

Do UK MPs engage more with Select Committees since the Wright reforms?:

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DO UK MPS ENGAGE MORE WITH SELECT COMMITTEES SINCE THE WRIGHT REFORMS?: AN INTERRUPTED TIME SERIES ANALYSIS, 1979-2016

Running Head: Wright Reforms & Select Committees

Original Article

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Abstract

The 2010 Wright Reforms are the most significant changes to the Select Committee system in the UK House of Commons since their inauguration in their modern form in 1979. We use interrupted time series techniques (ARIMA) to test the impact of the Wright Report on the level of parliamentarians' engagement with those Select Committees covered by the Wright Reforms using proxy measures of membership attendance and turnover rates. We find little or no evidence that the Wright Report had an impact on these outcomes. In light of these findings, we argue that some of the claims made regarding the successes of Select Committees and the Wright Reforms are overblown or, at least, premature and inadequately supported by evidence, and that further reforms may be needed if the aims of the Wright Committee are to be realised more fully.

Key words:

House of Commons; MPs; Parliament; Select Committees; Wright Reforms

DO UK MPS ENGAGE MORE WITH SELECT COMMITTEES SINCE THE WRIGHT REFORMS?: AN INTERRUPTED TIME SERIES ANALYSIS, 1979-2016

The introduction of the modern House of Commons Select Committee system in 1979 is regarded as one of the most successful episodes in recent Parliamentary reform. Though Select Committees (henceforth SCs) have relatively limited powers in contrast to committees in many other legislatures, they have received “universal praise” according to the Wright Committee on Reform of the House (2009, p.8). Since undergoing further reform in 2010 as a result of the recommendations of the Wright Committee, SCs have gained a higher profile and, many claim, have become even more assertive and effective, to the extent that the ‘Wright reforms’ have been described as ‘the most significant change to the way that the House operates in 30 years’ (Hagelund and Goddard 2015). The Speaker of the House of Commons described SCs as “pivotal players” in politics as a result of the Wright reforms; Ian Marsh describes SCs as a “newly emboldened” and “empowered system” (2016, p.96); BBC Parliamentary correspondent Mark d’Arcy described the post-Wright SC system as “more powerful and independent-minded than ever before” (BBC News 2011) and the Liaison Committee’s principal conclusions in their 2015 Legacy Report were:

- a) The Wright reforms have worked and should be retained and developed...
- b) Public opinion, commentators and academic critics have all recognised that select committee work is the most constructive and productive aspect of Parliament (2015, p.40).

In this article, we address two problems with these widespread, albeit not entirely uncontested assessments of SCs’ performance. First, there are major methodological difficulties in assessing the influence, impact or power of Parliament, as Russell and Benton (2011) and Judge (1993) among others note. This should temper any sweeping conclusions about the efficacy or otherwise of the SC system. Second, the data on which these assessments are based is limited, particularly as regards

quantitative data. This is highly significant since the methods used to support evaluations of the Wright reforms are often incomplete, unsystematic, impressionistic or potentially biased. This is especially problematic where the main source of information is interview data gathered from those most closely involved with the SC system and with the greatest vested interest in its being regarded as effective. While academic studies by O'Brien (2012), Fisher (2015), Marsh (2016), Rogers and Walters (2015), White (2015) and Russell and Benton (2011; 2013), and Parliament's own many reviews of the system including most recently that by the Liaison Committee (2015) have contributed greatly to the understanding and assessment of the SC system, the reservations raised by Hindmoor *et al.* (2009) in their paper on the pre-Wright system remain valid. Writing in 2009, the authors claimed that:

Within both official reports and the extant academic literature, arguments about the influence of committees are supported through the inclusion of positive endorsements from seasoned outside observers, past or present committee members and, for illustrative purposes, lists of the occasions on which committee recommendations are claimed to have resulted in policy changes. (Hindmoor, Larkin *et al.* 2009, 73)¹

We would further add that the degree to which existing reviews systematically compare the pre- and post- Wright systems is quite limited (*pace* O'Brien (2012)). In order to help address these two problems, we use interrupted time series techniques (autoregressive integrated moving average (ARIMA) models) to analyse a dataset of SC membership between 1979 and 2016 in order to examine the evidence for transformative change in the level of parliamentarians' engagement with

¹ This latter point has been addressed since the authors wrote by, for example, Russell and Benton (2011; 2013) who apply systematic quantitative analysis of committee impact on legislation supported by in-depth qualitative material.

SCs subsequent to the implementation of the Wright reforms through the use of two proxy variables: SC membership attendance and turnover rates. The paper also assesses the implementation in practice of a key recommendation of the Wright Committee regarding the number of SCs. The overall hypothesis most commonly presented in the extant literature is that post-Wright SCs have become more important and effective institutions. We would expect to see this improvement in status reflected in a greater engagement and involvement of parliamentarians with SC work. As the status of post-Wright SC work increases, we anticipate higher rates of attendance as MPs see greater value in committee work, and lower turnover as MPs increasingly choose to extend their period of service on committees in preference to, for example, pursuing promotion into the lower ranks of government, or focusing on constituency work. The Wright Committee's own report expressly defined increasing parliamentarians' engagement as measured by attendance as one of its objectives to invigorate SCs and implicitly defined lowering membership turnover as an aim. As such, the paper measures the Wright reforms against the committee's own success criteria, and also seeks evidence of increased engagement by MPs with committees to support or challenge claims made about the impact of Wright by existing academic, journalistic and practitioner evaluations. We find that, while the Wright reforms may have been a valuable exercise in many respects, there is no evidence thus far of even minor changes in the level of engagement by MPs with SCs subsequent to the reforms.

The article has seven further sections. In the first, we outline the role, reputation and reform of SCs. In the second, we discuss existing work on the impact of the Wright Reforms before setting out details of the data and methods for our analysis in the third and fourth sections respectively. The results are presented in the fifth section before a discussion of the results for our understanding of the impact of the Wright Reforms and a short conclusion.

I. Select Committees in the UK Parliament

SCs have become the principal vehicle in the UK Parliament for oversight and scrutiny of government departments. Yet their powers relative to committees in some other legislatures (not least the Scottish and Welsh devolved institutions) remain limited, particularly in the realm of policy-making and legislation. Although recently committees have expanded their range of activities to include more legislative work, the majority of their activity is still based on executive oversight. Despite this, they remain perhaps the one area of parliamentary activity that draws near-‘universal praise’ whether from parliamentarians, media or academic commentators. Some typical examples of this praise are described in the opening sections of this paper, illustrating the degree to which SCs are regarded as Parliament “at its best”. The most senior official of the House of Commons (henceforth HoC), for example, noted that “SCs seem to be held in generally high regard – perhaps more than anything else that Parliament does” (Rogers and Walters 2015, p.325).

A number of reports and reviews initiated by Parliament over the years have also given the Commons SC system a positive evaluation. A review by the Liaison Committee (composed of the Chairs of the main SCs) in 2000 claimed:

The 1979 Select Committee system has been a success. We have no doubt of that. At a bargain price, it has provided independent scrutiny of government. It has enabled the questioning of Ministers and civil servants, and has forced them to explain policies (paragraph 4).

A review by the Modernisation Committee in 2002 found that SCs have:

served Parliament well... they have enabled MPs to hold the executive to account through more rigorous scrutiny than is possible on the floor of the House (paragraph 59) .

SCs were seen to have contributed to both of Parliament's key roles in scrutinising government as a 'source of unbiased information, rational debate, and constructive ideas' and in representing the public; the reformed committees were also found to have 'made the political process less remote, and more accessible to the citizen who is affected by that process' (Liaison Committee 2000, paragraph 4).

Perhaps counter-intuitively, the generally positive assessment of the performance of the SC system over the years has been accompanied by a series of attempts at reform. The main remaining weakness in the system was often seen as the control of Whips over the appointment of SC members, which meant that government retained influence over the bodies charged with its own scrutiny. In the wake of the 2009 MPs' expenses scandal, parliamentarians seized an opportunity to make important changes to the scrutiny and accountability functions of Parliament, and in particular to the functions of SCs. An *ad hoc* committee on reform of the HoC was convened, chaired by the then chair of the Public Administration SC, Tony Wright, to develop proposals for parliamentary reform. The Committee made a number of recommendations that sought to strengthen the HoC in its engagements with government, including, as discussed in detail below, a series of reforms to the operation of SCs, particularly in terms of membership selection².

² Other reforms recommended by the Wright Committee included changes to control and timings of HoC business and efforts to enhance public involvement in Parliament. For more on the background and content of the Wright Reforms, see Russell (2011) and Wright (2014).

Since the Wright Reforms in 2010, praise for SCs, at least in some prominent quarters, has increased further, with media and academic commentaries on Parliament identifying greater assertiveness and effectiveness in SC work. SCs have played a prominent role in several major public policy episodes since the 2010 election, including the phone-hacking scandal (May 2015), tax evasion by multinational companies (O'Brien 2012) and banking and financial services reform. The work of SCs has become more frequently featured in the media (Kubala 2011), and some committee chairs have acquired an independent media profile. This led one committee chair to claim that the 2010-2015 Parliament would be remembered as 'the Parliament of the Select Committee' (Sir Richard Ottaway, former Chair of Foreign Affairs SC, cited in Fisher 2015, p.419). Reforms made by the Wright committee have been cited as the main reason for this by the Parliamentary and Constitutional Reform SC (2013), and by the Speaker of the House, among others. The Speaker said that the reforms have:

had a transformational impact on the authority and from there the ambitions of Select Committees. Their independence has been entrenched and their horizons broadened... They are pivotal players in politics. So much outstanding work have they done in scrutinising across the field of public policy that I am spoilt for choice in citing examples of it (Parliamentary and Constitutional Reform Committee, 2013).

There is arguably a narrative becoming established through parliamentary, media and academic sources that SCs are Parliament at its best, that the Wright reforms have improved SCs further and as a consequence, improved Parliament. SC chairs themselves have praised the new system, noting that committee work and particularly chairing, now presents a viable alternative career path for parliamentarians other than seeking ministerial office (a view endorsed by others; see, for example Fisher (2015) and Le Roux (2014)). One committee chair (and ex-minister) has claimed that some committee chairs were becoming more significant political players than cabinet ministers (May

2015). One of the few rigorous quantitative studies on the subject also claims that the new system of selecting members has improved SCs' gender balance and favoured the election of female Chairs (O'Brien 2012).

This emerging consensus on the effectiveness of the present system is politically consequential since it impacts on discussions about present and future proposals for parliamentary reform. Such is the esteem in which SCs are currently held that their resources have been increased significantly with a 20% increase in staffing and the creation of a supporting Scrutiny Unit in 2002-2003 (Le Roux 2014). Moreover, some people have continued to advocate for even greater resources to be devoted to them (Korris 2011) with one prominent think-tank suggesting transferring the legislative work currently conducted by Public Bill Committees to the SCs, a process that would represent an even greater transformation of the committee system than either the 1979 or 2010 changes (Hagelund and Goddard 2015; White 2015). Similar proposals to greatly enhance the role of SCs have also been endorsed by Robert Rogers, the former Clerk of the HoC, as a means of boosting the power of Parliament by playing to its 'acknowledged strengths' in the SC system (2015, pp.375-6).

2. Measuring the impact of the Wright reforms

As demonstrated above, the most widely-held belief about SCs is that they are generally effective and that they have grown in stature since 2010. More recently, a number of studies have emerged that are more nuanced in their assessment of the performance of SCs, acknowledging some improvements in performance and profile but also identifying areas of weakness and the difficulties of measuring impact and effectiveness (Brazier and Fox 2011; White 2015). Tyler (2011) also cautions against uncritical praise for the reformed system, noting that the changes to membership election may be limited in their impact due to the absence of competition for places and the swollen

payroll vote in Parliament. This caution about committee effectiveness should be reinforced by the fact that the quality of data available to academics to support evaluation of these claims is limited. As Hindmoor, Larkin and Kennon have noted in their study of the Education SC “The evidence used to support expressions of this argument is... largely anecdotal.” (2009). Benton and Russell have also remarked on the lack of robust evidence to support claims about SC efficacy, which they claim are often “made in a virtual vacuum in terms of evidence” (2013).

These scholars have produced work that has made significant progress in establishing an evidential basis for the assessment of SC performance. Hindmoor *et al.*'s study of the Education SC (2009), and Russell and Benton's more comprehensive study of a range of Committees over time (2011; 2013), have produced robust analyses of committee impact – understood as the effect of committee work on government legislative proposals – through tracking committee recommendations into subsequent legislation (see also Shephard and Cairney (2011) on committees in the Scottish Parliament) .

Yet as these scholars note, impact on government legislation represents only one dimension of the work of SCs, and so despite these advances, the picture remains incomplete. This article represents an attempt to further develop the quantitative evidence base for understanding and evaluating SCs, focusing on the 2010 reforms to SCs and their membership. In particular, we focus on two key sets of proposals of the Wright Committee for raising the status and quality of committee work and the appeal of committees to MPs: (i) changes to the process for selecting members of committees; and (ii) rationalising the SC system in terms of both the number of committees and their size. Thus, we do not assess committee impact as with these earlier studies, but instead focus on MPs engagement and involvement with SCs since the reforms.

The Wright Committee clearly sought to raise the profile of SC work both within and outside Parliament, and to encourage members to attend and actively participate in committee work (House of Commons Reform Committee 2009, p.5). To these ends, the Committee recommends:

[A]n initial system of election by the whole House of Chairs of departmental and similar SCs, and thereafter the election by secret ballot of members of those committees by each political party, according to their level of representation in the House, and using transparent and democratic means...

[T]hat the new House of Commons reduce the size of its standard departmental committees to not more than 11; Members in individual cases can be added to specific committees to accommodate the legitimate demands of the smaller parties... We believe there should be clear consequences for unreasonable absence from Select Committees. The House must also seek to reduce the numbers of committees, ending overlapping or duplicate remits and rationing the scarce resource of Members time and commitment (2009, pp.84-5; see also Chapter 3)³.

The Government of the time responded to these recommendations in a Written Ministerial Statement (Leader of the House, 9 January 2010) and, after a full day's debate and two series of votes on 22 February and 4 March 2010, the House, according to the Wright Committee, took 'significant and welcome steps... on the path to reform' (2010, pp.5-6). These steps included introducing or modifying Standing Orders in order to allow for the election of chairs (by the whole

³ Another recommendation, that of electing the Chair of the Intelligence and Security Committee, only deals with a specific committee and is not dealt with here.

House) and members (by party caucuses) of particular SCs, standardizing the size of departmental SCs at 11 (with the exception of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee which retained 13 members), ensuring that the nomination of SC members would take place within six weeks of the beginning of the session in a new Parliament, and introducing a mechanism ‘permitting the Speaker to invite the Committee of Selection to discharge and replace a SC member whose attendance had fallen below a given threshold over a session’ (House of Commons Reform Committee, 2009, pp.5-6 & 15); this threshold subsequently being set at 60% (Liaison Committee 2013, p.5).

Below, we analyse the impact of the Wright Report in two stages. First, as a preliminary to the study of MPs engagement with SCs, we investigate whether one other key recommendation – a reduction in the number of committees – was implemented in practice. The then Government were silent on this issue (Maer 2010, p.26) and no changes to Standing Orders were made at the time, including to the Order that stipulates that each government department should have a corresponding SC. However, both Governments and the HoC have at least some scope to limit the number of SCs, especially non-departmental SCs, and/or merge remits. For example, in 2015, the Conservative Government somewhat-controversially abolished the Political & Constitutional Reform Committee and merged its remit with the Public Administration Committee. Moreover, SCs themselves are customarily given the power to appoint sub-committees (Griffith *et al.* 2002 p.799). Thus, we test whether the Wright Reforms had an impact on: (i) the number of Domestic/Administrative and Other Scrutiny SCs (i.e. non-departmental SCs); and (ii) the number of sub-committees.

Second, we test the effectiveness of the interventions surrounding elections, committee size and attendance monitoring as a way of invigorating SCs and making the HoC a more vital institution, central goals of the Wright Committee. Here, we examine membership variables relating to

parliamentarians' engagement with Select Committees using attendance rates and membership turnover as proxies. An increase in attendance rates⁴ and a decrease in turnover rates were respectively explicit and implicit aims of the Wright Committee in its desire to boost the SC system and the vitality of Parliament, as can be seen from its statement:

We have proposed smaller committees and thus greater competition for places on them among Members which we hope will in turn generate a greater sense of ownership and will lead to higher levels of attendance and participation (2009 p.29).

Moreover, with regard attendance, the move from the system of appointments to that of elections was proposed, in part, to enhance the Members' sense of duty to attend meetings (2009 p.24); and, with regard turnover, the Wright Committee spoke of the need to incentivise (2009 p.19) and increase the commitment of SC members, and highlighted the view that it is "crucial to create a parliamentary career path focussed on select committee work" (2009 p.11). High turnover would suggest that MPs are not using committees to specialise and develop policy expertise, to pursue an explicitly parliamentary (rather than governmental or constituency-focused) orientation in their work, or to build a scrutiny-based parliamentary career. Consequently, we hypothesise that reforms to SCs introduced in response to the Wright Committee report that sought to increase the prestige, importance and effectiveness of committee work ought to lead to:

- i. An increase in membership attendance rates of SCs affected by the Wright Reforms;
- ii. A decrease in membership turnover rates of SCs affected by the Wright Reforms.

3. Data

⁴ SC attendance had long been a concern of Parliament with the introduction of individual attendance rates in the 2007/08 Sessional Return being in response to perceived low attendance among some Members (private correspondence with SC Clerk).

The data was collected from the HoC Sessional Returns or, before 1986-87, SCs Returns for each parliamentary session between 1979-80 and 2015-16 inclusive, thus covering 36 parliamentary sessions, nine parliaments and four changes of government. Sessional Returns are official HoC publications that provide information about the HoC and its Committees⁵.

Collecting this information produced a dataset which covered 256 different committees and contained 19,518 discrete data points. This dataset was then combined with another which recorded the party, gender, constituency, and other personal information of every MP who has sat in the HoC post-1979. This dataset was the main focus with regard to the number of committees. With regard to attendance and turnover, the main foci were on two sub-datasets: (i) all SCs affected by the Wright Reforms (n=53) and their members over the period 1979 to 2016 (n=9,767); and (ii) all departmental SCs (n=40) and their members over the same period (n=7,749). For number, we look at the two main types of non-departmental full SCs – Domestic/Administrative and Other Scrutiny (henceforth DAOS) – and the overall number of sub-Committees; for turnover, the focus is on all SCs affected by the reforms⁶. With regard to attendance, we ideally wanted to focus on all

⁵ The data collected in the Sessional Returns is not consistent over time. For the purpose of the present analysis, there were two consequential limitations of the data. First, information about attendance rates for the Committee as a whole was only included from 1985-86 onwards. Second, individual attendance rates were only recorded systematically between 2007-08 and 2014-15. Before 2007-08, it was only possible to calculate individual attendance rates for those members who sat on the Committee for the whole session and were not added and/or discharged partway through the session; for 2015-16 it was only possible to calculate individual attendance rates for those committees who published the data.

⁶ In addition to all departmental SCs, the other committees included in this time-series are: Environmental Audit; Procedure; Public Accounts; Public Administration & Constitutional Affairs (and forerunners); and Standards (and forerunners). Although affected by the reforms, the Backbench Business and Petitions Committees are not included because they did not exist before the 2010 election and, thus, no interrupted time-series analysis could occur.

committees affected by the reforms. However, because of methodological issues regarding how the data was recorded in earlier Returns⁷ and the different sizes of affected non-departmental SCs (for example, the Public Accounts Committee has 15 members), we concentrate here at the aggregate level on departmental SCs.

4. Method: interrupted time-series analysis

For our study we can represent the Wright reforms as constituting an interrupted time series (or intervention). A statistical approach known as autoregressive integrated moving average (ARIMA) models are well-suited to model the effect of the Wright Reforms on the engagement of members of departmental SCs because they analyse the impact of an intervention – in this case, the introduction of the Wright Reforms – on a time series when it is potentially the case that previous years' outcome have an effect on the current outcome⁸.

The dependent variables for the four different elements of this study were: (i) number of DAOS committees; (ii) number of sub-committees⁹; (iii) weighted turnover rate of membership¹⁰; and (iv)

⁷ See footnote 5.

⁸ We did not include a non-equivalent control group element because, with the possible exception of the European Scrutiny Committee, there is not enough overlap between Wright and non-Wright Committees – in terms of their remit, the frequency of meetings, and the number of inquiries, etc. – for meaningful comparisons. Thanks to Richard Kelly for discussions on this point.

⁹ Sub-Committees can be relatively long-standing, such as the Treasury Sub-Committee or the Sub-Committee on the work of the Independent Commission for Aid Impact, or *ad hoc*, appointed to address a particular issue, such as the Badgers & Cattle Tuberculosis Sub-Committee. Both types are included here.

membership attendance rate. The ARIMA model for each outcome looks at the effect of time, changes in the intercept, and changes in the slope, relevant to when the intervention took place.

For analysis of the number of SCs and turnover of Wright Committees' membership, the time series we used started with the 1979-80 session and ended with 2015-16; for analysis of the attendance rate of members, the time series ended at the same point but started with the 1985-86 session¹¹.

There are three basic steps involved in producing a model to assess the causal impact of an intervention on a time series when using ARIMA techniques (Pridemore *et al.* 2007, p.279):

1. A 'prewhitening' procedure occurs in which the dependent series – in this case, each series of the four different elements of our study outlined above – undergo a white noise process. This process entails transforming the dependent series into a new set of observations that are distributed independently and normally with a mean of zero and a constant variance.

¹⁰ Turnover was weighted in order to take into account the length of parliamentary sessions. For example, the unweighted turnover rate for the 2010-12 session was 38.8% and quite clearly the highest of the Parliament. However, the 2010-12 session, at 295 days, was more than twice as long as any other session in the Parliament. Once weighted, the turnover score of 48.0 for 2010-12 was the second highest of the Parliament. Weighting was calculated by dividing the turnover rate by the length in days of the parliamentary session and multiplying the answer by 365 to give an annualised score.

¹¹ See Footnote 5. The lengths of the two time series (36 and 30 observations respectively) are sometimes viewed as shorter than optimal (see, for example, Box, Jenkins & Reinsel, 1994). However, our dataset comprises all the data available and is therefore the most comprehensive that is capable of being assembled. Moreover, as Pridemore *et al.* argue "It should be recognized that analysts are often faced with the dilemma of analyzing relatively short time series or using less appropriate cross-sectional data to study dynamic social processes" (2007), and, as William *et al.* (2002) note, the exact number of observations cannot be fully specified beforehand and, statistically, the number of observations can be regarded as adequate if they are sufficient to identify the model.

2. An appropriate transfer function is chosen to estimate the impact of the intervention – here, the introduction of the Wright Reforms – on the prewhitened dependent series.
3. A number of diagnostic checks are run on the final model. If the model is considered inadequate, a new model is estimated. This process occurs until a statistically adequate model is constructed.

As with all interrupted time-series analyses, our causal hypothesis was that observations after the intervention (i.e. after the introduction of the Wright Reforms) will have a different intercept and/or slope, albeit possibly temporarily, from those before the intervention. The effect, if any, of the Wright Reforms can be determined empirically by testing for three common patterns, relating to changes in the intercept and/or slope, each determined by a different functional form (McDowell *et al.* 1980, pp.64-83):

1. An abrupt, permanent impact;
2. A gradual, permanent impact;
3. An abrupt, temporary impact.

5. Results

The scatterplots for the time series relating to the number of DAOS and sub-SCs, the attendance rates of departmental SCs, and the weighted membership turnover rates of SCs affected by the Wright Reforms, as well as a vertical line which indicates the pre- and post-intervention periods, are presented in Figures 1-4 respectively.

FIGURES 1-3 HERE

With regard to the number and average attendance and turnover rates of committees there is quite limited evidence of any effects from the graphical evidence. To extend the modelling we include two additional independent variables – whether the session was at (i) the start or (ii) the end of a Parliament – in order to also model for the possible effects of parliamentary cycles and changes in government¹². These additional independent variables were included following past research (Institute for Government 2015), which indicated that these two factors could be important in explaining changes in SCs and membership engagement.

The model description and statistics for each of the time series are presented in Table 1¹³, and the ARIMA model parameters for each time series are presented in Table 2.

TABLES 1-2 HERE

¹² The subsequent models are, in more technical terms, ARIMAX models (ARIMA plus exogenous covariates – transfer function model).

¹³ The form of the ARIMA model employed to account for systematic variation, or autocorrelation, for the weighted turnover time series is the first-order, autoregressive model (1,0,0); for the other three time series, it is the differenced first-order autoregressive model (1,1,0). We followed Hyndman and Athanasopoulos (2014) and used the R ‘forecast’ package to investigate which series need to be differenced, and to what degree. Two common tests for unit roots and trend-stationarity are the augmented Dickey-Fuller test and the Kwiatkowski-Phillips-Schmidt-Shin (KPSS) respectively. Using the latter, we determined that the series related to number and attendance should be first-differenced but that turnover did not require differencing. The Q statistic is the outcome of the Ljung–Box test which considers whether any of a group of autocorrelations of a time series are different from zero. In terms of statistical adequacy, the models for the all time series clearly meet the diagnostic criterion in that none of the autocorrelation functions are significant at the .05 level.

The results from the interrupted time series analysis are clear: there is little or no evidence that the Wright Reforms had any impact. There were no independent variables that were statistically significant for the number of DOAS committees, or the total number of sub-committees. The independent variables that are statistically significant at least at the .05 level are: it being the start ($p < .000$) of a Parliament for the average attendance rate; and it being the start ($p < .005$), or the end ($p < .009$), of a Parliament for the weighted membership turnover. In relation to both these dependent variables, then, there is a clear parliamentary cycle (see Figures 2 & 3) with attendance at its highest at the beginning of a parliament and with weighted turnover tending to be lower at the beginning and end of a parliament¹⁴. The evidence we have collected so far, then, suggests that one of the key recommendations of the Wright Committee was not implemented and that the other post-Wright reforms had little, if any, meaningful impact on these measures of SC membership engagement, which were the explicit or implicit aims of the Committee. There is therefore no statistical evidence that MPs were more engaged or involved with committees post-Wright, despite the many claims made about their higher status and significance following the reforms. We discuss these findings in more detail below.

¹⁴ In relation to weighted turnover, our model is only able to explain just less than half the variability of the response data around its mean (R-squared=.402), which suggests that other things – perhaps the nature of coalition government and/or the proportion of new MPs within an intake – are also important for explaining turnover patterns. On the former, Keith Vaz, formerly Chair of the Home Affairs SC, stated “I suspect the second biggest factor [after the election of chairs] leading to change in select committees has been the coalition government” (quoted in Fisher 2015, p.424).. Future research, perhaps undertaken at the end of the current Parliament when more data is available, could explore such an effect but data included in the series from the post-coalition session in 2015-2016 does not give grounds for modifying the analysis provided here, or for positing a coalition effect.

6. Discussion

We find no evidence that MPs were more engaged or involved in SCs following the Wright reforms than they were beforehand. A secondary finding of this paper is that one of the Wright recommendations relating to the number of committees was not implemented. There were no changes to the Standing Orders by the then Labour Government in relation to the number of SCs, nor even an explicit response to the Wright Committee's recommendation of a decrease. The powers of Government to control the number of committees are mitigated somewhat by external factors – for example public and political pressure regarding ethics and parliamentary conduct, equality, and public engagement have led to the creation of new committees. For its part, the HoC must track changes to the architecture of government such as the creation of new departments, by creating new SCs, as seen in the aftermath of the recent EU membership referendum which resulted in the creation of two new departments with two new shadowing SCs. Yet whatever the pressures faced, it is certainly the case that subsequent Governments have not utilised their power to limit the number of DAOS SCs; indeed, although not statistically significant, the number of DAOS SCs has increased post-2010. With regard the number of sub-committees, which is entirely under the remit of SC members themselves, MPs have not taken the opportunity to, or – perhaps more accurately – been able to, ration the 'scarce resource' of their time and commitment, as endorsed by the Wright Committee by reducing the number of SC sub-committees

The more significant finding of the study is that there appears to be no change in MPs engagement with SCs post-Wright. Despite the failure to implement a reduction in the number of committees, it might still be expected that attendance would be seen to increase and turnover decrease post-2010, especially given the implementation of the other main recommendations, the praise that has generally been directed towards the Wright Reforms in increasing the prestige of SCs and their

ownership among MPs, and the emphasis placed on creating alternative parliamentary career paths both within the Wright Report and elsewhere. However, we find no evidence that this rise in status has produced any greater willingness on the part of MPs to attend SCs since the Wright reforms were enacted. The ‘carrots’ of the claimed rise in status of SC work due, in part, to the introduction of elections, and the reduction in departmental SC size have not affected rates of attendance; nor has the ‘stick’ of the use, or the threat of the use¹⁵, of the mechanism by which members with what is deemed to be a poor attendance record are discharged and replaced. Similarly, an increased emphasis on ownership and alternative career paths has not led to a decrease in turnover rates¹⁶.

Yet, despite what some may argue about the Wright Reforms, it is perhaps unsurprising that the changes introduced in 2010 made little, if any, difference to these measures of membership engagement. MPs are subject to various competing demands on their time and committee work is only one aspect of their job. The wider architecture of party and government in British parliamentary politics sets the parameters around what parliamentarians can do, and the Wright Reforms could only ever modify this at the margins. As discussed below, there are thus numerous factors that militate against transformative change in the operation of the SC system and engagement with it¹⁷.

¹⁵ Until the end of the 2010 Parliament, the mechanism has not been used at all (Liaison Committee, 2015, p.33).

¹⁶ Our future research will explore the destinations of SC leavers and the impact of SC membership on parliamentary careers.

¹⁷ Moreover, it is arguable that the recommendations that were implemented were not as far-reaching or successful as intended. For instance, the 2010 changes to the Standing Orders regarding committee size did not have any catalytic, indirect impact on committee size for other non-departmental Wright Committees: the Environmental Audit Committee continues to have 16 members; the size of the Standards Committee rose to 15 by the end of the 2010 Parliament; and,

There is no evidence the mechanism of electoral competition has any impact on raising attendance and increasing ownership as intended. There is also reason to doubt that the mere fact of the new election system helps to produce higher quality committee chairs. The pool of candidates for any committee chair is restricted by two factors. First, since Select Committees are Parliamentary institutions that seek to scrutinise and hold government to account, the chair must be a backbencher. With the expansion of the payroll vote in recent years, this reduces the pool of candidates from 650 to around 410. Second, committee chair positions are divided up among the parliamentary parties in rough proportion to their levels of electoral support and with government having a large say in which committee chairs they retain. For Labour or Conservative-chaired committees, therefore, the pool of candidates is around 150-200 for each of 27 posts, meaning that competition is rather less fierce than it might initially appear. Of the 57 positions filled using the Wright system up to time of writing (26 in 2010, 27 in 2015 and 4 by-elections, with some MPs winning more than once), 20 were elected unopposed as the only candidate. 13 of the 47 elected chairs had also previously served as Select Committee chairs under the old, unelected system. It is difficult to imagine how this alone could produce a transformative impact on the ownership and operation of committees. The evidence that the chairs who are selected by this process are any different to the type of parliamentarian who previously occupied committee chairs in the unreformed system is also minimal to non-existent. There is only very weak evidence that elected chairs are more independent-minded or unbiddable than their predecessors or in comparison to backbenchers as a whole, that they supply ‘new blood’ to the system, or that they are opting for

although the size of the Procedure and the Public Accounts Committees fell from 13 to 12 and from 16 to 14 after the 2010 general election respectively, they rose back to 13 and 15 respectively after the 2015 election.

committee chairs as a deliberate choice as an alternative parliamentary career path and to forego the ministerial greasy pole (Goodwin, Bates et al. 2016).

Furthermore, Select Committee work continues to be only one aspect of parliamentary work that is competitive, and often incompatible with, many other responsibilities and roles such as constituency case work, scrutiny of legislation, contributing to debates, working with external stakeholders or pursuing governmental preferment. In their 2013 report, the Political & Constitutional Reform SC stated that '[T]he demands on Members are now such that select committees sometimes find it hard to fill vacancies so that they can maintain their numbers and consequently their effectiveness' (p.11). Although this point is related specifically to vacancies, it is also apposite here in that these demands would almost inevitably affect attendance rates also. The Liaison Committee note the clashes that sometimes arise between members' SC work and their placement on long-running public bill committees or on delegated legislation committees (2013, p.16), while the increasing use of electronic communications in recent years has vastly increased the volume of correspondence received by MPs and consequently their workload. The Liaison Committee also reports that Government or Shadow Cabinet appointments, even at junior levels, remain more attractive than Committee work (2013, p.16), which helps ensure that turnover rates remain high since many MPs will opt to relinquish their SC roles in order to participate in government, no matter how minor the role.

7. Conclusion

It is important to note that some of the claimed benefits of the Wright reforms regarding SCs are neither tangible, nor amenable to measurement with the data we have gathered here, and we are certainly not arguing that the Wright Reforms were either unnecessary or have failed. However, with

the evidence available to us now, the results are clear: one key recommendation concerning decreasing the number of SCs has not yet been implemented, and the overall Wright Reforms had little, if any, impact on attendance and turnover rates of SC membership.

These results, then, might give us pause for thought about some of the more effusive praise for both SCs and the impact of the Wright Reforms; the reforms may not have been implemented and may not have worked as comprehensively as some people have concluded, at least in some aspects of the SC system – attendance rates, ownership, career pathways – identified by both the Wright Committee and others as important. The results might also cause us to think about why the Wright Reforms did not have their intended effects in the areas considered here despite the aims of the Wright Committee and the clear will of the HoC.

Such thinking has already started to take place in Parliament and beyond. For instance, in addition to the Wright Report, the case to rationalise the number of SCs has also been made by the Liaison Committee, due to concerns ‘that increased responsibilities, and more and larger committees may result in the perverse outcome of an overall decrease in the quality of Parliament’s scrutiny of government’ (2010, pp.9-10). The Liaison Committee also reported, in a section concerned with SC attendance, that the number and size of SCs remained an issue (2015, p.35). Although recognising the importance of the issue of access for smaller parties to SCs, and despite government’s seemingly continued resistance to the idea (Political and Constitutional Reform Committee 2013, p.2), the Committee argued, “It may be time to contemplate the possibility that each committee itself does not have to mirror the exact party composition of the House” (2015, p.35), perhaps especially so given the reported problems of the inability of SCs to reach quoracy and to fill vacancies even with the help of the Whips (Political and Constitutional Reform Committee 2013, p.11).

Although relatively minor, these further reforms would have the effect of spreading MPs less thinly across the Committee system and might thus increase the time MPs have for Committee work, at the same time as making Chair and membership elections more competitive and encouraging members to be more engaged and involved. In such ways, the aims of the Wright Committee regarding membership engagement have a better chance of being more fully realised, even without broader changes to parliamentary architecture regarding party and executive dominance. More broadly, our findings suggest that, if Select Committees seek to entrench their growing significance in future, they should start to do so by avoiding complacency in assuming that the Wright reforms are a sufficiently powerful mechanism to drive improvement on their own.

Figures

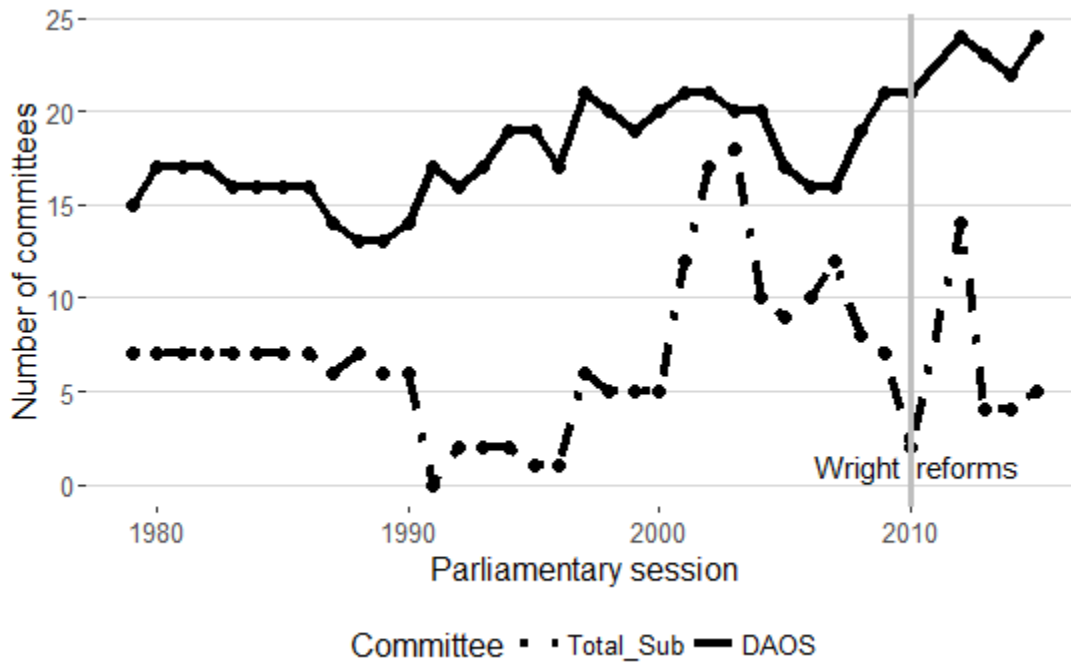


Figure 1: Number of Domestic/Administrative & Other Scrutiny Select Committees and Number of Select Sub-Committees, 1979-2016

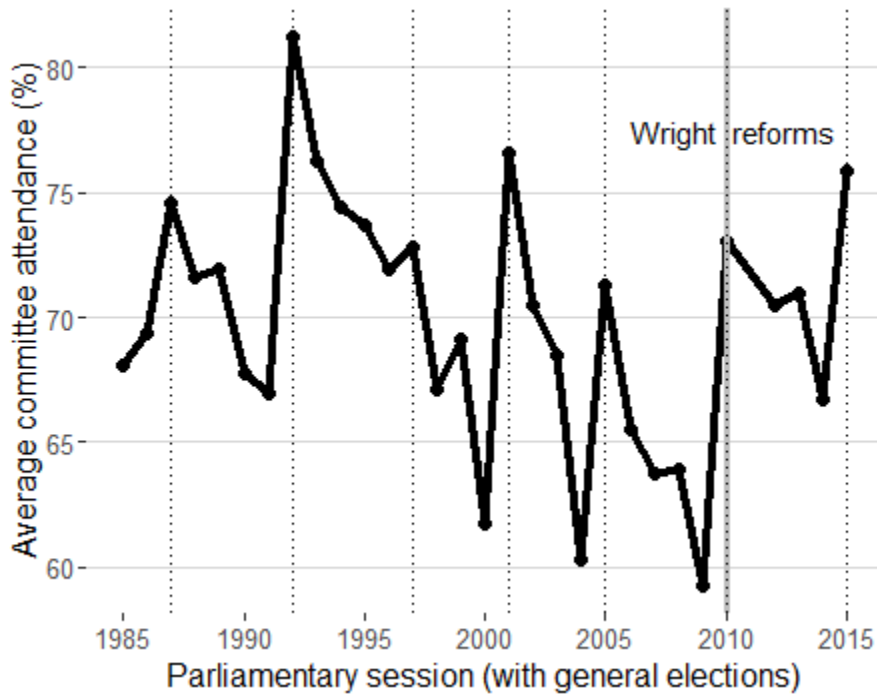


Figure 2: Average Attendance Rates for Departmental Select Committees, 1979-2016

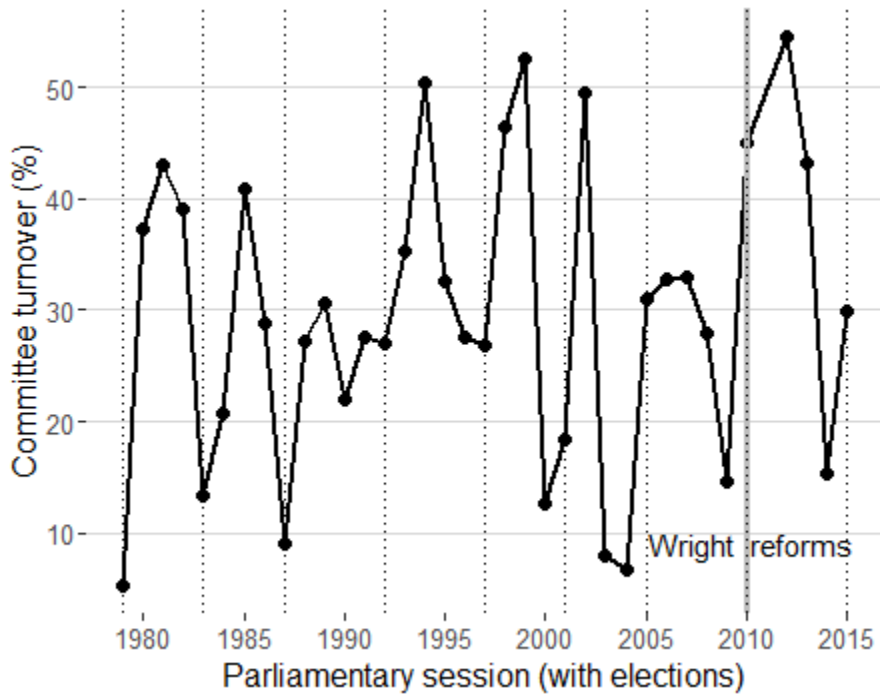


Figure 3: Weighted Turnover for Wright Select Committees Membership, 1979-2016

Tables

Table 1: Model Description & Statistics for each Time Series

Series	Model	Number of Predictors	R-Squared	Q Statistic
Number (Total Sub)	(1, 1, 0)	3	.104	$Q = 22.376; df = 17; p < .171$
Number (DAOS)	(1, 1, 0)	3	.014	$Q = 21.536; df = 17; p < .203$
Attendance	(1, 1, 0)	4	.787	$Q = 21.444; df = 17; p < .207$
Weighted Turnover	(1, 0, 0)	5	.405	$Q = 14.787; df = 17; p < .611$

Table 2: ARIMA Model Parameters for each Time Series

Dependent variable	Independent variables	Estimate	SE	t	Sig.
Number of Domestic/ Administrative & Other Scrutiny Committees	Constant	.061	.621	.098	.923
	AR(1)	-.076	.191	-.396	.695
	Difference	1			
	Time	.008	.033	.235	.816
	PrePost	2.860	18.199	.157	.876
	Interact	-.076	.535	-.142	.888
<i>Number of Sub-Committees</i>	Constant	.031	1.178	.026	.979
	AR(1)	-.318	.174	-1.828	.077
	Difference	1			
	Time	-.004	.063	-.056	.956
	PrePost	15.593	36.339	.374	.711
	Interact	-.407	1.068	-.381	.706
<i>Attendance</i>	Constant	-1.857	1.113	-1.668	.109
	AR(1)	-.477	.184	-2.599	.016
	Difference	1			
	Time	-.057	.069	-.828	.416
	PrePost	30.047	23.823	1.261	.220
	Interact	-.995	.851	-1.170	.254
	Start	10.781	1.511	7.137	.000*
<i>Weighted Turnover</i>	Constant	35.721	4.648	7.685	.000
	AR(1)	-.001	.191	-.003	.998
	Time	-.063	.233	-.270	.789
	PrePost	200.317	125.584	1.594	.122
	Interact	-5.522	3.697	-1.494	.146
	Start	-14.494	4.737	-3.060	.005*
	End	-13.863	4.939	-2.807	.009*

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