

Being Policed? Or Just Pleasing Themselves?

Electoral Rewards and Punishment for Legislative Behaviour in an Era of Localized Campaigning Effects: The Case of the UK in 2005

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Normal practice on election night is to deny furiously the outcome of any result until every vote is counted, no matter what pundits and pollsters are predicting. It is always too early to say. The only votes that count are the ones in ballot boxes. Not going to speculate. Let's wait and see.

Election night 2005 saw one Labour MP adopt a very different approach. Bob Marshall-Andrews, the Labour MP for Medway, and one of the most rebellious members of the Parliamentary Labour Party, became his very own Prophet of Doom, popping up on assorted TV and radio shows, confidently predicting his own demise. He laid the blame for this at the feet of Tony Blair, and especially his policy over Iraq, something Bob Marshall-Andrews had voted against. Marshall-Andrews claimed to have received a stack of letters and messages during the campaign from ex-Labour voters, all of which argued that whilst they would like to vote for him as an individual they couldn't bring themselves to vote Labour whilst Tony Blair was still in charge. His basic argument was that he – and other defeated MPs like him – constituted Tony Blair's collateral damage. The national picture had triumphed over the local, exactly as generations of British political scientists and psephologists would have expected.

Several hours later, however, and Marshall-Andrews was once again all over the airwaves, having held his seat. He had beaten the Conservative candidate, the unfortunately named Mr Reckless, by just 213 votes.¹ Marshall-Andrews's impression of Lazarus led some to claim a different interpretation of the election results: that those candidates – like Marshall-Andrews – who had defied the Blair Government performed better at the polls, in several cases saving themselves in the process. Or, in other words, the local picture has the potential to triumph over the national – a conclusion that would fit in neatly with more recent electoral studies in the UK.

The purpose of this paper is to see which of these versions of the 2005 election is valid. If we find evidence of differences in electoral performance based on legislative behaviour it will be both a reinforcement of, and a new dimension to, models that argue for the importance of local effects in British general elections. Moreover, because it will become clear that the public can – under specific circumstances – both know and care about the way that their MPs vote, it will

* Paper for presentation at the 2005 EPOP Conference, Essex University, September 2005. It draws on research funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, available from www.revolts.co.uk. For comments on an earlier draft we are grateful to Sarah Childs, Justin Fisher, Charles Pattie, Gemma Rosenblatt, Meg Russell, and Mark Stuart. Please do not cite without permission from the author, as this constitutes work in progress.

¹ Vote Reckless! Vote Conservative!

alter our conception of how representation in Britain works in practice. In time, it could also begin to affect the way MPs vote.

Party or candidate?

The idea that the way a British MP voted in the House of Commons might determine their electoral fortunes would have seemed absurd to mainstream political scientists just a few years ago. In the UK, electoral judgments have traditionally been about parties, not candidates. Just 42% of the electorate are able to name their MP, let alone make judgements about their suitability (Electoral Commission, 2004). In 1997, one candidate in Oxford West and Abingdon was told by a voter that there was no way she could support him, because she always backed 'that nice Mr Neave' – despite Airey Neave having been murdered by the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA) almost two decades before. Whilst there has been some evidence of a growing personal vote in UK elections, it has been based almost entirely on work done in the constituency rather than at Westminster (see for example Cain et al, 1987, Norton and Wood, 1992). MPs are well aware of this fact, and previous attempts to discover any linkage between MPs' voting and their electoral performance have discovered the most minimal of relationships (Pattie et al, 1994).

This had important consequences for the way MPs functioned whilst at Westminster. It allowed them to operate in a relatively cost-free environment, in which they took cues from both their own opinions and from the party managers (the whips) but where they did not need to pay much heed to the views of their electors on specific issues. For example, theories of morality-politics (theories derived almost solely from the voluminous US literature on the subject) argue that there will be a close convergence between the views of the electorate and the policies voted by the legislature. As Mooney writes:

Given the high salience and technical simplicity of morality policy, policymakers cannot rely on technical obfuscation and lack of interest to hide their actions from public view. They must pay close attention to what the public wants, be it out of a sense of democratic duty or electoral self-interest. Whereas on typical nonsalient and technical policy, there can be slippage between citizen values and public policy... on morality policy there is a much stronger and more direct correspondence (Mooney, 2001, 10).

In Britain, there is almost no such correspondence – or, more accurately, what correspondence exists is merely coincidental (Cowley, 2001), because in Britain there is no need for legislators to pay such close attention to the views of the public. In candidate-centred systems, therefore, legislators are policed by voters. In party-based systems, like Britain, no such policing occurs.

This does not mean – as is sometimes alleged – that MPs are completely ignorant or uncaring about the views of their constituents. British MPs spend an increasingly large amount of time dealing with constituents and are much more likely to be aware of constituents' views than they would have been, say, 30 or 40 years ago (see for example, Norton and Wood, 1993). When policies become unpopular with voters, MPs do take notice – with the Poll Tax being only the most obvious example of this (Cowley, 1995). But there is no need for this to manifest itself in the way they vote – there is, for example, almost no relationship between marginality and rebellion (Cowley, 2002) – not least because there never used to be any evidence that voters would notice such behaviour. The focus, therefore, of a British legislator's concern would be collective (to persuade one's party to remove or ameliorate an unpopular policy) rather than individualistic (voting for or against something in order to secure one's re-election).

Recent studies, however, have increasingly shown the importance of more local factors in British General Elections, of which local campaigning activity has been the most studied (see for example, Whiteley and Seyd, 1994; Pattie et al, 1995; Denver and Hands, 1997; Denver et al, 2002). As David Denver writes in his analysis of the 2005 election results:

Variations in changes in party support across constituencies reflect the important role that local factors can play in general elections – the pattern of electoral competition in the constituency, variations in campaigning intensity, the popularity of the incumbent MP, whether there has been an intervening by-election and so on (Denver, 2005).

Given this increasingly localised electoral campaign, it would therefore be perfectly plausible for the stances of candidates – especially incumbent MPs - to begin to affect their electoral fortunes.

And whatever the reality, it was clear that some MPs *thought* that they might be able to benefit at the polls if they had defied the government over certain issues – whilst several others feared the consequences of not having done so. There had already been concern in the Government Whips' Office at the beginning of the parliament that the stress placed on localism by Labour's campaigning tactics – working the constituency permanently, including allowing MPs to be absent from Westminster for extended periods – had led to a dangerous mindset amongst some MPs, in which the national picture became secondary to the goings on in Proletown North (Cowley, 2005). As one whip put it: 'Some of them thought *they'd* done it [winning the 2001 election] because of things that *they'd* done in their constituency, because of how hard *they'd* worked and campaigned... The constituency's important. But you're not just a super councillor. We allowed people to get into feeling that the constituency was the only thing that mattered'. This concern became heightened during the Parliament. One of the reasons that the whips felt they encountered so many rebellions towards the end of the Parliament – there were more revolts in the pre-election session than there were in the pre-election session of any other post-war Parliament – was that MPs were rebelling in order to signal to the electorate that they were distinct from the Government.

Geraldine Smith, the MP for Morecambe and Lunesdale, was frequently cited as the most high profile example of this. As one whip put it: 'Geraldine Smith believes the people of Morecambe will vote for her. They won't vote for Tony Blair, they don't trust or like Tony Blair. But they trust and like her. She thinks that by being seen as an independent spirit, she'll save herself'. Unsurprisingly, this was a view that the whips were keen to stamp on. They put it like this: 'If you tell your voters that the Government's crap all the time, and that Tony Blair must go, then when it comes to the election, they may well follow your lead. The only problem is that they can't vote against Tony Blair, or against the Government without also voting against you'. As another whip put it: 'People who don't understand politics see it as a reason to rebel – they think it'll make them look different. Those who understand politics see it as a reason to stick together. The old saying's true: you either hang together, or you hang apart'.

After the election, however, people pointed to Bob Marshall-Andrews in Medway as evidence that the whips might be wrong. Also to John Grogan, who metamorphosised into a rebel midway through the Parliament – beginning with Iraq, followed by a string of rebellions over a range of other issues – and who (just) managed to hold his Selby seat. They also pointed to MPs like Anne Campbell and Valerie Davey who lost their student-heavy constituencies

(Cambridge and Bristol West, respectively) – but who, it was argued, might have managed to hold them had they voted differently over student top-up fees.

Rebellions

One reason why the 2001 Parliament provides a good test case for the relationship between MPs' behaviour and their electoral fortunes is that there was plenty of variance in behaviour to analyse. The 2001-2005 Parliament was remarkable for both the frequency and size of the backbench rebellions that took place (Cowley, 2005). Between 2001 and 2005 the Parliamentary Labour Party set a series of records which their whips would much rather they had left well alone. There was:

- a higher rate of rebellion than in any other post-war Parliament, and more rebellions than in all but the (longer) 1974-79 Parliament
- more rebellions in the first session than in the first session of any Labour Government
- more rebellions in the final session than in the final session of any post-war Parliament
- the largest rebellion ever by Labour MPs over a Labour Government's health policy
- the largest rebellion ever by Labour MPs over a Labour Government's education policy
- the (joint) largest rebellion at a Bill's Second Reading since 1945, and
- the two largest rebellions by MPs of all parties for over 150 years.

Collectively, these rebellions involved more than 200 Labour MPs, rebelling on 259 separate occasions. The Appendix provides a summary of the issues to see the larger rebellions. They included plenty of issues where those on the left objected to the Government's plans – most obviously over hospital reform (especially the Government's policy of foundation hospital trusts), Higher Education (especially student fees), several pieces of asylum and immigration legislation, several controversial pieces of anti-terrorism legislation, and – most obviously of all – the Iraq war. There were therefore plenty of high-profile issues which both occasioned substantial rebellions in the House of Commons and attracted public interest. In other words, there was plenty here for voters to get their teeth into, if they wanted to.

The voting procedures in the House of Commons score highly in terms of transparency. This is important in terms of democratic accountability – since electors can see how their elected representatives have voted – but there are several measurement problems. Printing errors (such as the names of MPs being mixed up) are not frequent but neither are they rare. Some errors are obvious (such as when a minister votes against his or her own government, for example), but others have to be resolved by checking with the MP concerned. The data referred to in this paper differ slightly from the raw published division lists in that such errors have been removed.²

A further drawback of divisions in the House of Commons is that, unlike in some legislative chambers, abstentions cannot be formally recorded. The whips may formally sanction an absence from a vote, it may be accidental, or it may be deliberate. There is no information on the record that allows us to establish, at least not systematically, the cause of absences. We cannot therefore necessarily read anything into non-voting. For the purpose of systematic analysis over time,

² A full list of the rebellions between 2001 and 2005 can be found in Cowley and Stuart, 2005.

therefore, we have to rely on the votes cast. The focus here is primarily on dissenting votes; that is, those occasions when one or more Labour Members vote against their own party whip.³

Another reason the 2005 General Election provides a particularly good test case for the relationship between legislative voting and electoral performance is because there were a series of organisations and websites designed to encourage exactly this sort of targeted voting, as part of what was commonly called 'protest voting' against the Labour Government. A common argument was that since Labour were bound to win the election anyway – so some claimed – it was alright for those on the left to protest about the Government by withholding support. There was a frequent distinction between 'good' Labour MPs (those who voted against something or other, and therefore deserved the electorate's support) and 'bad' Labour MPs (those who didn't, and therefore didn't). For example, John Harris's popular book *So Now Who Do We Vote For?*, included a list of Labour MPs who voted against the Government over Iraq, Foundation Hospitals or Top-up fees. There was an accompanying website (www.sonowwhodowevotefor.net), one of several that sprang up advising voters how to vote (such as www.vote4peace.org.uk). The left-of-centre *New Statesman* published a hitlist of Labour MPs and candidates from whom left-of-centre voters should deny their support, and several other newspapers also published summaries of MPs' voting records. These were complemented by several websites that allowed voters to check the voting records of MPs (such as publicwhip.org.uk or theyworkforyou.com). The Public Whip had 55,000 visitors during the election campaign who looked at almost a million pages of material; TheyWorkForYou reported 160,000 visitors, looking at 1.2 million pages. Strikingly, the four issues that people were most interested in examining on these sites – Iraq, gay rights, top-up fees, and foundation hospitals – included three of the four issues to see the largest rebellions during the Parliament. Equally strikingly, the MPs in whom visitors were most interested were (in decreasing order of interest): Anne Campbell (Cambridge), George Galloway (then Glasgow Kelvin), Tony Blair (Sedgefield), Valerie Davey (Bristol West), Karen Buck (Regent's Park and Kensington North) and Keith Bradley (Manchester Withington). This list includes three MPs who lost their seats – in one case unexpectedly, and in two cases in some controversy amidst claims about their voting. In one form or another, such targeting has been a staple of US politics for years. It is a relatively new innovation in Britain.

The combined effect of these various factors was that in 2005 there was probably the most conducive environment for an electoral rewards/punishment of MPs for their behaviour in the House of Commons since the establishment of the modern British party system over a century ago.

Findings

Let's start with some overall figures – examining the relationship between electoral performance and rebellion in general. The paper examines only Labour MPs – on the grounds that if they are going to punish anyone voters are going to punish MPs from the governing party, and given that nearly all of the 'protest voting' literature focussed on the behaviour of Labour MPs. The dependent variable therefore is the change in Labour's share of the constituency vote

³ As in previous research, excluded from the analysis are votes on matters of private legislation, private members' bills, matters internal to the House of Commons and other free votes. I intend to examine the possible performance of MPs based on their voting on so-called free votes at a later date – although I am not anticipating any great revelations to emerge.

between 2001 and 2005. The figures for Scotland – where there were constituency boundary changes – are based on the widely used estimates by Denver et al (2004). The initial N is 351, which is all the incumbent Labour MPs who stood at the election.

The correlation between the number of votes cast against the Labour whip between 2001 and 2005 and the change in the Labour share of the vote in the same period is a desperately feeble -0.06.⁴ There therefore appears to be almost no relationship between the extent to which an MP defied their whip and their electoral fortune. The electorate frequently say that they like independence in their MPs, but there appears to be no evidence that they reward them for it. In fact, insofar as there is a relationship, it appears to be a negative one – with rebels doing marginally worse at the ballot box than loyalists.

1. Change in Labour vote, larger rebellions, by rebel/loyal

<i>Issue</i>	<i>Loyal</i>	<i>Rebel</i>	<i>No of rebels standing for re-election</i>
Anti-Terrorism	-6.5	-6.6	29
Education	-6.5	-6.8	38
Nationality and Immigration	-6.4	-7.1	39
Enterprise	-6.5	-6.9	25
Select Committee	-6.6	-5.7	29
NHS Reform	-6.4	-7.1	21
Iraq	-6.5	-6.4	124
Criminal Justice	-6.4	-7.1	34
Health and Social Care	-6.4	-6.6	72
Firefighters	-6.5	-6.3	46
Asylum and Immigration	-6.4	-7.2	32
Higher Education	-6.5	-6.5	70
Human Tissue	-6.4	-7.5	15
Gambling	-6.5	-6.5	35
Children	-6.5	-6.4	45
Housing	-6.5	-6.9	21
Serious Organised Crime	-6.4	-7.4	41
Mental Capacity	-6.6	-5.8	34
ID cards	-6.4	-7.4	20
Railways	-6.5	-6.4	24
Prevention of Terrorism	-6.3	-7.2	64

Note: The meaning of the votes is explained in the Appendix.

⁴ In theory, one problem with using the raw figure of dissenting votes as the unit of analysis is that it takes no account of the different number of votes that there might be on some issues. Some topics (criminal justice, for example) see repeated votes and rebellions in the Commons; others (such as the Railways Bill, for example) see more isolated votes. As a result, an MP who objected strongly to an issue with multiple votes but remained otherwise 'loyal' could seem more rebellious than an MP who rebelled across a far wider range of issues where there were fewer opportunities to dissent. Overall, however, it makes very little difference. For those MPs standing at the 2005 election, the relationship between number of issues over which they rebelled and the number of dissenting votes was 0.905 (significant at $p < 0.01$); it is therefore not surprising that the relationship between the number of issues on which they defied the whip and their electoral performance was again feeble -0.06.

Similar findings emerge when we examine the breakdown of electoral performance by issues. Table 1 (above) lists the 21 issues on which at least 15 Labour MPs who were standing at the 2005 election rebelled. It shows the change in the Labour vote for those who voted against their whip over the issue ('rebel') and for those who did not vote against ('loyal'). Given that the Labour share of the vote fell nationwide (except in isolated constituencies), and that therefore both loyalists and rebels saw falls in their share of the vote, it is the relative performance that matters here. And again, in most cases, the rebels did slightly worse than the loyalists. Out of the 21 issues listed in the table, there are just six where rebels did better than loyalists. There are two where there was no difference between the two categories. The remainder – 13 issues in total – saw the loyalists perform better than the rebels. That said, in no case are the differences statistically significant.⁵

At first glance, then, there's precious little evidence of any linkage between the way MPs behaved in Parliament and their electoral performance. This is pretty good stuff for the electoral traditionalists (and the whips, too) and a strong poke in the eye for all those websites and columnists, which acted as if they were Major Generals, directing their electoral troops around the battlefield.

It would, however, be too crude simply to accept these raw figures as sufficient proof of this. We know from other analysis that the swing against Labour was not uniform across the country, and therefore we need to control for this before we can be certain about the absence of any electoral costs or benefits from the way an MP votes. Here, in a fairly parsimonious way, I control for five variables known to have an impact of Labour's share of the vote at the last election:

- Labour did worse in London than elsewhere in the UK.
- Labour did worse where its vote was already strong.
- Labour did worse where there was a large Muslim population.
- Labour did worse where there was a large student population.
- Labour did better where there was an MP elected for the first time in 2001 – the so-called first-term incumbent bonus.

Table 2 shows a series of linear regressions, using change in Labour vote as the dependent variable, with five variables representing the variables known to impact on the Labour vote, along with a dummy variable for whether the MP rebelled or not. The final regression uses the number of dissenting votes as the sixth independent variable.⁶

The resulting table (Table 2, below) is fairly hefty – but much of it is pretty straight-forward. The five variables being used as control variables all show the

⁵ These figures differ slightly from those which appear in the forthcoming Nuffield volume on the election (although not by much). This is almost certainly as a result of taking different votes or combination of votes as the unit of analysis, a point discussed in more detail below.

⁶ This part of the analysis excludes Scottish MPs. This is because the data file being utilised – courtesy of Pippa Norris – didn't include the relevant census data for Scotland, although it is possible to make a virtue out of this vice. Apart from the problem of comparing notional estimates of constituency results with real results (as we have to do with Scottish constituencies when comparing 2001 and 2005), there is also the fact that several of these issues – top-up fees and foundation hospitals, for example - did not directly apply in Scotland as a result of devolution. As a result, Scottish MPs could face different pressures from their voters, making such comparisons problematic. The remaining N is 281.

expected effects: in all of them, Labour did worse in London, where its vote was strong, where there was a large Muslim or student population, and better where the MP was coming to the end of his or her first term. All of these variables have statistically significant effects, even controlling for one another.

The key figures are those in the penultimate row – which indicate the effect of the rebellions. For the most part, this is a series of breathtakingly stunning null findings. In all but two cases, whether a Labour MP rebelled over an issue makes no statistically significant difference to their performance at the ballot box. Just as with the comparison of means, it appears as if the voters do not care about the way individual MPs behave. They were passing judgement on the government, not on individual MPs.

However, there are two caveats. The first is that – once we control for other variables – the impact of rebellion is more likely to be positive than negative. In Table 1, when comparing means, rebels tended to perform worse than loyalists. Once we control for other variables, the opposite is true. Once you control for other variables known to have influenced their share of the vote, rebels tended to perform slightly better than loyalists. This is true of all but one of the regressions, and it is also true of the overall number of revolts (the final column in the table). Of course, this is a marginal effect – and one that is not statistically significant – but it is still relatively consistent across the range of issues.

The second caveat is that there are two issues where rebellion *does* appear to have a statistically significant effect on an MP's electoral fortunes. These are the votes over select committee nomination in 2001 and – more importantly – the Higher Education Bill in 2004. The idea that a vote over the programming motion relating to select committee appointments was responsible for altering any MP's electoral fortunes – when issues like Iraq and foundation hospitals do not – is laughable, and this is surely best seen as a statistical fluke, and treated accordingly. The vote on Higher Education, however, is more promising. Here is an issue which attracted lots of controversy at the time, which affects an educated and relatively organised and active sector of the population, and which appears to have affected MPs' electoral fortunes. MPs who voted against top-up fees do appear to have performed better at the polls than those who did not. The difference is relatively minor – less than one percentage point on average – but it is not to be sniffed at in a close contest. Very crudely (and being fairly generous to the electoral affect), it could be argued that there were six MPs whose electoral fortunes would have been different if that percentage point had been distributed differently. There were three MPs who lost by less than one percentage point and who did not rebel over top-up fees, along with three MPs who won by less than one percent and who had rebelled over top-up fees. This last group includes Bob Marshall-Andrews, with whom this paper began, and John Grogan.

2. Change in Labour vote, 2001-2005, rebellions plus other variables

	<i>Anti-terror</i>	<i>Education</i>	<i>Nationality</i>	<i>Enterprise</i>	<i>Select Committee programme</i>	<i>NHS Reform</i>	<i>Iraq</i>	<i>Criminal Justice</i>	<i>Health and Social Care</i>	<i>Firefighters</i>	<i>Asylum and Immigration</i>
London	-0.183**	-0.180**	-0.183**	-0.180**	-0.186**	-0.184**	-0.176**	-0.178**	-0.189**	-0.187**	-0.187**
% Muslim	-0.307***	-0.305***	-0.305***	-0.306***	-0.305***	-0.306***	-0.305***	-0.307***	-0.300***	-0.305***	-0.305***
% students	-0.145**	-0.148**	-0.149**	-0.144**	-0.140**	-0.148**	-0.155**	-0.144**	-0.148**	-0.143**	-0.148**
% Labour vote 2001	-0.139**	-0.138**	-0.139**	-0.138**	-0.134**	-0.141**	-0.132**	-0.136**	-0.140**	-0.137**	-0.138**
First term incumbent	0.217***	0.214***	0.215***	0.212***	0.218***	0.214***	0.207***	0.211***	0.214***	0.212***	0.215***
Rebel	0.061	0.042	0.035	0.011	0.110*	0.048	0.063	-0.003	0.091	0.059	0.046
Adjusted R2	0.33	0.33	0.33	0.33	0.34	0.33	0.33	0.33	0.34	0.33	0.33

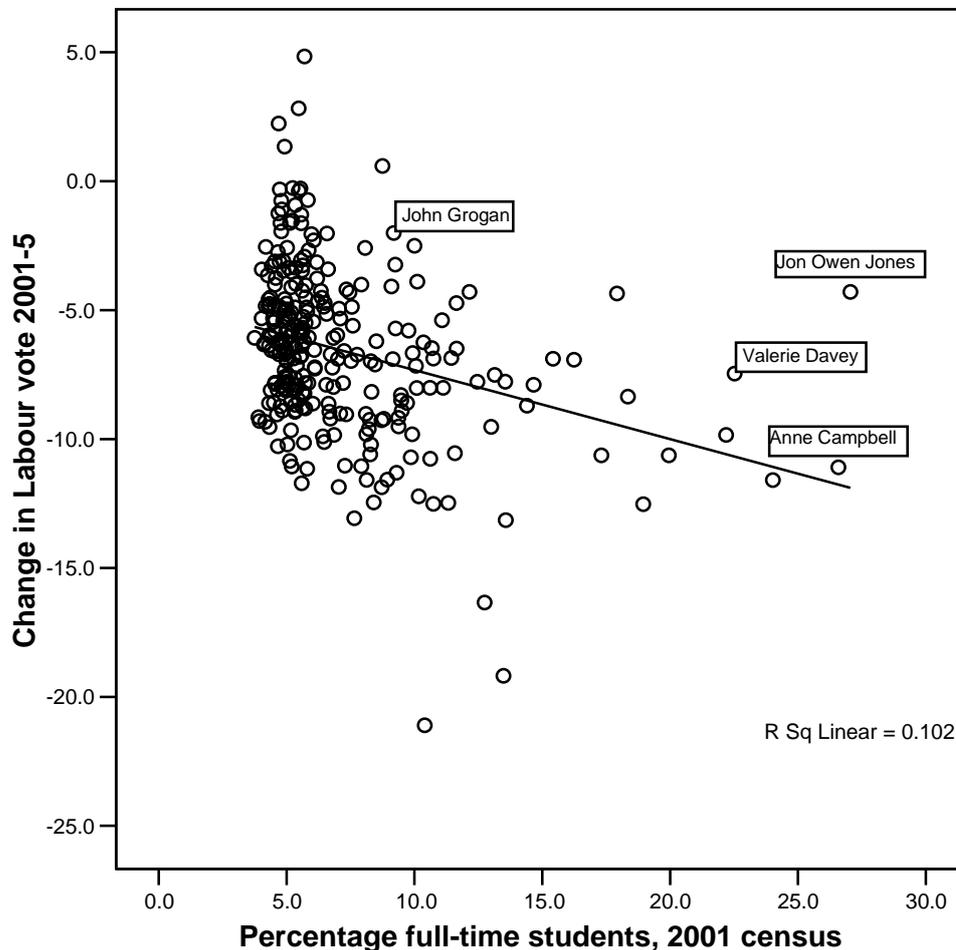
	<i>Higher Education</i>	<i>Human Tissue</i>	<i>Gambling</i>	<i>Children</i>	<i>Housing</i>	<i>Serious Organised Crime</i>	<i>Iraq</i>	<i>Mental Capacity</i>	<i>ID cards</i>	<i>Railways</i>	<i>Prevention of Terrorism</i>	<i>Overall no of rebellions</i>
London	-0.189**	-0.178**	-0.177**	-0.178**	-0.178**	-0.180**	-0.176**	-0.170**	-0.181**	-0.179**	-0.178**	-0.188**
% Muslim	-0.305***	-0.307***	-0.302***	-0.305***	-0.307***	-0.309***	-0.305***	-0.309***	-0.307***	-0.307***	-0.307***	-0.306***
% students	-0.159**	-0.144**	-0.155**	-0.145**	-0.144**	-0.145**	-0.155**	-0.147**	-0.145**	-0.142**	-0.147**	-0.152**
% Labour vote 2001	-0.132**	-0.136**	-0.136**	-0.136**	-0.136**	-0.139**	-0.132**	-0.145**	-0.139**	-0.136**	-0.136**	-0.141**
First term incumbent	0.207***	0.211***	0.217***	0.212***	0.211***	0.212***	0.207***	0.219***	0.214***	0.213***	0.211***	0.216***
Rebel	0.105*	0.003	0.058	0.014	0.011	0.031	0.063	0.071	0.033	0.015	0.014	0.063
Adjusted R2	0.34	0.33	0.33	0.33	0.33	0.33	0.33	0.33	0.33	0.33	0.33	0.33

Note: * <0.05; ** <0.01; *** <0.001. Reported figures are the standardized coefficients. For reasons of space, other details have been excluded.

I next want to look in more detail at two cases where it might be thought any effect might be particularly strong. The first is that of students and Higher Education. The second is Muslims and Iraq.

Figure 1 (below) shows the relationship between the fall in Labour's vote and the student population in a constituency, and it is pretty clear that the greater the number of students in a constituency, the worse Labour did. Just for illustrative purposes, four MPs have been identified. John Grogan, for example, who rebelled over top-up fees does clearly better than many of his contemporaries, given the size of his student population. So too does Jon Owen Jones (Cardiff Central) – although he was still to lose his seat. Both Valerie Davey and Anne Campbell also did better than expected, given the number of students in their constituency, although, just like Jon Owen Jones, both were to lose their seats.

Figure 1. The student population and Labour's share of the vote



Note: the figure shows the performance of incumbent Labour MPs only

Figure 2. The student population and Labour's share of the vote, by Higher Education Bill rebellion

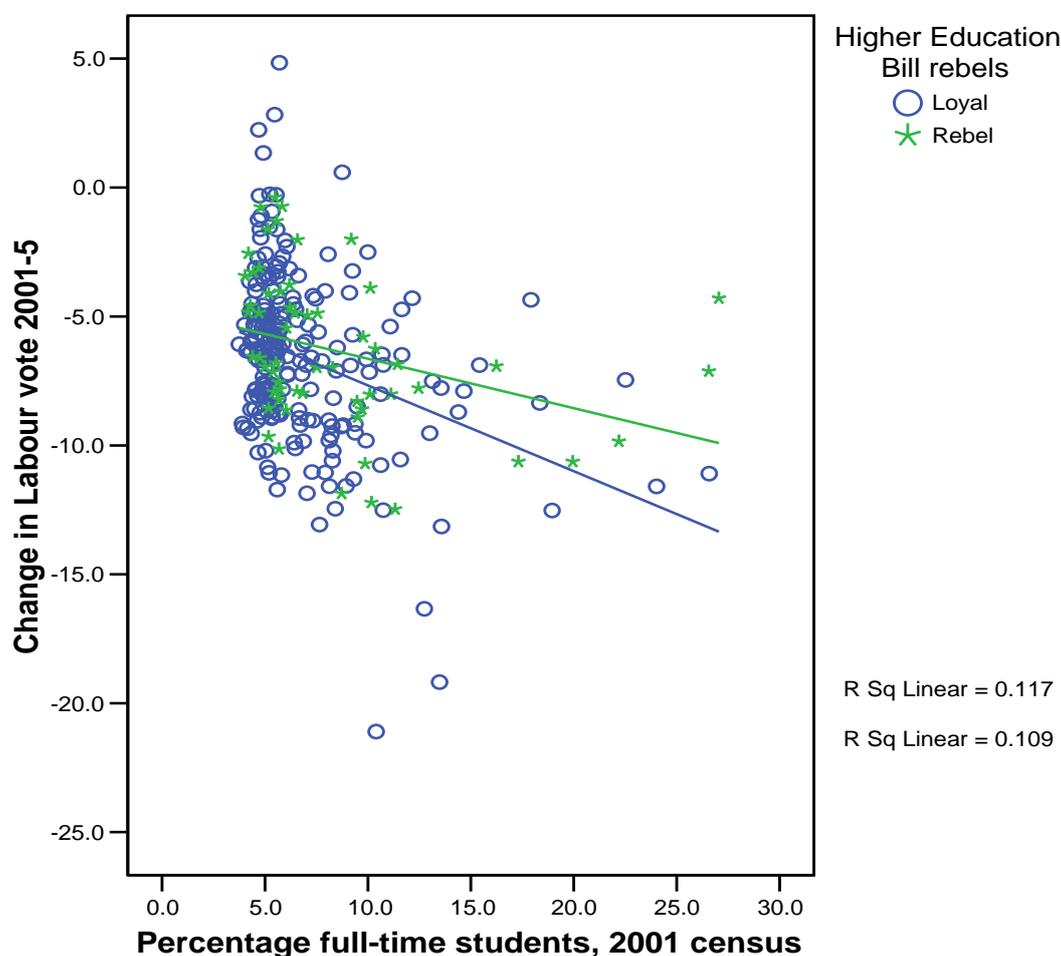


Figure 2 shows the relationship between shows the relationship between the fall in Labour's vote and the student population in a constituency, but broken down by whether the MP concerned rebelled over the Higher Education Bill. It shows how the rebels on this issue performed slightly better than those who did not vote against the proposal, once we control for the size of their student population. But note that both lines slope downwards. Higher Education rebels performed *better* than the loyalists, but not by sufficient to counter-act the effect of a large student population.

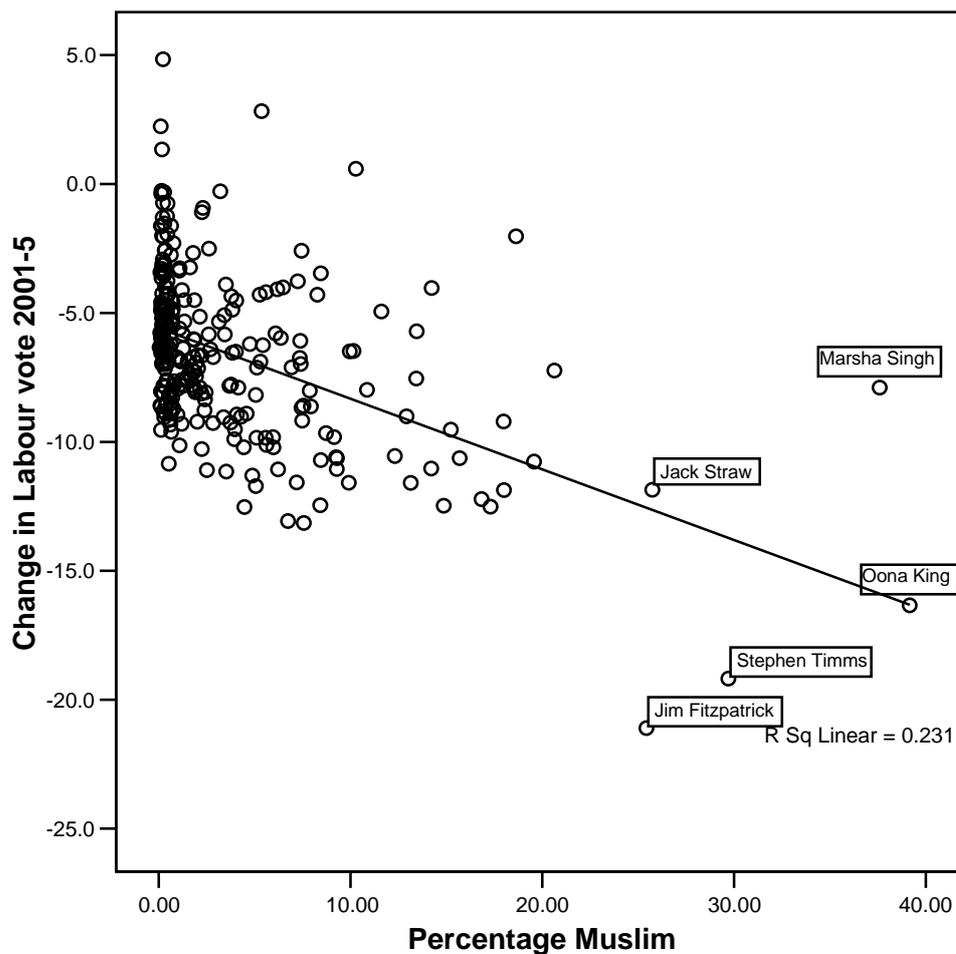
This is shown more clearly in Table 3, which shows how the relationship between Labour's share of the vote and depended on the percentage of students in the constituency. It was, slightly curiously, at its largest in seats with a relatively small student population (although the N for the rebels here is fairly small), at its most muted in seats with between 5 and 10 percent student population, and then large again – at one percentage point – in seats with a large student population (of over 10%). But note how the Labour performance gets worse as the percentage of students in a constituency increases – no matter what the MP did over top up fees. Loyalists who sat for seats with small student populations did better than rebels who sat for seats with large student populations.

3. Effect of rebellion over Higher Education Bill on change in Labour vote, by student population

Student population	Loyal	Rebel	N
0-4.9%	-5.811	-4.059	77
5-9.9%	-6.504	-6.234	162
10%+	-9.258	-8.212	42

Figure 3 repeats the exercise in Figure 1, but this time for Muslim voters. Again, the negative relationship is pretty clear. Again, a handful of illustrative examples are indicated. One is Oona King, who voted for the war and went on to lose her seat in Bethnal Green and Bow in a high-profile contest with the ex-Labour MP, and founder of Respect, George Galloway. King's performance is exactly as one would expect given the size of the Muslim population in her constituency. Two MPs who did appear to suffer as a result are Stephen Timms and Jim Fitzpatrick, both of whom voted for the war, both of whom faced strong Respect challenges (Respect coming second and third, respectively, in their constituencies).

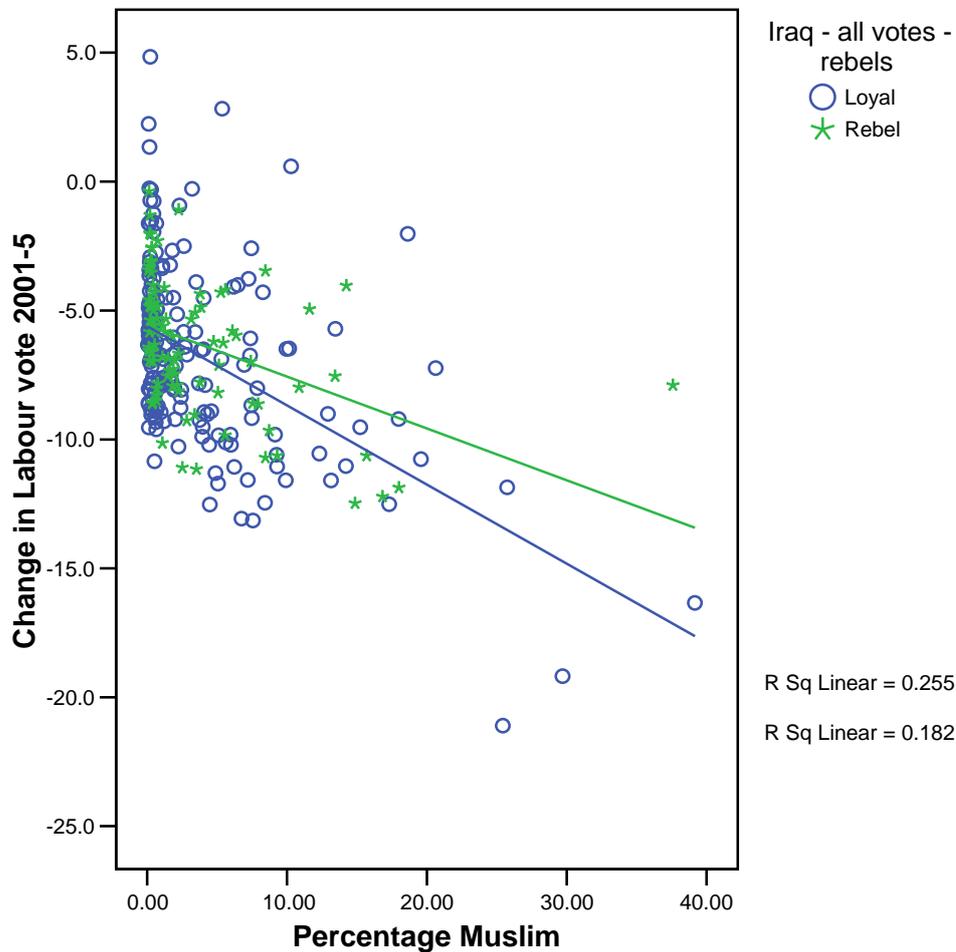
Figure 3. The Muslim population and Labour's share of the vote



Note also the performance of Marsha Singh, who voted against the war, and who performed particularly well in Bradford West – but also that of Jack Straw, the

Foreign Secretary, who performed slightly better than expected given the number of Muslims in his constituency.

Figure 4. The Muslim population and Labour's share of the vote, by Iraq rebellion



The Figure shows similar findings to the Higher Education figures (and as we would expect, given the figures in Table 2). The line of best fit for the Iraq rebels is higher than the line of best fit for loyalists. But – just as with Higher Education – this is not sufficient to compensate for the effect of a large Muslim population. The act of voting against a policy might in some cases ameliorate its effect; it did not serve as an antidote.

Some sceptical notes

One reason why such factors do not make a huge difference is, of course, that most voters are not all that bothered – they are quite content to cast their ballots on the basis of a party's national performance, if they bother to vote at all. Whilst they are impressive enough in their own right, the figures quoted above for the websites The Public Whip and They Work For You do not indicate a mass take up by voters. Even if we assume that every visitor to the two sites is unique, and even if we assume that every single one is visiting in order to discover information about their MP to inform their forthcoming vote, it still represents fewer than 350 people per constituency.

But there are a couple of other explanations as to why the effect of 'protest voting' might have proved to be relatively marginal in most cases. For one thing, when you start to compare the various published sources of advice on how to vote you soon discover that is that there is no agreement about what people are supposed to be protesting about – or, much more importantly, just how far they are prepared to go in doing it. This is because protest voting is a much more complicated and varied activity even than tactical voting (which itself could be fairly complicated). In 1997, for example, the point of most tactical voting was simply to get the Conservatives out. There might have been disagreement about the means - which candidate was best placed to defeat the Conservatives - but not the end. Advice about protest voting, on the other hand, differs both over end *and* means, and as a result different sources frequently offer completely contradictory advice. For example, what is a disgruntled Labour voter supposed to do about a Labour MP who voted for the war in Iraq but against top up fees and foundation hospitals? Or one who objected to Iraq but supported top-up fees? Or any other combination of the issues listed in the Appendix? Different voters will answer those questions in different ways, and it is therefore quite easy to see how the so-called 'progressive coalition' might soon splinter – with the result that its overall impact on the outcome of the election would be marginal at best.

What makes things even more complicated is that each MP's voting record is complicated and (to put it kindly) open to multiple interpretations. Take, for example, the issue of university top up fees. There were seven votes during the Bill's passage which saw Labour dissent. Just to make things easier, let's just focus on the three that I would consider to be key:

- There was a vote at Second Reading – on the principle of the Bill as then constituted.
- There was an attempt to amend the Bill, to remove clauses relating to top up fees, at Report Stage.
- And there was then the Bill's Third Reading – the vote on the Bill as finally constituted.

Imagine an MP who votes for the Bill at Second Reading, who abstains on the Report Stage amendment, but who then votes against at Third Reading. How do we classify such a person? Were they for or against the Bill? Do they deserve the support of a 'protest voter'?

One explanation would be that the MP objected to top-up fees but saw some merit in other parts of the Bill (such as the reintroduction of grants for low-income students), and so voted for the Bill at Second Reading hoping to see further changes made to the Bill as it progressed through Parliament. They then abstained at Report, because despite still objecting to the Bill's main contents they felt that the amendment being discussed was flawed (as many MPs did). Given that they still weren't happy with the Bill, they then voted against its Third Reading. They could legitimately argue that they voted against the measure, and on a substantive vote, one which if passed would have killed the Bill.

A more cynical explanation of such a pattern of votes would be that the person voted for the Bill at Second Reading in order to keep the whips off his or her back. The Second Reading vote was the occasion when the pressure was at its most extreme – as it was widely seen as being the main chance to defeat the measure. The abstention at Report and the vote against at Third Reading were both then done in relative safety, knowing that there was little chance of defeating the measure (Third Reading in particular saw widespread abstentions

by most of the Labour rebels). These MPs could legitimately argue that they voted against the measure - but in response we could argue that they didn't do it when it really mattered.

But who is to say? The former is a perfectly valid explanation – which will be true for some MPs. But the latter will also be true in some cases (there were, for example, some MPs who did explicit deals with the whips, in which they would not rebel at Second Reading but then do so later on less important votes).

In his volume, John Harris, for example, claims that he uses the last vote on top up fees, which he claims is the Bill's Third Reading (in fact, it isn't – he's actually using the Report Stage vote) 'because it shows MPs who held their nerve' (p. 165). But this means that MPs who voted against the Bill at Second Reading – when the Government's majority was slashed to five and who held their nerve when there were all sorts of rumours going around about votes of confidence and Prime Ministerial resignations should the Bill fall, get ignored if they didn't take part in the later rebellions, whereas any johnnie-come-latelies who join in at Report Stage get credit.

Or, take, for example, Valerie Davey, who was fighting to hold Bristol West. The Bristol West Liberal Democrats put out campaign material which said that she 'DID NOT VOTE' over Iraq. The inference – in very helpful big bold capital letters – was that she was a bit of slacker, who'd popped home to watch EastEnders rather than stick around to oppose the war. Except that Valerie Davey did vote on Iraq – and against the war. She had backed Chris Smith's anti-war amendments in both February and March 2003, taking part in the largest backbench rebellions for over 100 years. She then abstained on the government's main motions (in both February and March), along with many other anti-war rebels, not least because the latter contained support for the government's policy towards Palestine and support for British troops. The Liberal Democrats chose to use the latter vote (as did several of protest voting websites) whilst excluding the earlier votes completely. (Harris, by contrast, lists her as an Iraq rebel).⁷

Anne Campbell, fighting to hold Cambridge for Labour, found herself in a similar predicament, being attacked by the Liberal Democrats for not having opposed either the Iraq war or top-up fees, despite having resigned from the Government over Iraq (and voting against her whip in *both* of the votes in March 2003) and having been one of the organisers of the campaign against the Higher Education Bill (although she abstained at the Bill's Second Reading rather than lose the entire Bill). At times, the misrepresentation could reach ludicrous heights. In Islington North, the Liberal Dems put out a leaflet arguing that it was a choice between their candidate or 'Blair's man'. The Labour candidate for Islington North? Jeremy Corbyn, the most rebellious Labour MP. Corbyn said he was thinking of writing to Tony Blair to ask for confirmation that he wasn't Blair's man – confirmation he suspected the Prime Minister would have been only too happy to give.

Corbyn held his seat (an outcome never in doubt), whilst both Valerie Davey and Ann Campbell lost, both aggrieved at what they saw as deliberate

⁷ The analysis in this paper is conducted by using an aggregate of all the votes on that issue, with an MP who rebelled at any stage treated as a rebel. But, for the record, separate analysis of both the Iraq votes – the rebel amendment and the main motion – reveal no statistically significant effect on MPs' electoral fortunes, no matter how an MP voted.

misrepresentation of their voting.⁸ This paper makes no claim as to the righteousness of particular set of votes to use (although for the record its author has sympathy with both of them for the way their behaviour was portrayed), but one saving grace that should placate both Davey and Campbell is that there is little evidence in this paper that they would have performed all that differently at the polls had their voting record been represented differently. Both lost by sufficient margins – around nine percent – so that it is almost certain that they would have lost however they had voted on those issues, and however their voting had been reported by their opponents.

Conclusion

British General elections have traditionally been considered to be national-level events, in which local factors play only a marginal part. The conventional wisdom is that since the public does not know (or care) about what their MPs do in the division lobbies, their activities in Westminster will not affect their electoral fortunes. The (albeit limited) extant studies have tended to confirm this belief.

As the 2005 election approached, this conventional wisdom came under pressure like never before – and a fairly widespread belief grew up, certainly amongst many MPs and commentators that the electorate would reward or punish MPs for their behaviour. Certainly, all those activists who spent so much time and energy running websites, grading MPs and their behaviour, were of the opinion that it would matter. Why else would they have bothered?

This paper is just a first (and fairly rudimentary) examination of the subject – but so far the evidence is pretty one-sided. Very few of the issues to occasion rebellion in the House of Commons had any effect on the fortunes of MPs. Both rebels and loyalists performed roughly equally at the polls, with no statistically significant difference between them. The only substantive exception to this is the subject of university top-up fees – where rebels do appear to have performed marginally better at the polls than those who did not defy the whips. This, however, was worth less than one percentage point – and probably helped determine the outcome in just six constituencies.

For the most part, British voters still make their judgment about the government as a whole – not about the behaviour of individual MPs.

⁸ To be fair, it wasn't just the Lib Dems who got up to these shenanigans. Labour got into hot water in Weston-Super-Mare for a leaflet claiming that the Lib Dem MP, Brian Cotter, had not voted for the minimum wage (he had – although he'd also backed a regional system of minimum wages, which was the somewhat spurious basis for Labour's claim), and the Conservatives got up to similar tricks. Indeed, Michael Howard went one better – by proving that it was possible to misrepresent your own voting – when he appeared to misremember how he'd voted over abortion.

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Appendix

Large Labour backbench rebellions, 2001-2005

1. In July 2001 40 Labour MPs voted against the timetabling motion for a debate on the membership of select committees.
2. Throughout November and December 2001 there were 22 separate backbench revolts during the passage of the Anti-Terrorism, Crime and Security Bill. The largest saw 32 Labour MPs support an amendment to allow judicial review of the Home Secretary's decisions to detain terrorist suspects without trial.
3. In January 2002 26 Labour MPs backed a backbench amendment to the NHS Reform and Health Care Professions Bill, opposing the abolition of Community Health Councils (CHCs).
4. There were three rebellions during the passage of the Education Bill, including one in February 2002 in which 46 Labour backbenchers supported an amendment moved by the former Health Secretary, Frank Dobson, on faith schools.
5. Throughout June and November 2002 there were 17 separate rebellions during the passage of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Bill. The largest, insisting on the education of asylum seeker children in mainstream education, saw 43 Labour MPs vote against their whips.
6. In June and October 2002 the Enterprise Bill saw two rebellions, the largest of which saw 24 Labour MPs support an attempt to compel the Office of Fair Trading to take into account damage to the public interest and employment levels when determining competition policy on mergers and acquisitions.
7. The biggest rebellions of all came over the possibility of military action in Iraq, the largest of which saw 139 Labour MPs vote for an amendment that 'the case for war against Iraq had not yet been established, especially given the absence of specific United Nations authorisation'.
8. The subject of firefighters' pay and conditions saw rebellions during both the Local Government Bill and the Fire Services Bill; the largest saw 41 Labour MPs vote against their whips.
9. There were 20 rebellions throughout April, May and November against aspects of the Criminal Justice Bill. The two largest saw 33 Labour backbenchers vote against the abandonment of trial by jury in complicated serious fraud cases, or where there was thought to be a danger of a jury being interfered with.
10. There were nine rebellions during the passage of the Health and Social Care (Community Health and Standards) Bill that sought to establish Foundation Hospital Trusts. May saw the largest rebellion, when 65 Labour MPs defied their whips to back a Reasoned Amendment to Second Reading, and a subsequent revolt in November saw the Government's majority cut to 17, the lowest since Labour entered Government in 1997.
11. During the course of the third session, the Asylum and Immigration (Treatment of Claimants etc) Bill saw nine separate rebellions, the largest of which comprised 34 Labour backbenchers objecting to the Government's plans to remove the right of failed asylum seekers to appeal to the high court.
12. The Government's plans to introduce top-up fees provoked seven Labour rebellions, the largest of which saw 72 Labour MPs oppose the Second Reading of the Higher Education Bill in January 2004, reducing the Government's majority to just five, and equalling the post-war record for the largest rebellion by Government backbenchers on Second Reading.

13. In June 2004, 19 Labour backbenchers supported an amendment to the Human Tissue Bill that would have made organ donation automatic unless someone had previously registered their objections, a concept known as 'presumed consent'.
14. In November 2004, 30 Labour backbenchers voted against the Second Reading of the Gambling Bill, and when the Bill was carried over into the fourth session, there were five further rebellions, the largest of which saw 24 Labour MPs oppose Third Reading.
15. There were three rebellions during the Children Bill in November 2004, the largest of which saw 49 Labour MPs support an amendment that would have outlawed the physical chastisement of a child on the grounds that it constituted 'reasonable punishment'.
16. In November 2004, 26 Labour MPs supported an amendment to the Housing Bill that would have placed an obligation on the relevant Secretary of State to ensure at least a 20 per cent increase in residential energy efficiency by 2010.
17. There were ten rebellions during the passage of the Mental Capacity Bill, the largest of which saw 34 Labour backbenchers support an amendment that would have prevented doctors from taking any action that would hasten the end of a person's life.
18. There were six rebellions during the passage of the Identity Cards Bill. The legislation was opposed by 19 Labour backbenchers at both Second and Third Reading.
19. In January 2005, 28 Labour MPs supported an amendment to the Railways Bill that would have enabled independent assessors to choose whether the public or private sector would gain new contracts upon franchise renewal.
20. During February 2005, there were five rebellions during the passage of the Serious Organised Crime and Police Bill, the largest of which saw 34 Labour backbenchers support an amendment that would have offered a degree of extra protection for those affected when people sought to use religion to incite hatred against racial groups.
21. During February and March 2003, there were 27 rebellions during the passage of the Prevention of Terrorism Bill (19 occurring consecutively in one sitting), the largest of which saw 62 Labour MPs support an amendment that would have insisted upon a judge determining the restriction of liberty (non-derogatory orders) of terrorist suspects, as well as those involving the deprivation of liberty (derogatory orders such as house arrest).