



Review

# Programme backdrop by early day motions: the UK parliament as a case

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The issue of how programmes are set in parliaments is one that has been well researched by scholars. They have focused their examination on two major areas, namely seeking to understand the procedures of the relevant assembly that allow the government and the opposition to block or delay legislation and secondly, researching on the effectiveness of those procedures in delaying and blocking legislation. The goal of this study is to expand the knowledge about issue salience by using data from Early Day Motions (EDMs) in the UK parliament, particularly in the House of Commons, to determine how MPs set the parliamentary agenda. The study will be conducted in the context of Tony Blair's third (and last) government. The study will extend Cox and McCubbins' cartel model (Cox and McCubbins, 2005) with its concepts of agenda power, both positive and negative, into this new area in order to examine how MPs use EDMS to set their agenda.

**Key words:** Setting the programme, Early Day Motion, UK parliament.

## INTRODUCTION

The agenda-setting process is an ongoing competition among issue proponents to gain the attention of the media, professionals, the public and policy elites (Dearing and Rogers, 1996: 1-2). The issue of how agendas are set in parliaments is one that has been well researched by scholars. They have focused their examination on understanding the procedures of the relevant assembly that allow the government and the opposition to block or delay legislation (Huber 1992; Wilkerson 1999; Rasch 2000; Doring 2001; Tsebelis 2002; Cox and McCubbins 2005). Second, they have researched the effectiveness of those procedures in delaying and blocking legislation (Ferejohn, Fiorina and McKelvey, 1987; Doring 1995; Krehbiel, 1997, 2007; Masuyama, 2000; Kim and Loewenberg, 2005; Akirav, Cox and McCubbins, 2010)

The goal of this paper is to expand the knowledge about issue salience by using data from Early Day Motions (EDMs) in the UK parliament, particularly in the

House of Commons, to determine how MPs set the parliamentary agenda. The study will be conducted in the context of Tony Blair's third (and last) government. The study will extend Cox and McCubbins' cartel model (Cox and McCubbins, 2005) with its concepts of agenda power, both positive and negative, into this new area in order to examine how MPs use EDMS to set their agenda.

## The Concept of EDMs

EDMs are formal motions submitted for debate in the House of Commons. However, very few EDMs are actually debated<sup>1</sup> (Finer et al. 1961; Norton 2005; Bailey

<sup>1</sup> Although the majority of EDMs are never debated, the group of EDMs known as 'prayers' may be debated. Prayers

and Nason 2008). Instead, they are used for reasons such as publicizing the views of individual Members of Parliament (MPs), drawing attention to specific events or campaigns, and demonstrating the extent of parliamentary support for a particular cause or point of view (House of Commons Information Office fact sheet P3 procedure series, 2008: 2).

An EDM takes the form of a single sentence, no more than 250 words long (Bailey and Nason 2008). Despite the fact that any MP can initiate an EDM, ministers, whips, the speaker and deputies generally do not. Backbenchers of the government and of the opposition are the main users of EDMs. Therefore, EDMs can serve as an indicator of their ability to set the agenda.

Unlike most votes in the House of Commons, EDMs are „unwhipped“, that is, there is no pressure put on an MP by their party to sign them. Therefore, an EDM probably provides a fair indication of what that MP truly believes. It is for this reason that they are of such interest. Although an MP can freely and spontaneously sign an EDM, strong party structure is still evident (Finer et al., 1961; Franklin and Tappin, 1977; Leece and Berrington, 1977; Crowe 1983; Nason, 2001; Norton, 2005; Bailey and Nason, 2008).

An MP gives notice of an EDM by handing in its text to the Table Office near the House of Commons Chamber (House of Commons Information Office fact sheet P3 procedure series, 2008, p.2). After the EDM has been checked for conformity with the rules of the House (which are the same for all motions, whether for a specified day or not), it is printed. The Table Office can advise on the rules of the House concerning the text of motions; however, the final decision on whether a motion is in order rests with the Speaker<sup>2</sup> (House of Commons Information Office fact sheet P3 procedure series, 2008: 2).

At this point we can see the power of the government; the Speaker can, if he or her wants, block the EDM from being printed. While the Speaker must follow the rules, the motion can still be interpreted in different ways.

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are motions to overturn Statutory Instruments (laws made by Ministers under powers deriving from Acts of Parliament).

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The main rules are:

- Motions should not be over 250 words
- Motions should not criticize other MPs, Peers, judges or members of the royal family except as the main subject of the motion
- no reference should be made to matters before the courts
- no unparliamentarily language or irony should be used
- titles must be purely descriptive

Additional MPs can add their signature to an EDM to show their support (Bailey and Nason, 2008). Commonly, MPs do this by tearing out pages from their copy of the „Blues“ and signing below the chosen Motion or Motions. The pages are then handed to the Table Office, and the EDM (together with its top six sponsors, but not others who have previously signed the Motion) is reprinted in the next Notice Paper with the new names added (House of Commons Information Office fact sheet P3 procedure series, 2008: 4). Most scholars agree that supporting signatures are an important indication for understanding the MPs' opinion regarding issues they want to emphasize (Finer et al., 1961; Franklin and Tappin, 1977; Leece and Berrington, 1977; Crowe, 1983; Nason, 2001; Bailey and Nason, 2008). The number of supporting signatures will be considered in the current research as an important indicator by which we can measure the ability of backbenchers to set their agenda.

An MP may add an amendment or amendments to another MP's EDM (Bailey and Nason 2008). If MPs wish to table an amendment to an EDM which they have already signed, they first have to withdraw their name from the main motion (House of Commons Information Office fact sheet P3 procedure series, 2008: 5).

Thus, the MP has three opportunities for dealing with an EDM. First, the MP can initiate an EDM and by so doing, set his or her agenda. Second, an MP can add his or her signature as support for an EDM initiated by another MP. Third, an MP can amend an EDM by modifying it slightly but retaining its spirit or changing it dramatically by presenting an opinion contrary to the original EDM.

EDMs remain current for the rest of the session in which they are presented and extra names can be added at any time up until the session ends in prorogation or dissolution (House of Commons Information Office fact sheet P3 procedure series, 2008: 5). Before each parliamentary recess, the Table Office prints a list of EDMs giving their titles in numerical order, the date of first printing and the total number of signatories to date. This is issued with the „Blues“. At the end of the session all EDMs fall, but they can be introduced again in the new session. They do not automatically carry forward the signatures appended to them in the previous session (House of Commons Information Office fact sheet P3 procedure series, 2008: 5). This procedure can be another indicator of an MP's desire to highlight a particular issue.

EDMs tend to fall into two distinct groups. First, the opposition may put down an EDM to pray against statutory instruments (SIs)<sup>3</sup>. Many appear in the name of

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<sup>3</sup> SI (Statutory Instruments) are a form of legislation which allow the provisions of an Act of Parliament to be subsequently brought into force or altered without parliament having to pass a new Act.

the leader of the opposition or of another opposition party. Thus the opposition gives public notice that it may seek a debate on an SI; this type of EDM is generally the only one which can lead to a debate. Here we can see a procedure by which the opposition can initiate a debate on the floor and set its agenda. On the other hand, under Standing Order No. 118, the government may refer a statutory instrument subject to a negative procedure for debate in a standing committee once a motion for its annulment has been tabled. This procedure gives the government the ability to control the debate and to adjust it to the government's agenda.

In the House of Commons, any MP may put down a motion to annul an SI subject to the negative procedure. In practice such motions are now generally put down as EDMs, which are motions for which no time has been fixed and, in the vast majority of cases, for which no time is likely to be available. A motion put down by the official opposition will often be accommodated, although there is no absolute certainty of this. An annulment motion put down by a backbencher is unlikely to be dealt with, but a debate may be arranged if there are a large number of signatories to the EDM. Again we can see the significant power of the supporting signatures, which can, if used correctly, force a debate on the floor.

Second, a group within a party might put down an EDM. Such an action may indicate a view different from the official position of the party concerned. For example, motions put down by government backbenchers may seek to accelerate or otherwise change government action (House of Commons Information Office fact sheet P3 procedure series, 2008: 3-4).

Historically EDMs arose as expressions of intent to introduce a bill, motion or question. Today EDMs are a means by which an ordinary MP can prod the government into action (Nason, 2001: 4), express his or her opinion on a subject and canvas support for his or her views by inviting other MPs to add their signatures in support of the motion (Leece and Berrington, 1977; Crowe, 1983; Norton, 2005; Bailey and Nason, 2008).

EDMs have two unique characteristics. First, they are not whipped as are most votes in the House of Commons (Nason, 2001). The House Whips cannot and do not prevent the EDMs from appearing, nor prohibit MPs from signing them (Finer et al., 1961: 8). Second, EDMs are spontaneous in the sense that any issue may be raised at any time when the House is in session (Finer et al., 1961: 7; Nason, 2001).

Despite the fact that any MP can initiate an EDM, ministers, whips, the speaker and deputies generally do not do so. EDMs are considered a backbencher's<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Government ministers and opposition shadow ministers sit on the front benches and are known as 'frontbenchers' while MPs who do not hold ministerial positions sit towards the back of

manifesto and right (Finer et al., 1961: 8). The increased trend in parliamentary activities such as legislation has not left EDMs untouched. Since the end of the Second World War, there has been evidence for an increase in the number of EDMs even though most of them were not debated (Finer et al. 1961; Franklin and Tappin, 1977; Leece and Berrington, 1977; Nason, 2001; Bailey and Nason, 2008).

Although EDMs are one of the tools available to MPs, the research about them in the UK Parliament is partial and incomplete (Finer et al., 1961; Richards, 1962; Berrington, 1973; Franklin and Tappin, 1977; Crowe, 1983; Nason, 2001; Bailey and Nason, 2008). The existing literature deals with three issues: the use of EDMs as a tool for measuring MPs' opinions, the use of various research methodologies to measure EDMs and the providing of explanations about the way MPs use EDMs.

### ***The use of EDMs***

There is consensus among most scholars that EDMs are useful and important data that merit further investigation. For Franklin and Tappin (1977), EDMs are a means of predicting the opinion of MPs. Nason (2001) concurs with this assessment, noting that EDMs provide an indication of the opinions of backbench MPs. Furthermore, because EDMs are almost free from pressure from the Whips, they provide a relatively uninhibited source of information about shades of parliamentary opinion (Richards 1962: 338). Bromhead (1962) and Richards (1962) agreed that the "cheap-talk" nature of EDMs does not rule them out as an important source of information. EDMs are a basic raw material for intra-party attitude scaling (Leece and Berrington 1977: 539), are fascinating collections of expressions of opinion originating from the UK House of Commons and provide a wealth of information (Nason, 2001: 3). Other scholars have expanded the use of EDMs data; while Franklin and Tappin (1977) treated critical EDMs by backbenchers as evidence of dissatisfaction with party policy, Crowe (1983) examined parliamentary attitudes toward breaches of discipline, one of which is the EDM, to identify those attitudes which should be treated as norms (Crowe, 1983: 907).

In recent years scholars have tended to treat the data in EDMs as one of the mechanisms that play an important role in insuring that the government is aware of particular problems. Placing an issue on the agenda may prompt action (Norton 2005: 70) and also serves as a rich body of information (Bailey and Nason, 2008: 396).

The current research adopted Norton's (2005) point of view about the importance of the EDM as a procedure

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the Chamber and are known as 'backbenchers'.

that can prompt the government to act.

The second question deals with determining the appropriate way to validate data from the EDMs. Scholars have used a wide range of tests to make such determinations. Finer et al. (1961) examined their findings on EDMs against free votes on identical issues. Franklin and Tappin (1977) adopted a similar approach by combining interviews held among 200 parliamentary candidates and the position taken in the division lobbies by the same MPs on the second reading of Sidney Silverman's bill to abolish the death penalty. They found almost a complete match between the opinion expressed and the vote of MPs (Franklin and Tappin, 1977: 59). Nason devoted extensive discussion to determining the validity of EDMs based on the findings of previous research. His study concentrated on using new methods to measure EDMs, implying that EDMs provided valid data (Nason, 2001).

The third question concerns the limitations of the use of EDMs, limitations we have to bear in mind. First, there are differences in the amount of time MPs spend in the House of Commons. Some of them devote many hours in attendance when the House is in session, while others have professional and business interests and thus spend much less time in the House. Second, some MPs are quite ready to sign motions that come their way, while others are cautious and hardly ever support a motion. Third, sometimes a motion is worded ambiguously, so it is difficult to draw precise conclusions about the views of those who sign it (Richards 1962; Turner 1963). Fourth, any attempt to estimate the opinions of a group of MPs about an issue based on the signatures on an EDM depends fundamentally on our ability to predict the balance of opinion among those who did not sign EDMs related to this policy area (Franklin and Tappin, 1977: 68). In summation, there is agreement among scholars that EDMs provide available and useful data we can use in order to investigate MPs' behaviour. The current research, however, will use EDMs in a different way than previous studies have. It will use EDMs to examine the ability of the government and the opposition in the UK parliament to set an agenda.

### ***How EDMs were researched***

Several research methodologies have been used in order to examine EDMs. Franklin and Tappin (1977) used interviews, while Leece and Berrington (1977) conducted a Guttman scaling of EDM data. One aim of Nason's (2001) research was to subject recent EDMs to novel statistical analysis. He used exploratory multivariate techniques, one of which was factor analysis, in order to rank a set of items described as breaches of discipline. One of these breaches of discipline was the critical EDM. Bailey and Nason (2008) used the Feature selection as a

valuable tool which can 'reduce dimensionality and allow for easier subsequent analysis and interpretation of results' (Bailey and Nason, 2008: 421). Furthermore, they used a range of statistical techniques, such as the Jaccard coefficient, to 'weigh' groups of EDMs on similar issues (Bailey and Nason, 2008, p. 398). As we can see, most scholars combined qualitative and quantitative methods. Nason (2001) encouraged scholars to try other alternative methods to test EDMs. The current research embraces Nason's advice by examining EDMs using various statistical analyses and adding content analysis to construct a comprehensive picture about the way MPs use EDMs in order to set their agenda.

### ***Explanations about the way MPs use EDMs.***

Scholars try to understand who uses EDMs, how they have been used and what phenomena they explain. Regarding the question of 'who', Finer et al. (1961) and Nason (2001) found that variables such as age, gender, region, education, occupation and year of entry into parliament can explain the profiles of the backbenchers (Finer et al. 1961) and the degree of MP grouping (Nason 2001: 2). Regarding the question of what phenomena they explain, Nason discovered a strong political party structure (Nason, 2001: 24). Leece and Berrington distinguished between backbenchers of the same party using EDMs (Leece and Berrington, 1977). Crowe showed that one of the breaks of discipline is the critical EDM (Crowe, 1983). The use of EDMs has become part of a sensitive communications system for transmitting attitudes to the government and party leaders from the backbenches (Franklin and Tappin, 1977). Furthermore, MPs who support an EDM do so either because they have been asked to by the initiating MP or because they happen to agree with the motion. However, MPs differ in their readiness to take such action (Franklin and Tappin 1977). Bailey and Nason (2008) proposed using the signing of EDMs to gauge the cohesiveness of political parties and illustrated the link between EDMs and political events during the recent 2005/6 parliamentary session. They found that cohesion levels tend to be much greater for the more recently tabled EDMs (Bailey and Nason 2008:169). Furthermore, foreign issues brought all three major parties together, while congratulatory and sporting EDMs were often the ones which caused the most dissention within the parties (Bailey and Nason 2008: 426).

Concerning the question of 'how has it been used', MPs consider the EDM a convenient means of putting their opinions on record in a way that it is not limited by considerations of party loyalty or the pressures of the parliamentary timetable (Franklin and Tappin, 1977: 53). They suggest seeing EDMs as reflecting the informal grouping of trust and respect in the House (Franklin and

Tappin 1977: 58).

Richards criticized the fact that little attention is paid to the large number of motions which attract support from both sides of the House (Richards 1962: 339). The current research will analyze those EDMs in an attempt to understand the content that attracts support from both sides of the House.

As mentioned previously, the research about EDMs is partial and incomplete, but the available data can provide broad operational leeway for studying EDMs.

Nason's study only scratched the surface of what might be extracted from the EDM data (Nason 2001: 24) and he encouraged other scholars to try alternative ways of examining the EDMs' data (Nason 2001: 2). The current research responds to Nason's challenge by extending Cox and McCubbins' cartel model (Cox and McCubbins, 2005) into this new area in order to examine how MPs use EDMs to set their agenda.

### **The Cartel Model**

Cox and McCubbins' cartel model introduces a concept called agenda power, which was defined by Akirav, Cox and McCubbins as the ability to decide what questions will be formally considered in a legislative assembly (Akirav, Cox and McCubbins 2010: 1). In this study the term agenda power will be used to describe the amount of support for a particular motion, evidenced by the number of supporting signatures that appear on EDMs (Finer et al., 1961; Franklin and Tappin, 1977; Crowe, 1983; Bailey and Nason, 2008). The study will also use the concept of negative agenda power, defined as the ability to block or significantly delay MPs from initiating and signing EDMs. The study will examine Tony Blair's third (and last) government in the UK in light of eight hypotheses that will be tested using recently available Early Day Motions data from the UK's parliament web site. The content of EDMs which received a large number of supportive signatures will be examined using content analysis.

### **Tony Blair's Government**

This research will discuss the UK Parliament from 2005 to 2007, from Blair's third victory to his reassignment. The 2005 UK general election was held on Thursday, 5 May 2005 to elect members to the House of Commons. The Labour Party under Tony Blair won its third consecutive victory, with a reduced overall majority of 55.2 percent of the seats (356 out of 646). The Conservative Party gained 30.7 percent of the seats (198 out of 646). The Liberal Democrat Party won 9.6 percent of the seats (62 out of 646). The rest of the small parties won 36 seats.

Following the election results, Labour remained in power and Tony Blair remained Prime Minister, reshuffling government positions over the following weekend, with formal announcements made on 9 May 2005. The most senior positions of Chancellor, Home Secretary and Foreign Secretary remained the same, but a few new faces were added. The official opposition remained the Conservative Party. The new Parliament met on 11 May for the election of the Speaker of the House of Commons. During his time in parliament, Blair raised taxes, introduced new employment rights, introduced significant constitutional reforms, promoted new rights for gay people in the Civil Partnership Act 2004, and signed treaties integrating Britain more closely with the EU. He introduced substantial market-based reforms in the education and health sectors, introduced student tuition fees, sought to reduce certain categories of welfare payments, and introduced tough anti-terrorism and identity card legislation. In foreign affairs, Blair strongly supported the United States' foreign policy, notably by participating in the invasions of Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003. Following the Omagh Bombing (which killed 29 people and wounded hundreds) on 15 August 1998 by dissidents opposed to the peace process, Blair visited the County Tyrone town and met with victims at Belfast's Royal Victoria Hospital. That visit made a significant contribution towards the Northern Ireland Peace Process formalized in the Good Friday Agreement. On 24 June Blair formally handed over the leadership of the Labour Party to Gordon Brown at a special party conference in Manchester. Blair tendered his resignation as Prime Minister of the United Kingdom to the Queen on 27 June 2007.

### **EDMS in Blair's government**

Based on the discussion of EDMs and given the brief history of Blair's government outline above, I can make several predictions about EDMs from 2005 to 2007:

H1: The rate of EDMs initiated by government MPs should be lower than that of EDMs initiated by opposition MPs.

H2: The rate of EDMs initiated by frontbench MPs should be lower than that of EDMs initiated by backbench MPs.

H3: Government MPs will support EDMs less often than opposition MPs.

H4: The number of government MPs that support an EDM initiated by government MPs will be greater than the number of government MPs that support an EDM initiated by opposition MPs.



H5: There will be a difference between frontbench MPs and backbench MPs that support an EDM initiated by government MPs.

H6: The number of opposition MPs that support an EDM initiated by opposition MPs will be greater than the number of opposition MPs that support an EDM initiated by government MPs.

H7: There will be a difference between frontbench MPs and backbench MPs that support an EDM initiated by opposition MPs.

H8: The ratio of the number of supporters from opposition MPs to the number of supporters from government MPs will be greater than 1. In other words, any given EDM will have more opposition MPs supporting it than government MPs.

## Data

To test the hypotheses I gathered data on EDMs proposed between 2005 and 2007 from the UK Parliament's web site. (I sampled 1021 EDMs and 100 amendments to these EDMs). I identified the initiator of the EDM; identified whether the initiator was a backbencher or a frontbencher; identified the initiator's affiliation (opposition/government); identified the number of supporters of the EDM; and then calculated the ratio of support for each EDM (the number of opposition supporters divided by the number of coalition supporters).

This EDM data set is similar to Nason's (2001) data set; he analyzed about 550 MPs on about 1200 motions while I analyzed 646 MPs on 1021 EDMs.

As suggested by previous scholars the current research will use different kinds of research methods, combining statistical analysis and content analysis (Finer et al. 1961; Franklin and Tappin 1977; Nason 2001; Bailey and Nason 2008).

## Analysis

H1: The rate of EDMs initiated by government MPs should be lower than that of EDMs initiated by opposition MPs.

Out of 1112 EDMs, 1103 were valid. The government MPs initiated 573 EDMs (51.9 percent of all EDMs) while the opposition MPs initiated 530 (48.1 percent of all EDMs). While the hypothesis posited that opposition MPs would make greater use of EDMs to force the government to respond to an issue raised by the

opposition, the data show that both government MPs and opposition MPs use EDMs in almost the same manner. Thus, H1 is not supported. Previous research about EDMs did not consider the variable of opposition/government as an explanatory variable in describing the use of the EDM, so the findings of H1 are consistent with the literature.

In order to determine whether the difference was between backbench MPs and frontbench MPs rather than between opposition and government MPs, I examined hypothesis H2.

H2: The rate of EDMs initiated by frontbench MPs should be lower than that of EDMs initiated by backbench MPs.

I (use of first person singular NOT encouraged in academic writing) We sampled 505 EDMs and tested H2 on them; out of 505 EDMs 499 were valid. The frontbench MPs initiated 261 EDMs (52.3 percent of all EDMs) while the backbench MPs initiated 238 (47.7 percent of all EDMs). Thus, hypothesis H2 is not supported. The literature talks about the activities of backbench MPs (Finer et al. 1961; Nason, 2001) but the findings at this point of the research do not support the tendency mentioned by them. I questioned why the current data was inconsistent with the literature. In order to solve the puzzle I ran a  $\chi^2$  test on the initiators' affiliation and their status as either frontbenchers or backbenchers. Backbench MPs from the government and frontbench MPs from the opposition tend to initiate more EDMs than frontbenchers from the government and backbenchers from the opposition ( $\chi^2=135.674$ ,  $\text{sig}=0.000$ ).

Here we can see that there are two specific groups that use EDMs more frequently and therefore consider EDMs as a relevant tool for setting their agenda. Being a backbencher alone does not provide an adequate explanation for the use or lack of use of EDMs. We can obtain a better explanation when we combine the variable of being a front or backbencher with the opposition/government variable.

As previously mentioned, each EDM can be supported by MPs from any party. The current research uses the negative agenda power variable from Cox and McCubbins' cartel model to measure the number of supporting signatures on an EDM. Therefore, the number of supporting signatures for each EDM can be considered a measurement of an MP's ability to set his or her agenda and to convince his or her colleagues about the need for considering the issue rose in the EDM.

H3: Government MPs will support EDMs less often than opposition MPs.

I found that an average of 27 government MPs supported EDMs while an average of 30 opposition MPs did so. The

median was 18 MPs for the government and 19 MPs for the opposition; the mode was 0 for the government and 1 for the opposition. Therefore, hypothesis H3 is supported. Furthermore, these data show us that there is enormous variation among the MPs regarding their support for an EDM, both in the government and in the opposition. These findings are consistent with previous research, which explains the variation between MPs regarding the number of supportive signatures (Franklin and Tappin 1977; Bailey and Nason 2008). Given that government MPs support fewer EDMs than opposition MPs, I wondered if government MPs were more likely to support their colleagues from the government or their opponents from the opposition.

H4: The number of government MPs that support an EDM initiated by government MPs will be greater than the number of government MPs that support an EDM initiated by opposition MPs.

I ran a t test for independent samples and found that 38 government MPs on average supported an EDM initiated by a government MP, while 15 opposition MPs on average supported an EDM initiated by a government MP. The result was significant ( $t=13.477$ ,  $\text{Sig}=0.00$ ), so hypothesis H4 is supported. The results make sense. MPs from the same side of the aisle will tend to band together and help each other. This finding is consistent with Nason's (2001) study which found that support for EDMs was strong along party lines. The question is whether the same pattern would be evident between front and backbench MPs.

H5: There will be a difference between frontbench MPs and backbench MPs in the way they support an EDM initiated by government MPs.

In order to test this hypothesis I ran a t test for independent samples. The results show that 21 frontbench MPs on average supported an EDM initiated by a government MP, while 33 backbench MPs on average supported an EDM initiated by a government MP. The result was significant ( $t=-4.278$ ,  $\text{Sig}=0.00$ ), so hypothesis H5 is supported. Indeed, it was surprising to see that backbench MPs are more supportive of EDMs initiated by government MPs than frontbench MPs, but we have to remember that backbench MPs are not a homogeneous group. The backbench contains MPs from the opposition and from the government who use parliamentary tools in a different manner from one another.

H6: The number of opposition MPs that support an EDM initiated by opposition MPs will be greater than the number of opposition MPs that support an EDM initiated by government MPs.

I ran a t test for independent samples and found that 37 opposition MPs on average supported an EDM initiated by opposition MPs, while 25 government MPs on average supported an EDM initiated by opposition MPs. The result was significant ( $t=-6.5$ ,  $\text{Sig}=0.00$ ), so hypothesis H6 is supported. These findings are also consistent with Nason's (2001) findings about a strong political party structure as a variable for explaining the use of EDMs. The next hypothesis asks whether the same pattern will be evident when comparing frontbench MPs with backbench MPs.

H7: There will be a difference between frontbench MPs and backbench MPs that support an EDM initiated by opposition MPs.

The t test results show that 25 backbencher MPs on average supported an EDM initiated by opposition MPs, while 40 frontbencher MPs on average supported an EDM initiated by opposition MPs. The results were significant, so hypothesis H7 is supported ( $t=4.532$ ,  $\text{sig}=0.00$ ).

We may ask, why do frontbenchers tend to support the EDMs of opposition MPs rather than the contrary? One of the answers is that some of the frontbenchers are from the opposition, so this is a good way to help their colleagues set their agenda. A second answer is that some of the frontbenchers from the government may not be satisfied with the government's actions. By supporting the EDM, they can express their discontent with their own government.

In summation, the first two hypotheses about the initiation of EDMs were not supported, indicating that variables such as government affiliation and position as front or backbench MPs are not explanatory variables about the initiation of EDMs. However, all of the hypotheses pertaining to support of EDMs were shown to be correct. In the light of these findings we can construct a measure of the variable agenda power by using the number of supporting signatures for each EDM. By doing so, we can extend Cox and McCubbins' cartel model into new territory.

### **The proportion index**

The next part of the analysis tries to establish a new way to measure the power of the supporting signatures. Since any MP can sign and support an EDM, it would be interesting to determine what proportion of supporters for any given EDM comes from the government and what proportion comes from the opposition. To calculate this number, I constructed the proportion index. The proportion index measures the opposition's power. For any given EDM, if the index is greater than 1, then more

opposition MPs supported it than government MPs. If the index is less than 1, more government MPs supported the EDM than opposition MPs.

H8: The ratio of the number of supporters from opposition MPs to the number of supporters from government MPs will be greater than 1. In other words, any given EDM will have more opposition MPs supporting it than government MPs.

There were 979 valid EDMs (in 133 cases the denominator was 0). The average proportion was 2.9, the median was 0.85, the mode was 0 and the standard deviation was 8.721. Therefore, hypothesis H8 is supported. As we thought, opposition MPs predominate over government MPs in their support for EDMs. Perhaps opposition MPs think that by adding their support to an EDM they can force the issue so that the government will respond with their support. We can say, therefore, that the proportion index shows us the opposition's ability to set its agenda.

### Understanding the content of EDMs

In order to understand the content of the EDMs I conducted a content analysis of each one. I determined that 34 out of 1021 EDMs dealt with UK armed forces in Iraq and Afghanistan during 2007. EDMs with multiple supporters were about health care, welfare and the war situation (Iraq and refugee problems). Furthermore, there were 93 amendments to the 1021 EDMs (almost 10 percent).

Reading the content of the EDMs strengthens support for the use of the proportion index. For example, EDM No. 128 had 362 supporters, 126 from the government and 236 from the opposition. In this case the proportion index is 1.87. The EDM was initiated by an MP from the Conservative Party (Theresa May), which was at that time in the opposition. The EDM is about the rights of separated parents to have a legal presumption of contact with their children, so that both parents can continue to raise their children and the children are able to benefit from being parented by both, as well receive the benefit of contact with any grandparents and extended family members willing and able to play a role in their upbringing. This EDM is one of consensus, so MPs from both the government and the opposition could support it, even though the opposition MPs supported this EDM at almost twice the rate as government MPs.

EDM No.178 had 412 supporters, 202 from the government and 210 from the opposition. In this case the proportion index is 1.04. The EDM was initiated by an MP from the Labour Party (Michael and Docherty, 2004), which at that time was in the government. The EDM is about the threat of climate change. The EDM welcomes

the cross-party agreement in favour of major cuts in greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. Again, this is a consensus EDM; both opposition MPs and government MPs supported the initiation almost equally.

EDM No.393 had 351 supporters, 148 from the government and 203 from the opposition. In this case the proportion index is 1.37. The EDM was initiated by an MP from the Liberal Democrat Party (Paul Burstow), which was then in the opposition. The EDM deals with the 100,000 children who run away from home or care each year. The EDM welcomes the Children's Society's Safe and Sound campaign and calls on all local authorities to put into place the safeguards recommended by the Department of Health to protect young runaways. The EDM is consensual; both opposition MPs and government MPs supported the initiation with a bigger share going to the opposition.

EDM No. 641 had 363 supporters, 170 from the government and 193 from the opposition. In this case the proportion index is 1.14. The EDM was initiated by an MP from the Liberal Democrat Party (Julia Goldsworthy), which was then in the opposition. The subject of the EDM is the Sustainable Communities Bill introduced into the House before the General Election and supported by over 200 MPs. The EDM is consensual; both opposition MPs and government MPs supported the initiation with a bigger share going to the opposition.

EDM No.679 had 275 supporters, 162 from the government and 113 from the opposition. In this case the proportion index is 0.7. The EDM was initiated by an MP from the Labour Party (John Battle), which was in the government. The subject of the EDM is eradicating poverty through fair trade. Battle believes that the UK should not push developing countries to open up their markets but should respect their right to decide on trade policies that will help them end poverty, respect workers' rights and protect their environment.

In summation, EDMs with a significant number of supporters, both from the government and the opposition, are consensual ones; through cooperation between the opposition and the government, UK MPs can set their agenda.

Besides the consensual EDMs, there are EDMs with many supporters. Nason (2001) found that the EDM with the largest number of signatures was about Warm Homes and Energy Conservation put down on 25 January 2000 with 392 signatures (Nason 2001, p. 7) However, these EDMs originated only from the opposition and had no significant support or even minor support from the government. For example, an opposition MP from the Conservative Party named William Cash tabled EDM No. 607; he managed to get 133 opposition supporters, but just 18 government supporters. The proportion index in this case is a startling 7.39. That EDM deals with "the European Directive 2002/46/EC and the judgment of the European Court of Justice on that



Directive relating to food supplements shall not have effect in the United Kingdom".

Henry Bellingham, an opposition MP who was also from the Conservative Party, tabled EDM No. 651. This EDM received the support of 139 opposition supporters and 41 government supporters. The proportion index in this case is 3.39. This EDM deals with a helicopter crash that had happened on 2 June 1994. The MP asked the government to revisit the findings of the crash investigation.

An opposition MP from the Democratic Unionist Party, Gregory Campbell, tabled EDM No. 737. This EDM had 15 opposition supporters and 1 government supporter; the proportion index in this case is 15! The EDM deals with British passports for UK residents. MP Campbell says that "this House acknowledges the significant anomaly which exists in Northern Ireland whereby people in Northern Ireland who were not born in the Republic of Ireland can choose to have an Irish passport with no naturalisation process being required, while those born in the Republic since 1949, but living for many years since in Northern Ireland paying UK taxes and voting in UK elections can only choose to have a British passport after going through such a naturalisation process; and calls upon the Government to rectify this anomaly as a matter of urgency".

A Liberal Democrat Party opposition MP, Mark Oaten, tabled EDM No. 728. This EDM had 124 supporters from the opposition and 39 government supporters. The proportion index in this case is 3.18. The EDM deals with a health issue--hypothyroidism--and the importance of raising awareness of it.

EDM No. 752 had 101 opposition supporters and none from the government. The EDM was initiated by an opposition MP from the Conservative party, Andrew Lansley. The EDM deals with the closure of community hospitals.

EDM No. 813 tells us another story. It was initiated by a government MP from the Labour Party, Judy Mallaber. The EDM had 128 opposition supporters and none from the government. MP Mallaber expressed concern at the way in which the government developed its proposals to reconfigure the role of the primary care trusts (PCTs). She called for the ministers to review the consultation process and withdraw these proposals until elected representatives, healthcare managers, and patient groups had the opportunity to examine the impact that they would have on the provision of health services in their areas.

EDM No. 857 had the highest proportion index: 106, with 106 supporters from the opposition and just one from the government. This EDM was initiated by an opposition MP from the Conservative Party, Michael Howard. The EDM is about fair, just and free trade. The MP contended that a fair and just world trading system is vital if poverty is to be eradicated. Furthermore, the MP believed that

"the British Government should champion the benefits of free trade and push the EU and US to scrap their immoral and hypocritical trade subsidies and tariffs, particularly in the agricultural sector, in order to secure a breakthrough in world trade talks in Hong Kong in December".

Up until now we have tried to understand the ability of the opposition and the government to set its agenda by EDMs using the proportion index. In order to examine whether the index is affected by whether the EDM is initiated by the government or by the opposition, I ran a t test for independent samples. I found that when an MP from the government initiates the EDM the average proportion is 0.649, while when an MP from the opposition initiates the EDM, the average proportion is 6.0122. ( $t=-9.940$ ,  $sig=0.00$ )

Running an ANOVA test enables us to see whether the index is affected by party affiliation. The results show that the test is significant ( $F=43.162$ ,  $sig=0.000$ ), but the difference was not the same for different parties. For example, between the Democratic Unionist Party (opposition) and the Labour Party (coalition) the average proportion was 5.9; between the Liberal Democrats (opposition) and the Conservative Party (opposition) the average proportion was 6.88; between the Labour Party (coalition) and the Conservative Party (opposition) the average proportion was -8.78; and between the Conservative Party (opposition) and the Scottish National Party (opposition) the average proportion was 5.906. All those comparisons are significant while other options are not.

### **The critical mass index**

The final test for my EDM analysis was to find the critical mass for the variable of the number of supporters. Computation of this number would help determine negative agenda power, namely, the ability of the government and of the opposition to block or significantly delay support for an EDM. Fact sheet P3 of the House of Commons Information Office notes that "in an average Session only about six or seven EDMs reach over 200 signatures, but perhaps 70 or 80 get over 100 signatures" (p. 5). Therefore, I divided the number of supporting signatures into four groups: very small number (0-33), small number (34-99), large number (100-199) and very large amount (200 – up).

Table 1 shows the frequency of the opposition support; most of the EDMs, 68.4 percent, had a very small number of supporting signatures (0-33). Moving up the scale we can see that 26 percent of the EDMs received between 34 and 99 supporting signatures. The point of 100 signatures is defined in this research as the critical point of support, based on evidence mentioned in fact sheet P3. Just 5.2 percent of the EDMs received between 100 and 199 supporting signatures, while only 0.3

**Table 1:** Frequency of opposition support\*.

Ordinary Scale	Number of supporters	Percentage
Very small number	0-33	68.4% (594n)
Small number	34-99	26% (226n)
Large number	100-199	5.2% (45n)
Very large number	200-236	0.3% (3n)

\*An interesting piece of data: 30 MPs gave zero support, constituting 2.7 percent of the opposition support of EDMs.

**Table 2.** Frequency of government support\*.

Ordinary Scale	Number of supporters	Percentage
Very small number	0-33	70.7%(613n)
Small number	34-99	25.4% (220n)
Large number	100-199	3.7% (32n)
Very large number	200-202	0.2% (2n)

\*Interesting data: 125 MPs gave zero support, constituting 11 percent of the coalition's support of EDMs.

percent of the EDMs received more than 200 supporting signatures.

Using the critical mass point can help us determine that the opposition set its agenda when an EDM received more than 100 supporting signatures (almost one-fifth of the House members).

Table 2 shows a similar picture with regard to the government's supporting signatures: most of the EDMs, 70.7 percent, received a small number of supporting signatures (0-33); 25.4 percent of the EDMs received between 34 and 99 supporting signatures. When we reach the turning point, we find that just 3.7 percent of the EDMs received between 100 and 199 supporting signatures and only 0.2 percent of the EDMs received more than 200 supporting signatures.

## CONCLUSIONS

Setting the agenda is an important issue in legislative studies. Therefore, expanding previous models which examined the ability of the government and the opposition to set its agenda is important, too. In this paper, I have tried to extend Cox and McCubbins' cartel model by using EDMs instead of legislation and by developing new indices, including a proportion index and a critical mass index, to examine the ability of the UK government and the opposition to set their agenda.

Six out of eight hypotheses were supported, providing explanations about the way MPs use support for EDMs in the UK parliament. As previous scholars have noted, MPs make frequent and extensive use of EDMs. Therefore, they can be used as valid data to examine MPs' behaviour. In this study I tried a novel use for EDMs as a means of determining the ability of UK MPs to set their agenda by using EDMs.

The previous literature looked at the procedures in which governments can control their agenda (Huber 1992; Wilkerson 1999; Rasch 2000; Cox, Heller and McCubbins 2008) and the effectiveness of those procedures (Doring 1995; Marshall 2002; Krehbiel 2007). In this paper I show that the EDM procedures focus on the publicity initiated by the EDM's initiators and supporters. Hence, the government can use the Speaker's power to deal with EDMs with which it is not comfortable, but the government cannot block initiation of EDMs nor supporters' signatures. Therefore, the opposition and the backbenchers in UK can use EDMs to set their agenda by raising an issue in public and gathering a large number of supporters.

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