

Do Peers Respond? Attendance and Critical Events

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What motivates Peers to attend legislative sittings? Sitting attendance is a symbolic way for legislators to show citizens that they are being productive and hence is often explained by electoral motivations that Peers lack. I argue that Peers make decisions to attend sittings when critical events threaten their position in the legislature. Attending at these times --- namely after scandals and House of Lords reform debates --- is an attempt to counteract negative impressions about the House and its members. Other critical events that may impact elected legislators such as terrorist attacks and natural disasters should have no impact on Peers attendance. Using a newly compiled dataset on attendance and critical events, I show that Peers respond by increasing attendance only after House of Lords reform debates in either House; attendance after scandals, natural disasters, and terrorist attacks is unchanged. This suggests that Peers are responsive in only the most urgent cases: when they are in the spotlight and the future of the House is on the line. More broadly, I offer the first empirical investigation of symbolic responsiveness among unelected legislators and show that there are some situations where said legislators feel the need to respond.

Keywords: Peers, attendance, responsiveness, House of Lords reform, UK Parliament.

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Why do Peers attend sittings in the House of Lords? An almost endless stream of news articles focuses on compensation as the main motivator for Peers attendance (Duncan and Pegg, 2019). This coverage is complimented by the fact that Peers can claim increasingly large sums of money for attending Parliament (Woodcock, 2020). Yet, if generating revenue is the main reason why Peers attend, then many more Peers should be claiming the maximum possible amount with near perfect attendance. As it stands, many Peers do not claim any expense allowance for serving in the House, and attendance rates vary widely from day-to-day and year-over-year.

I argue that these attendance patterns are not simply an anomaly, rather that Peers respond to certain kinds of significant or “critical” events by providing symbolic responsiveness in the form of attendance. I delineate between critical events that primarily impact citizens --- constituency-level events --- and those that primarily impact legislators themselves --- legislator-level events. I argue that Peers have few incentives to attend sittings following constituency-level events because they are unelected and, therefore, do not need to immediately signal to citizens that they are responding to the event. Legislator-level events can threaten Peers’ reputations, which may provide Peers a more compelling reason to symbolically respond by attending sittings.

To test this argument, I use a newly collected dataset on daily sitting attendance in the House of Lords combined with two types of constituency-level critical events (terrorist attacks and natural disasters) and two types of legislator-level events (House of Lords reform debates and legislator scandals). Peers do not change their attendance rate after constituency-level events, in line with expectations, or after scandals. Peers increase attendance during House of Lords reform debates in both the House of Commons and House of Lords. Thus, Peers do demonstrate symbolic responsiveness to at least some legislator-level events, suggesting that Peer attendance

is indeed strategic. This paper contributes to the broader literature on legislator responsiveness by introducing the idea of responsiveness to legislator-level events and by testing these theoretical expectations among unelected legislators.

I. Literature Review

Various individual characteristics impact an elected legislators' decision to attend parliament. Demographics are important (Ghosh, 2018) including age and tenure in office (Hajek, 2019), criminal background (Gehring et al., 2019), and political party (Fisk, 2011; Johnston and Pattie, 2011; Russell and Sciara, 2009). The location of the legislators' constituency matters with MPs from constituencies located far away from parliament opting to sign more Early Day Motions and to attend fewer divisions (Willumsen, 2019). While legislators who have jobs outside of government attend less frequently (Gagliarducci et al., 2010), earnings (Arnold et al., 2014; Fisman et al., 2015; Mocan and Altindag, 2013) and claimed expenses (Besley and Larcinese, 2011) have little influence on attendance.

Electoral competition also plays a role (Willumsen and Goetz, 2017). Elected legislators behave differently when electoral competition is removed either due to retirement or losing re-election. These two scenarios produce different reactions: those voted out may increase attendance and parliamentary effort because they hope of running again whereas those retiring have no incentives to keep attending (Clark and Williams, 2014; Geys and Mause, 2016).

Elected legislators also have motivations to be responsive to critical events that impact their constituents. In this context, the term "critical events" refers to abnormal and important occurrences that have wide-reaching, negative impacts. The most common examples of events that I term "constituency-level" are terrorist attacks and natural disasters, while the most

common example of “legislator-level” events are legislator scandals. Voters reward legislators who respond to constituency-level events in a meaningful way. Disaster declarations and disaster relief spending increase leader popularity and chances for re-election (Healy and Malhotra, 2009), just as electorates punish leaders who oversee disasters with many deaths (Quiroz Flores and Smith, 2013) and large amounts of damage (Gasper and Reeves, 2011). Similarly, successful leadership following a terrorist attack increases leader support (Cohen et al., 2005), but attacks themselves reduce re-election chances (Gassebner et al., 2008; Getmansky and Zeitzoff, 2014). Thus, leaders’ responses to constituency-level events are critical to retain popularity and voters.

Voters punish legislators wrapped up in legislator-level events like scandals to varying degrees. Using the 2009 MP expense scandal as their case, Allen and Birch (2011) find that most citizens notice parliamentary scandals and favor honest politicians (see also Birch and Allen, 2015; Graffin et al., 2013; Larcinese and Sircar, 2017; Vivyan et al., 2012). Voters do, however, discount the importance of scandals over time (Pereira and Waterbury, 2019), often leading to muted electoral effects (Fernandez-Vázquez et al., 2016; Vivyan et al., 2012). As such, the damage to politicians happens in the immediate aftermath of the scandal, meaning that politicians need to respond quickly.

While previous literature has studied the long-term responsiveness of elected legislators, immediate responsiveness to both constituency and legislator-level events is required in order to mitigate the impact of the event on legislators’ reputations. I argue that sitting attendance is a useful measure of immediate responsiveness to events. Additionally, unelected legislator responsiveness has largely been ignored, despite the fact that chamber norms (Crewe, 2015) and the legislator appointment process (Connell, 2017) both influence legislative attendance. In the

next section, I tie the attendance and responsiveness literatures together in the context of unelected legislators' symbolic responsiveness to critical events.

II. Theory

Two actors clearly delineate the differences between constituency and legislator-level events: the individuals primarily affected and the individuals providing the response. Constituency-level events impact a large number of citizens and, for this reason, are often considered nationwide crises. Citizens bear the primary cost during constituency-level events and are often killed or injured. Thus, even if only a small proportion of citizens are directly impacted by the event, citizens throughout the country will look to legislators for a response. Because these events affect citizens, legislators are empowered to respond to address or mitigate the impact of the event. An appropriate response can reduce reputational costs that legislators may bear for not preventing the event from happening (Coombs and Holladay, 2012, 21).

Legislator-level events primarily impact legislators themselves, as they are the ones whose jobs or reputation is directly being questioned. Citizens respond to legislator-level events by changing their opinion of legislators. Here legislators are the primary losers: their jobs or personal reputations are on the line whereas citizens are only indirectly affected. Some events like scandals typically only directly implicate a handful of legislators. Yet, the fallout from the event is not limited to those implicated legislators. In line with the ways in which citizens evaluate constituency-level event response, citizens tend to evaluate scandals and other legislator-level events as damaging to all politicians (Blackham and Williams, 2013, 115).

Clearly, elected legislators want to take whatever action is necessary to protect their position in power and their reputation after constituency and legislator-level events. As alluded

to earlier, one popular strategy is for elected legislators to exhibit symbolic responsiveness. Symbolic responsiveness is related to the concept of symbolic representation, wherein individuals stand as an exemplar of a certain group or belief (Pitkin, 1967, 92). During or in the immediate aftermath of a critical event, elected legislators often want to show that they are working to address citizen concerns. Myriad case studies and guidebooks advise politicians to be symbolically responsive in the immediate aftermath of both constituency and legislator-level events (Boin et al., 2008; Coombs and Holladay, 2012). Symbolic responsiveness in this “acute phase” of the event can take many forms, including making statements to the media (Cohen, 1997; Drennan et al., 2015, 160) and conducting symbolic gestures like wreath laying (’t Hart, 1993).

Legislative attendance is another example of symbolic responsiveness (Stark, 2010). Not only do legislators care about and publicize their attendance record to citizens, but they do so specifically around important events. The day after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, the United States Congress met and conducted a series of symbolic actions to commemorate the event (Graff, 2019). Legislative attendance is required in order to perform a wide variety of these symbolic gestures including making parliamentary statements, planning responses with party leaders and other politicians, answering constituent mail, and reassuring the public that parliamentary functions will continue in the aftermath of the event. While most constituency and legislator-level events are not of the scale or magnitude of 9/11, attendance is still a meaningful way to show solidarity, to acknowledge the event, and to facilitate symbolic actions with other legislators.

Without electoral motivations, how does symbolic responsiveness and hence legislative attendance make sense? Why would unelected legislators bother to attempt to signal normalcy or

to demonstrate how hard they are working when these responses are meant as purely symbolic gestures? It could be that Peers feel like they represent a constituency or interest group. If this is the case, it does not really matter that Peers are unelected, they see themselves as having a moral duty or obligation to symbolically represent individuals by attending sittings. However, Peers are reluctant to say that they represent anyone other than themselves and pride themselves on making independent judgements, making such an obligation unlikely (Bochel and Defty, 2012).

Instead, Peers may wish to try to bolster their own reputation and feel that they can do so by symbolically responding to events. The Lords' reputation among citizens, the media, and their Commons colleagues continues to decline (Russell, 2013). Further, Peers are resistant to the proposed solution to address declining public approval of the Lords: House of Lords reform (Medeiros et al., 2018; Reid, 2018). By being symbolically responsive to important events, Peers can put themselves in a positive light and counteract negative publicity generated by critical events.

I argue that only legislator-level events impact Peers' reputations. Citizens do not expect Peers to respond to constituency-level critical events because Peers do not represent constituencies. The onus is on MPs to respond to such events, and they are held accountable for failing to show that they are engaged with aiding the response effort. Peers can deflect the responsibility for responding to constituency-level events onto MPs because the Prime Minister, his cabinet, and opposition leaders play a central role in constituency-level critical event response. By definition, however, during legislator-level events that directly impact Peers, all the attention is on Peers and what they do. Attending sittings during and after legislator-level events provides a way for Peers to shape this narrative. Responsiveness can help Peers bolster their

reputation both among citizens and among their colleagues in the House of Commons. These theoretical expectations lead to two hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Peers will not increase attendance for constituency-level events.

Hypothesis 2: Peers will increase attendance for legislator-level events.

III. Data and Measures

I test these hypotheses using daily sitting attendance data for the House of Lords from 1999 to 2014. Because I am interested in how Peers respond to events, the dependent variable of interest is the percentage of Peers attending a given sitting (*Attendance*) and the unit-of-analysis is sitting days.²

3.1 Constituency-level events

I measure symbolic responsiveness to constituency-level events using data on both terrorist attacks and natural disasters.³ Terrorist attacks, regardless of size or success, are picked up and quickly reported by national newspapers.⁴ While news coverage of terrorism may be enough for some politicians to respond, swift action helps reassure citizens and allows legislators to

² All replication data for this analysis is available on the author's website.

³ I exclude terrorist attacks in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland as immediate crisis response is likely to occur in those legislatures.

⁴ The *Daily Mail* reports on average one additional article on "terrorism" the day of or the day after a terrorist attack.

coordinate their responses with party members. Public criticism about terrorism increases after terrorist attacks, and legislators need to develop a strategy to respond appropriately (Klausen, 2009, 405). Hence, informal discussion among legislators attending a sitting may play a key coordination role (Norton, 2019).

I measure terrorist attacks using the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) by creating a dichotomous variable indicating whether a terrorist attack occurred between the present sitting and the sitting immediately prior (*Attack*). In order to be recorded as a terrorist attack in GTD, an incident must be intentional, involve violence, and be sub-national. It must also fulfill at least two of the following: be aimed at satisfying a political, economic, religious, or social goal; seek to convey a broad message impacting individuals beyond those attacked; and/or violate humanitarian law.

Citizens also expect symbolic responsiveness from legislators after natural disasters. Images of legislators visiting disaster sites and working on disaster relief legislation are meant to calm citizen fears and reassure them that help is on the way. I measure natural disasters using the EM-Dat database, which employs international standard peril classifications and is publicly available (Wirtz et al., 2014). EM-Dat also has the advantage of including only major disasters likely to receive media attention and where citizens are likely to demand a response. Disasters must “overwhelm the local coping capacity, necessitating a request to a national or international level for external assistance” (Wirtz et al., 2014, 137). I focus on short-term natural disasters, excluding general epidemics where symbolic responsiveness could occur at any time. I create a dichotomous variable indicating whether a natural disaster occurred between the present sitting and the sitting immediately prior (*Disaster*).

3.2 Legislator-level events

I measure legislator-level events using data on scandals and House of Lords reform debates. Legislative scandals are heterogeneous: many types of accusations constitute scandals, and allegations need not be true in order for the scandal to have widespread impact. I develop an indicator (*Scandal*) for whether a scandal was recorded in the House of Lords Privileges and Conduct Committee between the present sitting and the sitting immediately prior (see also Allen, 2011). These scandals are both often reported on by the media and have at least enough credibility that someone was willing to register a complaint. Measuring scandals in this way means that I can check whether scandal severity --- whether the Committee issues an adverse finding --- provokes differential symbolic responsiveness.

House of Lords reform debates occur both in the Commons and the Lords. All of Parliament could be dramatically impacted by House of Lords reform (Norton, 2017, 16). Common proposals call for eliminating the 92 Hereditary Peers, eliminating the 26 Spiritual Peers, and replacing part of the House of Lords with an elected body. Peers are, therefore, directly impacted (often negatively) by House of Lords reform debates. They have an incentive to attend their own debates to articulate their opinions, but their motivations to attend after a debate in the Commons are much more about symbolic responsiveness to show MPs that they are productive. I create dichotomous variables from the Parliamentary Hansard indicating whether a House of Lords reform debate occurred in the House of Commons between the present sitting and the sitting immediately prior (*Commons Debate*) and whether a sitting day has a reform debate in the House of Lords (*Lords Debate*).

3.3 Controls

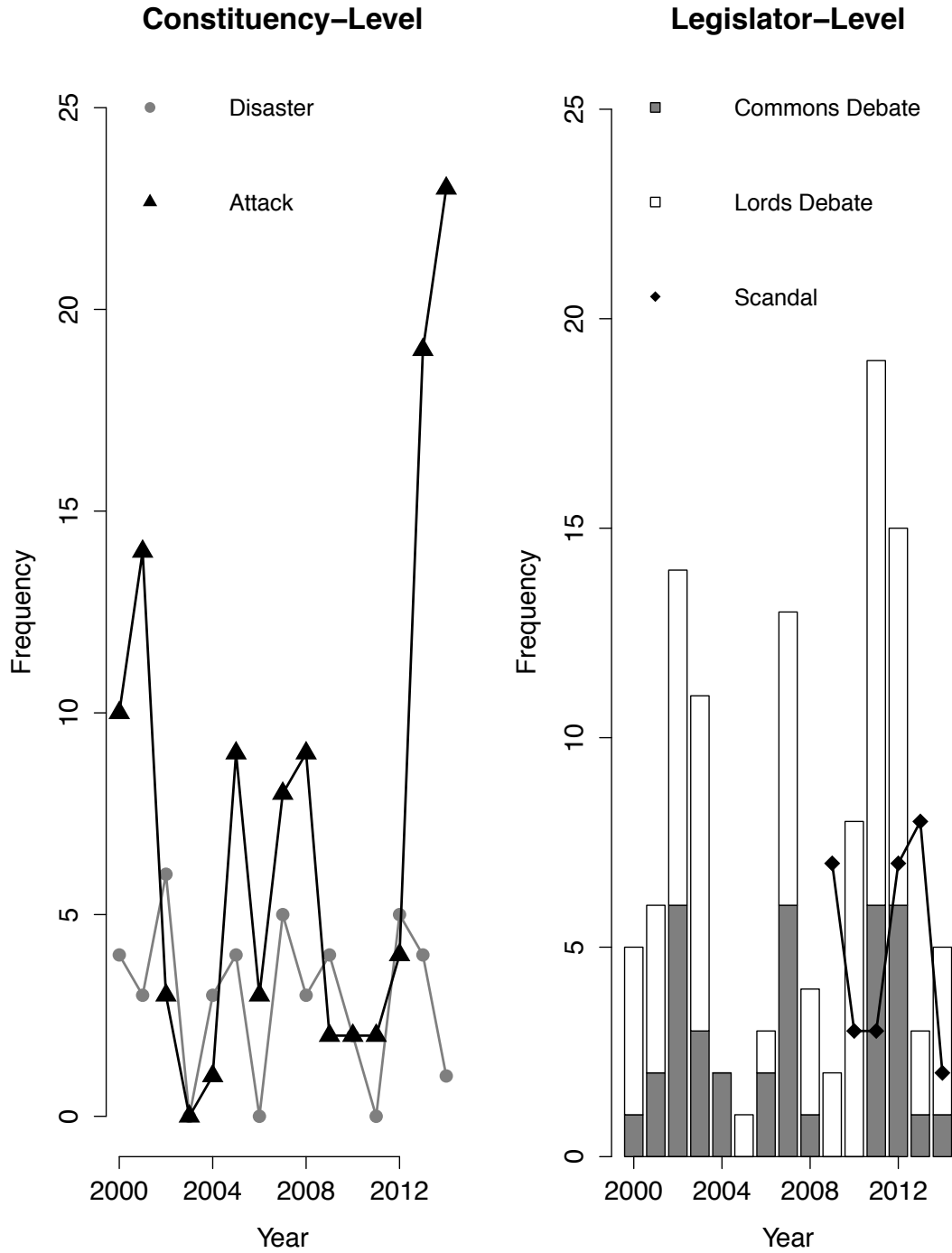
Peers are more likely to attend when there is legislative business to consider: *Lords Division* records whether at least one division occurred during the sitting, and *Commons Division* records whether at least one division occurred in the Commons on the day the Lords sat. The composition of Peers has shifted greatly over the last fifty years, with more women and minority groups becoming Peers; I account for these changes using year fixed effects. Month fixed effects and lagged attendance account for seasonal variation. Additionally, I control for weather (temperature and rain), which impacts turnout (Gomez et al., 2007).⁵

IV. Results

Figure 1 displays descriptive statistics for the main independent variables. The number of natural disasters, terrorist attacks, scandals, and House of Lords reform debates vary substantially over the time series. Likewise, the percentage of Lords attending any given sitting ranges from zero Lords on sitting days where no business is scheduled to fully 85% of the House, with a mean of 57% attendance.

⁵ Weather data from <https://weather.crawleydownvillage.org.uk/Monthly.htm>.

Figure 1: Frequency of Constituency and Legislator-Level Critical Events



Constituency and legislator-level events shown from 2000 to 2014.

Table 1 displays the main results of linear regression models with the control variables mentioned above, year and month fixed effects, lagged attendance, and robust standard errors. Model 2 is restricted to the period between 2009 and 2014, as the House of Lords Privileges and Conduct Committee investigated its first case in 2009. There is no significant change in attendance following either terrorist attacks or natural disasters, in line with Hypothesis 1.

Table 1: Attendance and Critical Events

	Attendance	
	(1)	(2)
Attack	-0.02 (0.02)	-0.03 (0.03)
Disaster	0.01 (0.02)	0.01 (0.03)
Complaint		0.01 (0.02)
Lords Debate	0.03** (0.01)	0.01 (0.02)
Commons Debate	0.04*** (0.01)	0.01 (0.02)
Lords Division	0.09*** (0.005)	0.10*** (0.01)
Commons Division	0.06*** (0.01)	0.05*** (0.01)
Constant	0.30*** (0.03)	0.31*** (0.03)
Observations	2,001	888
Controls	Yes	Yes
Year and Month FE	Yes	Yes
Lag Attendance	Yes	Yes
R ²	0.42	0.50
Adjusted R ²	0.41	0.49

Note: *p<0.01 **p<0.05 ***p<0.01

Linear models with robust standard errors.

Moving to legislator-level events, Peers do not increase attendance following scandals, counter to Hypothesis 2. In Model 1, Peers increase attendance during reform debates in both their own House and the Commons. The point estimates of the effects are smaller in Model 2 and the p -values are not significant. Thus, Peers do exhibit some symbolic responsiveness especially following reform debates in the Commons, but the effect is concentrated in the period before 2009. The substantive effect is approximately 30 of the average of 731 Peers deciding to attend following a reform debate in the Commons.

I evaluate the robustness of these results using a number of different specifications of the main independent variables (Table 2). *Violent* records only terrorist attacks where at least one person was killed or wounded. *Attack Days* considers only terrorist attacks that occurred within ten days of a given sitting in order for the attack to still be relevant when the sitting occurred. *Affected* restricts disasters to only those large enough that estimates were provided of the number of people impacted by the attack. *Adverse* considers only scandals where the accused Peers were found to be at fault and were required to take corrective action. All the main results hold.

Table 2: Robustness Checks

	Attendance							
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Attack	-0.02 (0.02)			-0.03 (0.03)	-0.03 (0.03)	-0.03 (0.03)		
Violent Attack		0.06 (0.05)					-0.01 (0.07)	
Attack Days			-0.02 (0.02)					-0.03 (0.03)
Disaster		0.001 (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)		0.01 (0.03)		0.003 (0.02)	0.01 (0.03)
Affected	0.01 (0.03)			0.002 (0.05)		0.002 (0.05)		
Complaint				0.01 (0.02)			0.01 (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)
Adverse					0.01 (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)		
Lords Debate	0.03** (0.01)	0.03** (0.01)	0.03** (0.01)	0.01 (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)
Commons Debate	0.04*** (0.01)	0.03** (0.01)	0.04*** (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.02)	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)
Lords Division	0.09*** (0.005)	0.09*** (0.005)	0.09*** (0.005)	0.10*** (0.01)	0.10*** (0.01)	0.10*** (0.01)	0.10*** (0.01)	0.10*** (0.01)
Commons Division	0.06*** (0.01)	0.06*** (0.01)	0.06*** (0.01)	0.05*** (0.01)	0.05*** (0.01)	0.05*** (0.01)	0.05*** (0.01)	0.05*** (0.01)
Constant	0.30*** (0.03)	0.30*** (0.03)	0.30*** (0.03)	0.31*** (0.03)	0.31*** (0.03)	0.31*** (0.03)	0.31*** (0.03)	0.31*** (0.03)
Observations	2,001	2,001	2,001	888	888	888	888	888
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year and Month FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Lag Attendance	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
R ²	0.42	0.42	0.42	0.50	0.50	0.50	0.50	0.50
Adjusted R ²	0.41	0.42	0.41	0.49	0.49	0.49	0.49	0.49

Note:

* p<0.01 ** p<0.05 *** p<0.01

Linear models with robust standard errors.

V. Discussion and Conclusion

In line with expectations, Peers do not symbolically respond to constituency-level critical events (terrorist attacks or natural disasters). Further evidence for this point comes from my search of the Parliamentary Hansard for Peers' speeches immediately after terrorist attacks occurred. Peers took to the floor to speak about the attack less frequently than MPs: only 46 Peers spoke on the four occasions after a terrorist attack where the attack was discussed in a sitting. This does not mean that Peers do not care about constituency-level events, just that they are not immediately symbolically responsive by increasing attendance.

Peers are symbolically responsive by increasing attendance at the sitting on or immediately after Commons reform debates, but this effect does not hold when restricting the sample to the period from 2009 to 2014. The effect is not simply because Peers already had reform debates scheduled in their chamber. Debates overlapped in only 10 cases of the 42 Commons debates and 76 Lords debates. Commons reform debates are also not concentrated in the period from 2009 to 2014. One potential explanation is that Lords attendance was relatively more volatile during the period from 2009 to 2014 than in previous years. The attendance rate changed by more than 10% during this period.

Overall, Peers increase attendance in response to Commons reform debates, but not in response to scandals, even scandals with adverse findings. While Peers are relatively united in their disdain for House of Lords reform, many MPs are in favor of reform that could cost Peers their positions in the legislature. When Peers attend during or immediately after a Commons reform debate, they can attempt to counteract the negative publicity generated by the debate. Commons reform debates are also scheduled up to one week in advance, meaning that Peers can coordinate to show up at the sitting following the debate. It is also likely that MPs are closely

watching how Peers respond to whatever was brought up in the debate. This is added pressure on Peers to respond: unlike citizens who will only care about House of Lords reform debates if they are publicized by the media, MPs both play a critical role in determining the future of the House of Lords and are more likely to be attuned to Peer attendance and symbolic responsiveness. Scandals are more unpredictable events and are simply not far-reaching enough for Peers to symbolically react. Though scandals generate bad publicity for Peers, only a few Peers are directly impacted, and even then, the punishment for an adverse finding is typically a public apology or short suspension from the House.

Unelected legislator attendance is not random and can be partially explained by symbolic responsiveness to critical events. This finding broadens existing literature on legislator responsiveness by studying unelected legislators and events that primarily impact legislators, not constituents. In doing so, I suggest that the key to explaining attendance and, therefore, symbolic responsiveness reduces to a cost-benefit calculation wherein costs come in the form of a tarnished reputation or lost job and benefits amount to positive press releases and potential media coverage. For elected legislators, benefits are large, and costs are small for most events that impact constituents. Unelected legislators only benefit from responding when attention is focused on them and costs are high. Future work would do well to investigate whether Peers make intentional calculations about the costs and benefits of being responsive or whether their decision to respond is more ad hoc and spontaneous.

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