higher among governing party MPs who are former ministers and among those with a longer tenure in the Commons. Such characteristics may also correlate with a higher profile – and greater electoral support – among constituents. Therefore we also control for the (logged) number of years a respondent's MP has sat in the Commons (*Years as MP*) and whether the respondent's MP is an *Ex-Minister*.[11]

Third, a Labour MP may have differential incentives to rebel depending on whether the main challenger in their constituency represents a party that is ideologically on the centre-right (i.e. a Conservative) or centre-left (i.e. Liberal Democrat, SNP, Plaid Cymru). This same factor may influence average Labour support in a constituency, since dissatisfied previous Labour voters may be more likely to abandon the party if there is a centre-left challenger who can plausibly win in their constituency. Therefore, we also include a dummy variable identifying whether the main challenger in a respondent's constituency is from a main party other than the Conservatives (*Main challenger from the left*).[12]

Despite these constituency controls, it is possible that constituency-level heterogeneity (in terms of average respondent propensity to vote Labour) may be driven by other variables which we are unable to observe. Therefore, for each specification below we estimate a hierarchical binary logistic regression (Gelman and Hill, 2007) that models intercepts as varying randomly across constituencies. This approach accounts for unobserved constituency-level heterogeneity and the potential correlation of observations within each constituency while also enabling us to include constituency-level predictors in the model.[13]

Results

Overall levels of MP rebelliousness and constituent vote choice

We first review the results of our tests for the effects of overall levels of MP rebellion on constituent vote choice. Table 1 shows parameter estimates for four hierarchical binary logistic regressions. Model 1 has a simple specification, estimating the main effect on respondent vote choice of overall Labour MP rebelliousness and negativity toward Tony Blair without any interaction and controlling only for constituency random effects. Model 2 adds the full set of controls described above. The estimated coefficients for the standard controls are often significant and in the right direction, following closely the results for all constituencies presented in Clarke et al. (2009). The coefficient on MP rebellion is positive in both Models 1 and 2 (0.06 and 0.09, respectively), but the estimates are statistically significant only at the 0.1 level. If we were to end our enquiry here we might conclude that there is weak support for a profile effect of MP rebelliousness: the more an MP rebelled in the Commons, the more likely was a constituent in a Labour-held seat to vote Labour.

[Table 1 about here]

However, Models 1 and 2 only estimate the average association between Labour MP rebelliousness and respondent vote choice in Labour constituencies. We also want to test the general policy accountability hypothesis that the association between Labour MP rebelliousness and constituent vote choice is conditional upon constituent evaluations of the Labour party leadership. To do this, Models 3 and 4 estimate a cross-level interaction between Labour MP rebelliousness and constituent negativity toward Tony Blair while controlling, respectively, for constituency random effects only and for the full set of controls. In both models the coefficient estimates for these two variables are as expected: negative evaluations of the prime minister have a strong negative effect on the probability of voting Labour when MP rebellion is zero (coefficient estimates of -0.57 and -0.36, respectively), while the percentage of Labour MP rebellions has a positive effect on probability of voting Labour when constituent evaluations of Blair are neither positive nor negative (coefficient estimates of 0.02 and 0.04, respectively). More importantly, the interaction term between Blair evaluation and percentage of rebellions is positive and significant at the 0.05 level in both the simple

and the full model. In other words, MP rebelliousness has a more positive effect on probability of voting Labour among constituents who evaluate Blair more negatively. Overall, these results lend support to the general policy accountability hypothesis.

To ease substantive interpretation of this interaction effect, for Model 4 we plot the estimated marginal effect upon constituent vote choice of moving from zero rebellions to the 75th percentile of the percentage of rebellions (1.45%), conditional on constituent evaluations of Tony Blair.[14] We choose these values as they represent the shift from a loyal MP to a moderately rebellious MP; an MP at the 75th percentile is one of the more rebellious MPs, but not extreme within the parliamentary party. The two plots in Figure 1 depict marginal effects and 95% confidence intervals for constituents who are neutral towards Labour and those who are favourably inclined towards the party, respectively. In both plots, the rebelliousness of an MP only has a clear positive effect on Labour voting probability when the constituent's evaluation of Tony Blair is more negative than positive (greater than zero). This relatively clear evidence of a conditional association between MP rebellion and vote choice is supportive of the *general accountability hypothesis* as compared to the *profile effects* hypothesis: if the latter hypothesis were accurate, we would see an effect for rebellion whether or not voters disapprove of the Labour Party leadership. However, there is no evidence that voters who support the Labour Party leadership tend to punish rebellious MPs for disloyalty: among constituents who evaluate Tony Blair positively (values less than zero), increasing MP rebelliousness has no significant effect on Labour voting probability.

[Figure 1 about here]

Figure 1 also allows us to examine the magnitude of the rebellion effect. For those constituents who most strongly dislike Blair and are favourably inclined towards Labour, moving from no rebellions to the 75th percentile of rebellions increases the probability of voting Labour by around eight percentage points. For those neutral towards Labour, the same change in rebelliousness increases the probability of voting Labour only by around two-and-a-half percentage points when

Blair evaluation is above zero. Though statistically significant, these effects are not very large substantively, as should be expected given the party-centred nature of the UK political system.

These findings are robust to several modifications of our model specification that we report in the supplementary materials. Because the measure of Labour MP rebelliousness used in Models 3 and 4 has a right-skewed distribution, we instead estimate the effect of the logarithm of this variable. We also check that results are robust to using a measure of MP rebelliousness that excludes free votes in the House of Commons. Another robustness check replaces our measure of respondents' spatial proximities to the main parties with a simple measure of their left-right self-placement, to examine whether our results in Model 4 are driven by having to drop the relatively large number of respondents who have missing observations on the spatial proximity variables. We also separately analysed seats where the Conservatives were in second place in the previous election (and thus the main challenger) and seats with non-Conservative second-place parties. Finally, we ran a model that included self-declared non-voting respondents and included a series of controls for propensity to turn out to vote. For all of these model specifications the coefficient estimates for MP rebellion, constituent Blair evaluation and their interaction, maintain the same sign and significance levels, and are similar in terms of magnitude. Furthermore, examination of marginal effects plots for these models suggest that the estimated effect of MP rebellion was similar in all cases.

We also perform two important checks on the validity of our conclusions. First, we create an alternative variable that taps how positively a respondent feels toward the Labour leadership relative to the Labour party as a whole. This is computed as the respondent's assessment of the Labour party on a 0-10 like-dislike scale minus his or her assessment of Tony Blair on the same scale. The motivation for this variable is to test whether it is voters who have Labour party sympathies but dislike the current Labour leadership that are more likely to respond positively to Labour MPs who rebel against this leadership.

We interact our measure of MP rebelliousness with this measure of the difference in respondent Labour and Blair evaluations. Figure 2 presents the estimated marginal effect of MP

rebellion, conditional on the difference between evaluations of Labour and Blair (detailed results in supplementary materials). For these plots, negativity toward Tony Blair is set to 2.5, so a relatively high level of dislike (thus constraining the potential range of the difference in evaluations between Labour and Blair to -2.5 to 7.5). The rebelliousness of an MP only has a clear positive effect on Labour voting probability among constituents who prefer Labour to Blair (the region above zero on the x-axis). Among constituents who evaluate Tony Blair more positively than the Labour Party (the region below zero on the x-axis), increasing MP rebelliousness has no significant effect on Labour voting probability. These results suggest that the voters who respond to MP rebellion against the party leadership are those who are more sympathetic to the MP's party as a whole than to the party leadership specifically.

[Figure 2 about here]

As a second validity check we estimated a model with a three-way interaction, allowing the conditional effect of rebellion to vary for different levels of voter attention to politics, which is measured using the survey question: 'On a scale of 0-10, how much attention do you generally pay to politics?'. Information on the rebelliousness of an MP will not reach all voters equally, as those constituents who pay more attention to politics should also be more likely to know about the behaviour of their MP. The results are summarised graphically in Figure 3, with detailed results in the supplementary materials. This figure takes a Labour-favourable constituent and plots the marginal effect of MP rebellion on probability of voting Labour, conditional on constituent evaluations of Tony Blair for four different levels of attention to politics. As expected, among constituents who pay little attention to politics, the marginal effect of rebellion is relatively small and non-significant regardless of Blair evaluation. In contrast, among constituents who pay more attention to politics, the marginal effect of MP rebellion is more positive and significant when evaluations of Blair are negative. Furthermore, the difference in the marginal effect of MP rebellion among Blair approvers versus Blair disapprovers (i.e. the slope of the mean marginal effect curve) is

greater among constituents who pay more attention to politics. These findings provide further confirmation that our theoretical approach and inferences are plausible.

[Figure 3 about here]

In sum, there is evidence of a definite, though weak, general policy accountability link between MPs and their constituents. MP rebellion does not appear to have a pure profile effect on constituent vote choice but rather operates conditional on whether the constituent disapproves of the policies advocated by the MP's party leadership. Specifically, voters are more likely to vote for their Labour MP if (1) their representative signals disagreement with leadership policies through rebellion and (2) the constituent evaluates the MP's party leadership negatively. In contrast, it does not appear that strong supporters of the party leadership tend to punish disloyal MPs.

In order to better understand the estimated electoral impact of Labour MP rebellion at the 2005 general election, in Table 2 we use Kam's (2009) method to approximate the predicted difference in vote shares for a loyal Labour MP and a somewhat rebellious Labour MP in a typical Labour-held constituency. We take the hypothetical example of an average-sized Labour-held constituency. We divide these 39385 voters up among the eleven levels of evaluation of Tony Blair in proportion to the distribution of this variable in our sample of respondents from Labour-held seats (columns 2 and3). By estimating the predicted probability of voting Labour for each level of Blair evaluation for a loyal and a moderately rebellious MP (columns 4 and 6), we can calculate the hypothetical number of constituents voting for Labour in each case (columns 5 and 7). Based on Model 2, we therefore predict a non-rebellious Labour MP to receive 36.42 per cent of the vote and a moderately rebellious Labour MP 38.05 per cent, as shown by the vote totals at the bottom of Table 2. In other words, the somewhat rebellious MP is predicted to receive a constituency vote-share that is approximately 1.5 percentage points higher than the loyal MP. Such a margin can be of vital importance in vulnerable constituencies. While this exercise is merely illustrative, it does suggest that MP rebellion can have a non-trivial, albeit weak, electoral impact in the UK.

[Table 2 about here]

Specific instances of MP rebellion and constituent vote choice

Finally, we present our test of specific policy accountability using MP voting behaviour on the Iraq war. In Figure 4 we plot the estimated marginal effect of MP Iraq rebellion on the probability of voting Labour, conditional on constituent disapproval of the invasion. These estimated effects are again based on hierarchical binary logistic regressions and employ identical controls to the models in the previous section (full results are included in the supplementary materials). The two panels relate to the two measures of opposition to the Iraq War. Again, we distinguish between those favourable and those neutral to Labour in how we set the control variables. If there were a specific policy effect, the fact that the constituent's MP rebelled on the key Iraq vote would have an impact on the probability of voting Labour only if that constituent disapproved of the Iraq War. No convincing evidence of this is found. According to the 95 per cent confidence intervals in Figure 4, there is no statistically distinguishable marginal effect of MP Iraq rebellion regardless of a respondent's opinion of the Iraq war.[15]

[Figure 4 about here]

Based on this case, there is thus little evidence that voters take MP rebellion on specific policies into account to any great extent in their voting decision, even on an issue as important and as public as that on the Iraq war. Combined with our earlier findings, this suggests that any association between MPs' legislative actions and constituent vote choice is related mainly to MPs' general rebelliousness.

Conclusion

In a parliamentary democracy, we can distinguish between the collective accountability of parties and the individual accountability of representatives. For a constituent to hold an individual representative electorally accountable for their policy-related behaviour the constituent must, at least to some extent, condition their vote choice on the policy-related behaviour of the representative, as

distinct from that of the representative's party more generally. This paper is the first to use voter-level data to examine whether this occurs under Britain's FPTP electoral system. To do so, we have looked at whether the vote choices of individual constituents respond when their MP formally differentiates themselves from the policies advocated by their party by rebelling on parliamentary votes.

We have developed and tested three hypotheses about how constituents might respond to such instances of behaviour: a *profile effects* hypothesis where constituents reward higher overall levels of MP rebellion unconditionally; a *general policy accountability* hypothesis where constituents only reward higher overall levels of MP rebellion if they disapprove of the policies advocated by the MP's party leadership to a sufficient extent; and a *specific policy accountability* hypothesis where constituents reward a specific instance of MP rebellion if they disapprove of the stance taken by the MP's party on the specific issue in question. If there is evidence in favour of either of the latter two hypotheses, British voters can be said to hold their MPs individually accountable for their policy-related behaviour; this is not the case for the profile effects hypothesis.

We only find evidence for general policy accountability, and the overall effect is relatively weak. There is little evidence that MP rebellion affects constituent voting behaviour simply by raising MP profile, nor do constituents appear to take into account their MP's parliamentary vote on a particularly salient single issue. The accountability of MPs to their voters, insofar as it exists, is therefore general rather than issue-specific.

There is growing evidence from the United States that voters are aware of and base their decisions in part on their representatives' legislative votes (Ansolabehere and Jones, 2010; Carson et al., 2010). Our findings indicate that a level of individual policy accountability exists even in much more restrictive institutional settings: the UK's political system is arguably one where MPs' personal reputation is of comparatively little value (Carey and Shugart 1995). In future research, it would be interesting to compare these results to other parliamentary systems, particularly those that allow for

more constituent choice between representatives and thus lean further towards the ideal of individual MP accountability relative to the ideal of collective party accountability.

This paper studied a period particular propitious to finding effects of MP rebellion on voting behaviour (Cowley and Stuart 2005a). Thus, future research could also examine whether there is an influence of MP voting behaviour on constituent vote choice in less favourable conditions. Given that we found only a weak effect, it would not be surprising if MP rebellion only had an effect in specific electoral circumstances, for example when the government is relatively unpopular with its own partisans. It will also be interesting to see whether the electoral effects of rebellion are affected by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition, where rebellion against the government takes on a different meaning than under single-party government. Furthermore, due to the lack of suitable survey items our conclusion regarding specific policy accountability rests on the examination of one issue, the Iraq war. It would be worth carrying out further tests of specific policy accountability if future election studies include questions specifically asking for voter opinions on a number of bills with high-profile rebellions.

Finally, we have not argued that individual accountability is an attribute of electoral systems that should be pursued at all costs. Instead, we have shown that voters do behave in a manner consistent with an effort to hold their MPs to account for their legislative actions, but that this only affects vote choice at the margin in the British context. The ability of voters to hold individual representatives to account would not be greatly increased by the introduction of an AV electoral system, if at all. Voters would still be faced by the problem that their one vote conflates party and MP support. There are political institutions that would allow constituents significant freedom in choosing their preferred candidates from within one party. Examples are other electoral systems such as multi-member single-transferable vote or open-list PR (Curtice, 1992) and party primaries, an option which some major British parties are currently considering. However, before introducing any such reform one must first consider the inevitable trade-off between the two normative ideals of strong parties and individual accountability.

Endnotes

[1] While previous work by Kam (2009) links MP voting behaviour and name recognition among constituents, we have not found any research linking rebellion to constituents' vote choice.

[2] Arnold (1993), Bovitz and Carson (2006), and Canes-Wrone et al. (2002) discuss this type of behaviour in the US context.

[3] Of course, other parties, interest groups and the media have their own agendas and shape the way the public views specific votes. For example, Cowley and Stuart (2005a: 15) cite the case of a Labour MP who rebelled on the Iraq War and university top-up fees, but who was accused by the Liberal Democrats of being a Blair loyalist on the issues.

[4] Data on incumbency status from Norris (2005).

[5] The measure was calculated using the Firth and Spirling (2003) dataset. Absences were not counted as dissent, following the recommendation by Benedetto and Hix (2007). The measure includes the 64 so-called 'free votes' on which the party leadership did not give voting recommendations (Cowley and Stuart, 2005b). We use the measure based on all rebellions as even free votes can be coloured by informal pressure (McLean et al., 2003).

[6] The two questions are: 'Please tell me whether you strongly approve, approve, disapprove, or strongly disapprove of Britain's involvement in Iraq' and 'Which of the following words describe your feelings about the situation in Iraq?'; 'angry' and 'disgusted' are two of eight offered words.

[7] Ethnicity is measured as a binary variable, with white British scored as 0 and all others as 1. Respondents classifying themselves as foremen or supervisors of other workers or skilled, semi-skilled or unskilled manual workers are classed as 'manual workers'. Income is coded in 13 categories. Unless otherwise noted, the controls are coded from the pre-election survey.

[8] Party identification is 1 for respondents who generally think of themselves as (or as closer to) Labour, Conservative, Liberal Democrat or another party, 0 if not. The party best able to handle the most important issue is 1 for Labour, Conservatives, Liberal Democrats and other parties, 0 if not.

Spatial proximities on taxes versus spending are the absolute distance of the voter's self-placement from his or her placement of Labour, Conservatives and Liberal Democrats, using a 0-10 scale.

[9] Respondents were asked for the extent to which they agree with the statement: 'My member of parliament tries hard to look after the interests of people who live in my constituency.'

[10] The size of the Labour majority is measured in percentage vote share at the 2001 election. Following Canes-Wrone et al. (2002) the campaign spending variable is measured as the difference between Labour spending in the constituency (as the percentage of the spending limit) and the spending of the biggest-spending challenger to Labour in that constituency.

[11] The information on the number of years spent as an MP and on former ministers was kindly provided by [name removed]. Note that there is no need to control for incumbency status since we only include respondents with a Labour incumbent fighting for re-election.

[12] The main challenger is coded as the second-place party in 2001.

[13] Re-running the model with constituency fixed-effects (and dropping all other constituency-level covariates, including the constituent term for MP rebelliousness) results in a positive and significant coefficient on the interaction between negativity toward Tony Blair and MP rebelliousness.

[14] We also created identical plots for Model 3, which show a very similar significance pattern, though with substantive effects of slightly lower magnitude.

[15] Furthermore, this finding does not change if we include in our model non-voters (while adding additional controls that may affect the decision to vote). No changes are found as well if we sub-set the model to Labour identifiers or if the percentage of rebellions is added as a further control.

Table 1. Constituency vote choice and Labour MP rebelliousness

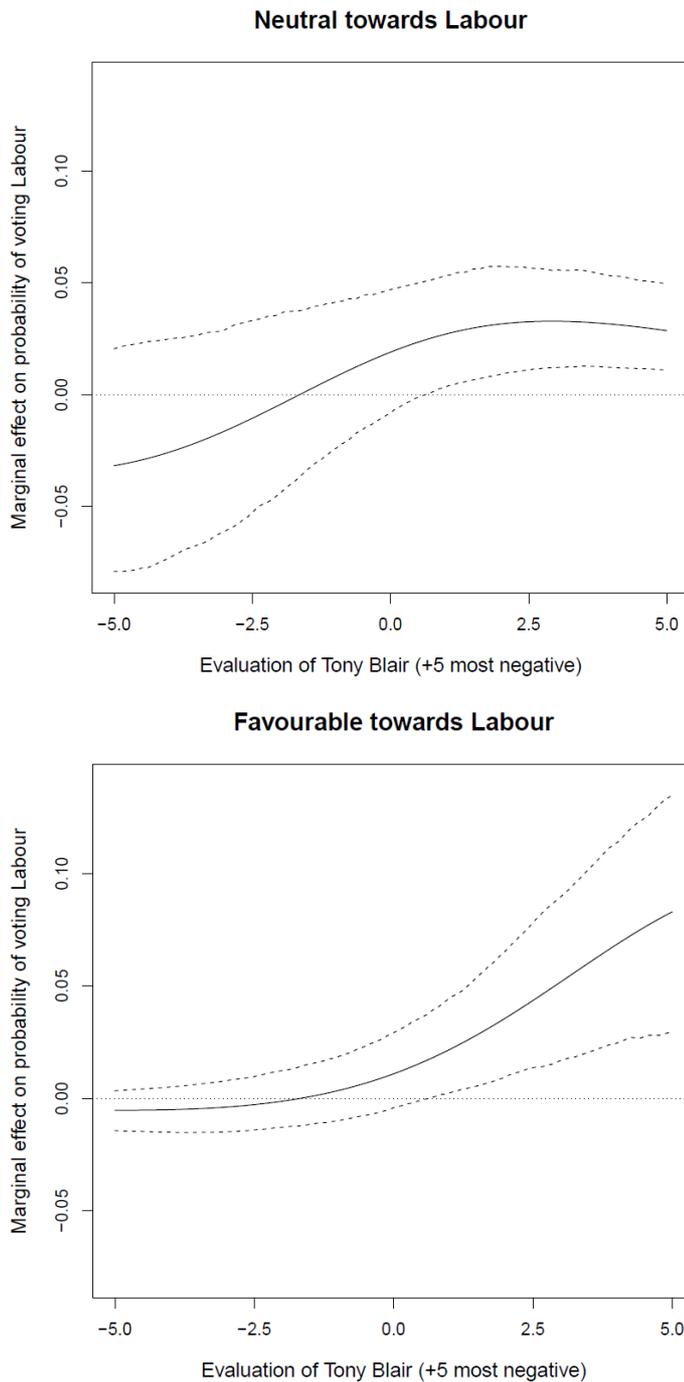|	Model 1 Simple model, no interaction term		Model 2 Full model, no interaction term		Model 3 Simple model, with interaction term		Model 4 Full model, with interaction term	
	b	se	b	se	b	se	b	se
Blair evaluation	-0.54***	0.02	-0.31***	0.03	-0.57***	0.03	-0.36***	0.04
Rebelliousness	0.06*	0.03	0.09*	0.04	0.04	0.03	0.06	0.04
Blair eval x rebelliousness					0.02**	0.01	0.04**	0.01
Party identification								
Labour			1.53***	0.19			1.53***	0.19
Liberal Democrat			-0.66**	0.29			-0.63**	0.29
Conservatives			-1.13***	0.35			-1.14***	0.35
Other party			-0.46	0.35			-0.42	0.36
Issue proximities, tax-spend								
Labour			0.23***	0.05			0.24***	0.05
Liberal Democrat			-0.11**	0.05			-0.11**	0.05
Conservatives			-0.15***	0.03			-0.15***	0.03
Party best on most important issue								
Labour			0.82***	0.22			0.82***	0.22
Liberal Democrat			-0.97***	0.28			-0.99***	0.28
Conservatives			-0.82***	0.28			-0.81***	0.28
Other party			-0.10	0.28			-0.12	0.28
Age			-0.01	0.01			-0.01	0.01
Gender			0.62***	0.17			0.59***	0.17
Ethnicity			0.11	0.32			0.09	0.32
Manual worker			0.69***	0.20			0.70***	0.20
Income			-0.05*	0.03			-0.06**	0.03
Evaluation of MP care			0.88***	0.17			0.87***	0.17
Spending gap to main challenger			0.01	0.00			0.01	0.00
Majority size			-0.64	0.69			-0.67	0.69
Ex-minister			-0.19	0.24			-0.18	0.24
Years as MP (logged)			-0.06	0.16			-0.06	0.17
Main challenger from Left			-0.41*	0.22			-0.43*	0.22
Constant	-0.13*	0.07	-0.61	0.53	-0.11*	0.07	-0.46	0.53
σ_1	0.26		0.33		0.27		0.33	
AIC	2440.1		1151.6		2437.1		1148.1	
Deviance	2432.1		1099.6		2427.1		1094.1	
no. of individuals	2637		1734		2637		1734	
no. of groups	333		331		333		331	

Notes: ***: p<0.01; **: p<0.05; *: p<0.1. Survey data from the British election study internet survey 2005. For details on variable coding and additional data sources, see the text and the supplemental materials.

Table 2. Predicted impact of MP rebelliousness on the 2005 vote share of a Labour incumbent in a typical Labour-held constituency.

| (1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
			no rebellion		75th percentile amount of rebellion	
Respondent's evaluation of Tony Blair (+5 most negative)	Estimated n in each group	In per cent	Predicted probability of voting Labour for each group	Estimated number of votes from each group	Predicted probability of voting Labour for each group	Estimated number of votes from each group
-5	2206	5.60	0.80	1777	0.77	1712
-4	1674	4.25	0.74	1241	0.71	1200
-3	3340	8.48	0.66	2220	0.65	2166
-2	3793	9.63	0.58	2195	0.57	2177
-1	3371	8.56	0.49	1645	0.49	1672
0	5380	13.66	0.40	2142	0.42	2252
1	2532	6.43	0.31	797	0.34	873
2	2859	7.26	0.24	691	0.28	795
3	2918	7.41	0.18	529	0.22	641
4	2273	5.77	0.13	303	0.17	388
5	9039	22.95	0.10	873	0.13	1185
total	39385			14415		15061
				36.42%		38.05 %

Notes: Each row corresponds to a group of voters who evaluate Tony Blair at a particular level between -5 and +5. Columns two and three detail the estimated size of these groups in a typical Labour constituency based on the sample distribution of evaluations of Tony Blair. The fourth column presents the predicted probability, based on Model 2, that a member of each group would vote for a Labour MP who remains perfectly loyal to their party, while the fifth column computes the predicted number of votes for such an MP from each group based on columns two and four. For these calculations, all other variables in Model 2 are held at their mean value in the sample. Columns six and seven present the equivalent results for an MP who rebels against the party on 1.45 per cent of occasions (the 75th percentile of rebellions across Labour MPs during the 2001-2005 parliament). The estimated average constituency size is the mean of the total number of votes cast in each Labour constituency (data from Norris, 2005).

Figure 1. Marginal effect of rebellion on probability of voting Labour conditional on Blair evaluations

Neutral towards Labour

Evaluation of Tony Blair (+5 most negative)

Favourable towards Labour
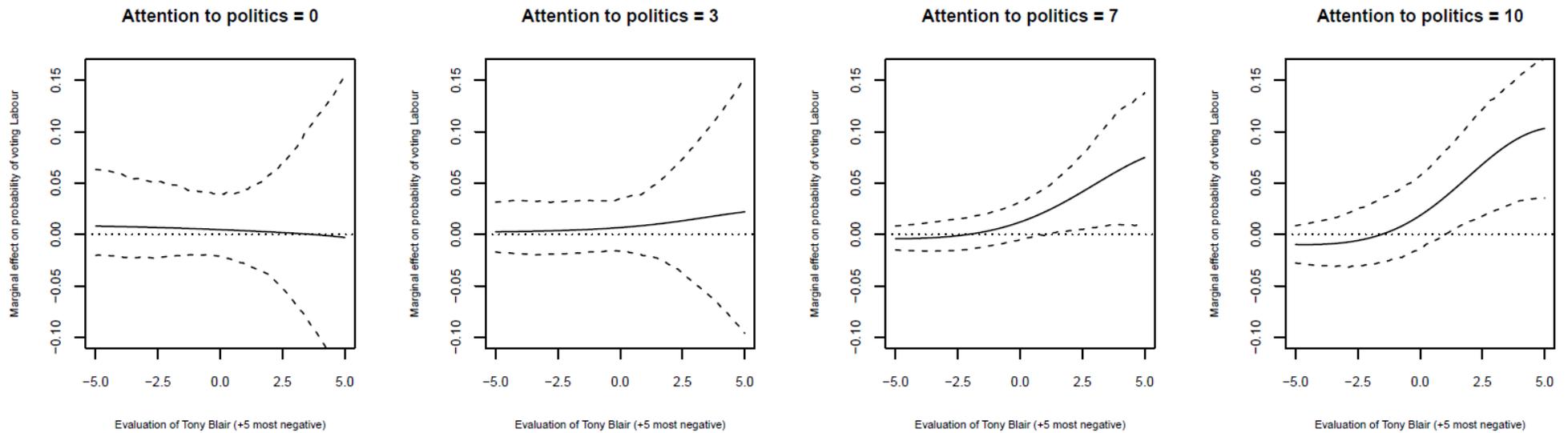

Evaluation of Tony Blair (+5 most negative)

Notes: Based on Model 4. The effect is shown is for moving from 0% (minimum) to 1.45% (75th percentile) rebellions in the 2001-5 term. Continuous variables are held at their mean and binary variables at their mode. Values for party identification and for which party is best at solving the most important problem are set to 'none' for respondents neutral towards Labour and 'Labour' for respondents favourable towards Labour.

Figure 2. Marginal effect of rebellion on probability of voting Labour conditional on difference in respondent Labour and Blair evaluations

Neutral towards Labour

**Favourable towards Labour**
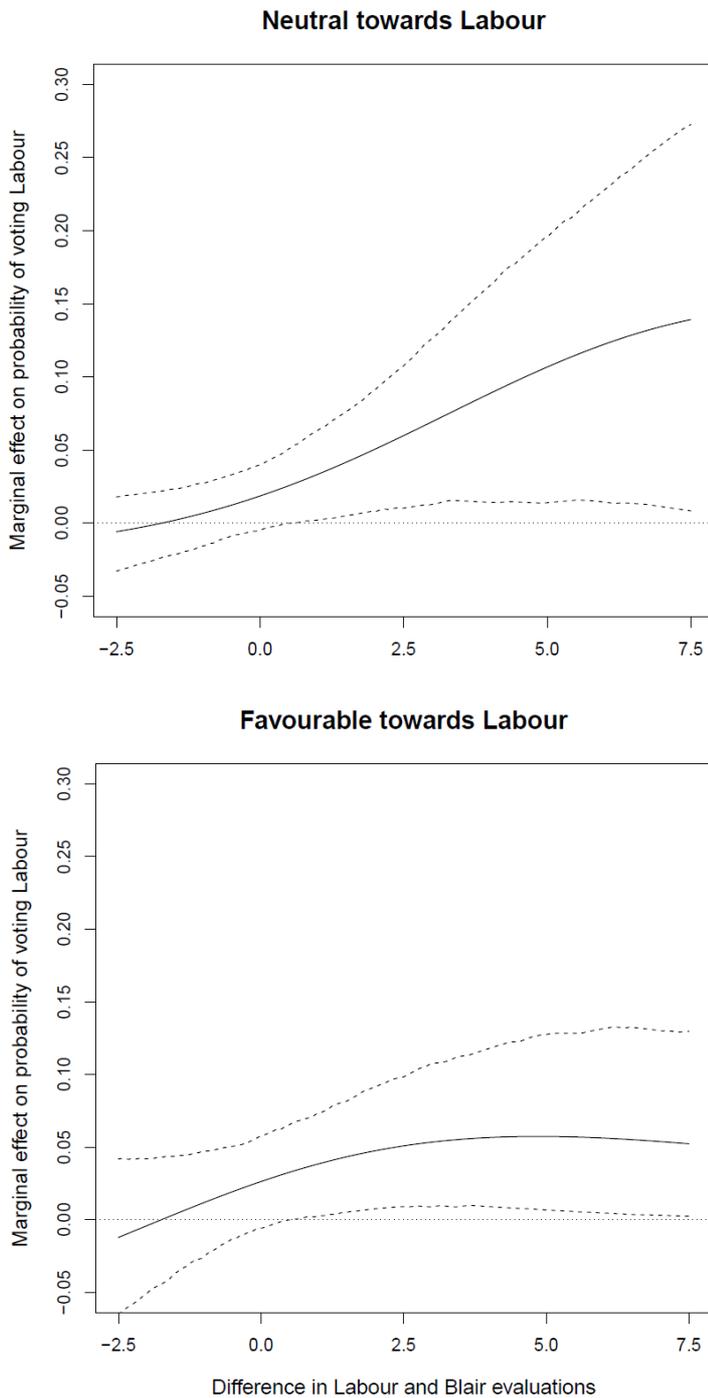
Notes: Based on Model A.8 (see supplemental materials). The effect is shown is for moving from 0% (minimum) to 1.45% (75th percentile) rebellions in the 2001-5 term. The x-axis shows the difference in Labour evaluations and Blair evaluations, with positive values indicating preference for Labour over Blair. The level of Blair evaluation is set at -2.5. Continuous variables are held at their mean and binary variables at their mode. Values for party identification and for which party is best at solving the most important problem are set to 'none' for respondents neutral towards Labour and 'Labour' for respondents favourable towards Labour.

Figure 3. Marginal effect of MP rebellion on probability of voting Labour conditional on Blair evaluation and respondent's attention to politics.

Notes: Based on model A.9 (see supplemental materials). The effect is shown is for moving from 0% (minimum) to 1.45% (75th percentile) rebellions in the 2001-5 term. Values for party identification and for which party is best at solving the most important problem are set to 'Labour'.

Figure 4. Marginal effect of MP Iraq rebellion on probability of voting Labour conditional on voter opinion on war

Marginal effect of MP Iraq rebellion on probability of voting Labour

● Favourable toward Labour
○ Neutral toward Labour

Marginal effect of MP Iraq rebellion on probability of voting Labour

● Favourable toward Labour
○ Neutral toward Labour
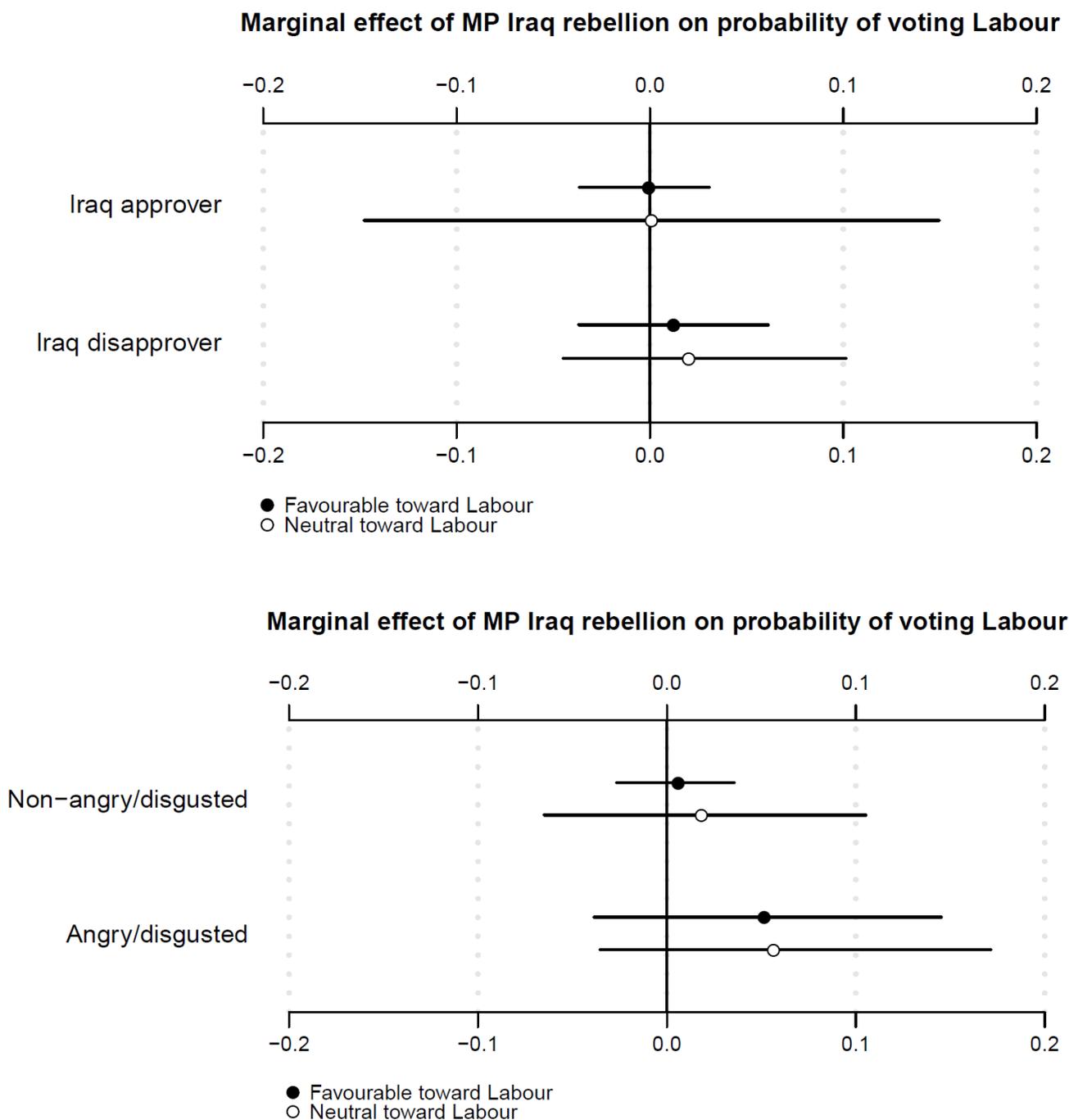
Notes: Based on Models A.11 and A.13 (see supplemental materials). The effect shown is of moving from no rebellion to rebellion on the key Iraq vote. Continuous variables are held at their mean and binary variables at their mode. Values for party identification and for which party is best at solving the most important problem are set to 'none' for respondents neutral towards Labour and 'Labour' for respondents favourable towards Labour.

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