

Keeping Roger Happy

The purpose of this teeny weeny little paper is to make Roger Scully a happy man – or at least a happier man.

The source of Roger's current unhappiness is the way that backbench dissent is measured in *Revolts and Rebellions*, where he believes that too much of the data are presented in absolute terms. This complaint applies both to measures of the number of dissenting votes cast by MPs ('it would have been useful to have reported a figure... that allowed for the length of time of the session, or in some way adjusted for the number of opportunities that MPs had to cast dissenting votes') and to measures of the size of rebellions ('it is, arguably, the relative proportion of government party MPs who are rebelling that is more important than the absolute number').¹

Both are fair points. The number of divisions in a parliamentary session can vary dramatically. The session of 1965-66 saw just 39 divisions, whereas the mammoth session of 1979 saw 500.² In most – though not all – parliaments the first session is longer than the rest of the parliament.³ Conversely, the final session of each Parliament – usually truncated because of the forthcoming election – almost always sees fewer divisions than other sessions in the parliament.⁴ So, to take a fairly typical parliament at random, the 1983 Parliament had 480 divisions in its first session; this then dropped to 307 and 310 in its middle two sessions, before falling to 165 in its final session. As a result, and given in addition the variable length of the parliaments, the overall number of divisions in any post-war parliament varied from that of February 1974, which saw just 109 divisions to that of 1987, which saw fourteen times as many, 1597.

In practice, however, how much difference does this make to our understanding of rebelliousness in the post-war era? Table 1 (below) lists the number of backbench revolts by government MPs in each post-war parliament, with the most rebellious parliament in absolute terms (October 1974) at the top, all the way down to the parliament of 1964 at the bottom. The table then also includes the figure for those revolts expressed as a percentage of the total number of divisions.

As is clear, it makes very little difference if we were to rank the parliaments by their relative frequency of rebellion instead of using an absolute measure. The final two columns of the table report the absolute and relative ranking, and, however they are measured, the top three parliaments remain the same – and in the same order. Most of the others remain in broadly the same sequence – although the exact order differs occasionally in a few places. The only significant differences come once we reach the short parliaments of 1950, 1964 and 1974, two of which (1950 and 1974) are ranked higher in relative terms than they are in absolute terms. This is not surprising – indeed, if anything what is surprising is that the difference is not starker – and is why even analysis based largely on

¹ *Party Politics* (forthcoming).

² The very short session of 1948 saw just 10 divisions, but in what follows this session has been merged with the session of 1948-1949.

³ This was true in all of the full-length post-war parliaments, except that of 1945, 1959, and October 1974.

⁴ This was not true in the 1945 Parliament, but has been true of all other post-war parliaments.

absolute values has tended to exclude these short parliaments from any analysis.⁵

Table 1: Number of rebellions in all post-war Parliaments

Parliament	No of rebellions by gvt MPs	No of rebellions as % of divisions	Ranked by number of rebellions	Ranked by rebellions as % of divisions
1974O	309	21	1	1
1970	204	19	2	2
1983	203	16	3	3
1987	198	12	4	Jnt 5
1992	174	13	5	4
1979	159	12	6	Jnt 5
1959	120	12	7	Jnt 5
1966	109	8	8	Jnt 8
1997	96	8	9	Jnt 8
1945	79	6	10	11
1955	12	1	11	Jnt 13
1951	11	1	12	Jnt 13
1974F	8	7	13	10
1950	5	2	14	12
1964	1	0	15	15

Looking just at the full-length parliaments (as in Table 2, below) makes this point even more clearly. Once the short parliaments are removed, there is almost no difference between the rankings of the post-war parliaments depending on whether their rebellions are viewed as an absolute value or as a percentage of divisions. The top three parliaments remain the same – and in the same order. The top seven parliaments all remain the same – with only very minor variations in the ordering, and the bottom three parliaments remain the same, again with only very minor variations in the order.

So, in practice it makes very little difference whether we measure the *frequency* of rebellion relatively or in absolute terms. What about the size of revolts?

Here there are two different variables that come into play. The first is the overall size of the parliamentary party, which varies as a result of the electoral success of the party in government. Fairly obviously, governments which win landslides have more MPs than those that scrape in. The second variable is the size of the 'payroll vote', those MPs who are part of the government (broadly defined) and who are bound to support it in the division lobbies. This latter group has – over time – increased, with the result that similar sized parliamentary parties from the 1950s and 1990s would have very different numbers of backbenchers. What we need to focus on, therefore, is the number of backbenchers in any period, and during the post-war period this figure has ranged from under 200 (in 1964, 1974F, 1974O) to over 300 (in 1945).

⁵ See, for example, *Revolts and Rebellions*, p. 88.

Table 2: Number of rebellions in full-length post-war Parliaments

Parliament	No of rebellions by gvt MPs	No of rebellions as % of divisions	Ranked by number of rebellions	Ranked by rebellions as % of divisions
19740	309	21	1	1
1970	204	19	2	2
1983	203	16	3	3
1987	198	12	4	Jnt 5
1992	174	13	5	4
1979	159	12	6	Jnt 5
1959	120	12	7	Jnt 5
1966	109	8	8	Jnt 8
1997	96	8	9	Jnt 8
1945	79	6	10	10
1955	12	1	11	Jnt 11
1951	11	1	12	Jnt 11

Table 3 shows the average size of rebellions in each post-war parliament, ranked in absolute terms, from the largest (February 1974) to the smallest. It then also shows that average rebellion expressed as a percentage of the backbench party.

Table 3: Average size of rebellions, all post-war parliaments

Parliament	Average size of rebellion	Average rebellion as % of backbench party	Ranked by average size of rebellions	Ranked by rebellion as % of backbench party
1974	35	19	1	1
19740	21	11	2	2
1966	17	7	3	3
1997	15	5	4	Jnt 5
1945	13	4	Jnt 5	8
1950	13	6	Jnt 5	4
1992	11	5	7	Jnt 5
1979	10	5	8	Jnt 5
1970	7	3	Jnt 9	Jnt 9
1983	7	3	Jnt 9	Jnt 9
1987	7	3	Jnt 9	Jnt 9
1951	6	3	12	Jnt 9
1955	5	2	13	Jnt 13
1959	4	2	14	Jnt 13
1964	1	1	15	15

There is, again, relatively little difference whether we rank these parliaments by the absolute size or the relative size of the revolts. The top and bottom three parliaments remain the size however we measure the revolts. That said, there is slightly more variation than there was when looking at the number of rebellions. Then, no Parliament altered its rankings by more than two places whether we used a relative or an absolute measure of rebellion. But when looking at the size of rebellions there is more variation. The Parliament of 1945, for example, ranked joint-fifth when looking at the absolute size of revolts, but once we take into account the large size of the backbench party at the time it falls to eighth. Conversely, the Parliament of 1979 ranked eighth in absolute terms, but rises to joint-fifth in relative terms. And the Parliament of 1951 ranks twelfth in absolute terms, but joint ninth in relative terms.

This handful of case aside, though, it makes relatively little difference whether we display these data in relative or absolute terms. Take, for example, the Parliament of 1997, the main focus of *Revolts and Rebellions*, where it is described as seeing relatively infrequent but large rebellion: 'we have MPs who were prepared to rebel, and rebel in sizable numbers, but who did so infrequently'.⁶ This claim is based on the fact that – in absolute terms – it was the ninth most rebellious post-war parliament in terms of the number of rebellions, and fourth in terms of the size of those rebellions. If we view the revolts in relative terms, then it is instead joint-eighth in terms of frequency (up one place) and joint-fifth in terms of size (down one place). The overall conclusion would therefore not change. The Parliament of 1997 would still be fairly described as seeing relatively infrequent but large rebellion.

Does this mean that this is all a waste of time? Probably not. Even if in practice it makes relatively little difference to the findings, it does make more sense to record the figures for rebellions in relative terms. And if nothing else, it will make Roger Scully happier – and that can be no bad thing.

**Philip Cowley,
November 2003**

⁶ *Revolts and Rebellions*, p. 93.