Explaining MPs' Communication to their Constituents: Evidence from the UK House of Commons

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Abstract

Everyone agrees that members of parliaments (MPs) should keep in touch with the people they represent. Yet some MPs invest more in communication with their constituency than others. We approach this problem with data from the parliamentary communication allowance in the United Kingdom, where all MPs had the same amount of budget to reach out proactively to their electors. We base our analysis on two fundamental assumptions – that re-election is the main goal of legislators and that communication to signal trustworthiness is one way of securing their re-election. We then examine the impact of electoral prospects, constituency characteristics, and parliamentary behaviour on communication to constituents. We find evidence that, even in the absence of budgetary constraints, MPs' constituency communication depends on challenges to their re-election.

Keywords

communication allowance, House of Commons, members of parliament, parliamentary communication, re-election, representation

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Rarely is there so broad a consensus in politics as the understanding that members of parliaments (MPs) should keep in touch with the people they represent (Leston-Bandeira, 2012). It was not always this way, and until the mid-twentieth century, people in the United Kingdom hardly ever had a visit to their constituency – let alone a personal correspondence – from their MP (Mitchell, 1982). Since then, both the demand for and supply of constituency communication have soared. On one hand, constituents demand increasingly more of their MPs' attention (Norton, 2014), expecting them to be available at all times. On the other, parliament's connection with the public has become a major issue for policy-makers especially due to growing political apathy among voters (Leston-Bandeira, 2012). Both trends have led parliaments to invest considerably in the development of opportunities for access by and direct contacts with citizens, including an increase in the resources available for MPs to communicate with their constituents (Norton, 2007). Parties and parliaments alike encourage their members with additional means to reach out to the people because MPs can pass on party political messages on while engaging the public with parliamentary democracy. As a result, MPs are involved in supplying more and more communication to their constituents themselves (Zittel, 2003; Norton, 2007; Williamson, 2009; Leston-Bandeira, 2012).

Yet despite the general consensus on its importance, some MPs invest more in communication with their constituency than others. We approach this puzzle by examining one of the most comprehensive resources ever provided to MPs – the parliamentary communication allowance in the United Kingdom. Established in 2007 'to help Members inform their constituents about what they have been doing and to consult them on issues of importance to them locally' (House of Commons, 2007a: 13) and covering a wide variety of communication expenses, its design and application make it ideal as an indicator of MPs' investments in communication with their constituents. For the analysis, we draw on two basic

assumptions – namely that re-election is the main goal of legislators and that communication to signal trustworthiness is one way of securing that re-election – and examine the impact of electoral prospects, constituency characteristics, and parliamentary behaviour.

The aim is to contribute to our understanding of constituency communication in three ways. First, much of what we know about the communication between legislators and their constituents originates from studies on the US Congress. The advent of the Internet and social media has also generated a broader literature on digital communication efforts of parliamentarians in Europe, but non-digital means of communication have rarely been the object of studies on European legislatures due to difficulties of data access. Although based on a single case, which makes it more difficult to generalise our findings, our study thus adds to our understanding of overall communication efforts within a European legislature. Second, most studies test explanations for a single means of communicating with citizens. Yet single means may tell us little about the overall communication activities of individual legislators given the variety of communication means at their disposal. In addition, MPs may have preferences for different ways of communication due to not only personal inclination (Marcinkowski and Metag, 2014), but also the variation in costs associated with different communication instruments. Here, the theoretical contribution of our analysis lies in testing explanations for the *overall investment in communication in the absence of budgetary constraints*. Finally, and with regard to the *period under investigation*, much of the literature focuses on legislators' communication during election campaigns while our study adds crucial information on MPs' constituency communication in non-election periods. This also allows us to distinguish constituency communication from (party) political campaigning.

Explaining Communication

Much of the literature on the relationship between legislators and citizens focuses on the electoral connection, yet decades ago Fenno already urged political scientists 'to spend a little less of our time explaining votes and a little more of our time *explaining explanations*' (1978: 141, italics in the original). And scholars have heeded his call: A number of studies have analysed the constituency communication by members of the US Congress, focusing mainly on the franking privilege. They show not only that securing electoral support is one of the primary purposes for sending franked mail to constituents, but also that electoral conditions affect the extent of communication, with members from marginal seats spending significantly more on direct mail to their constitutes than those from safe seats (Goodman and Parker, 2010; Cover, 1980; Hall et al., 2012; Lariscy and Tinkham, 1996; Lipinski, 2004).

Academic interest in constituency communication grew further, expanding beyond the US Congress, especially with the advent of the Internet and new communication means such as websites, e-newsletters, email and social media platforms such as Twitter (see Jungherr, 2016; Gibson et al., 2014; Umit, 2017b). Existing research on legislatures outside the US also indicates that the electoral conditions under which parliamentarians compete may determine what they communicate about, who they communicate with, how and how successfully (André et al., 2013a; Coleman and Spiller, 2003; Umit, 2017a). In European parliamentary systems, candidates are largely elected on the basis of their party affiliation, although the importance of party labels may vary according to the specific electoral system. In the United Kingdom, MPs' individual election campaign efforts or constituency communication have therefore long been seen as having no impact on general election outcomes (Butler and Kavanagh, 1974; Butler and Rose, 1960; Dunleavy and Husbands, 1985; Rose and McAllister, 1986). More recent research has shown, however, that personal reputation is by

no means irrelevant (Butler and Collins, 2001; Jackson and Lilleker, 2004; Lilleker, 2005; Jackson, 2011; see also Cain et al., 1984).

Our theoretical framework rests on two well-known assumptions. First, in line with most of the rational choice literature on legislative behaviour (Katznelson and Weingast, 2005: 8) we accept 'the usual emphasis on re-election' as an important (but not necessarily sole) component of legislators' motivation that 'is reasonable to consider … in isolation' (Cox and McCubbins, 1993: 100; on the hierarchical order of MPs' preferences, see also Strøm, 1997). Second, our framework draws on the basic assumption of agency theory, namely that any delegation of power to an agent creates risks of *agency loss* for the principal, especially the risk that the agent fails to act in the best interest of his principal (*shirking*) or even acts against her interests (*sabotage*) (for a detailed discussion see Akerlof, 1970; Kiewiet and McCubbins, 1991; Brehm and Gates, 1999; Lupia, 2003). As a result, delegation is fraught with a fundamental dilemma: the principal needs the agent to get a task done but cannot trust the agent to act truly in her interest; the agent, in turn, wants to be (re-)assigned the task but will only be authorised if he can convince his principal of his trustworthiness (Behnke, 2007: 14; see also Fenno, 1977: 898–899). For the principal, the most important aim of delegation is thus minimising agency loss. For the agent, on the other hand, the most important aim is to secure continued authorisation – and thus to signal to his principal that he is trustworthy, i.e. persuade her, truthfully or not, that agency loss is indeed negligible. In the following, we therefore argue that constituency communication is one strategic means for MPs to signal trustworthiness to their principals, the constituents.

Communication as Signalling Trustworthiness

In one of the earliest and most influential contributions, Mayhew (1974) argued that legislative behaviour could be best understood if legislators were seen as 'single-minded seekers of reelection' (p. 5), who have to focus on three basic activities to secure that goal:

> One activity is *advertising,* defined here as any effort to disseminate one's name among constituents in such a fashion as to create a favorable image, …*credit claiming,* defined here as acting so as to generate a belief that one is personally responsible for causing … something …desirable [and] *position taking,* defined here as the public enunciation of a judgmental statement on anything likely to be of interest. (Mayhew, 1974: 49–61, italics in the original)

Within parliament, MPs have various means to signal trustworthiness to their electorate. Behnke (2007), for example, argues that legislative agents use ethics rules and codes to signal trustworthiness – by voluntarily committing to ethical norms and rules to guide their conduct. Similarly, parliamentary questions or debates (Auel et al., 2016; Proksch and Slapin, 2015) as well as Early Day Motions (Kellermann, 2013) can be used to communicate policy positions, justifications or simply a positive image. However, citizens will usually not observe most of these activities directly – despite the introduction of parliamentary TV and similar services. BBC Parliament, for example, usually reaches a monthly average of less than 0.1 per cent of all viewers.[1]

Advertising, credit claiming, and position taking will therefore also take the form of communication with constituents – be it directly through face-to-face contacts and speeches, or indirectly through newsletters, letters and emails, Twitter, or personal webpages etc. In this sense, what representatives *communicate* to their electorates can be as important as what they actually *do* when it comes to electoral support (McGraw et al., 1995). In the following therefore we develop our hypotheses based on the basic assumption that the extent to which

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[1] A monthly viewing summary of all British television channels is provided by the Broadcasters Audience Research Board at http://www.barb.co.uk/whats-new/monthly-viewing-summary?_s=4

MPs will invest in communication to signal trustworthiness will depend on (a) the general security of their electoral prospects, (b) characteristics of their constituencies, and (c) their voting behaviour within parliament, especially if the latter deviates from the party line.

Re-election Prospects and Signalling Trustworthiness: The Safe, the Senior and the Retirees

In the above section, we argued that MPs' re-election prospects depend on both – their party's reputation as well as their own. MPs can thus benefit from signalling both, their own as well as their party's trustworthiness. Where, however, trust between the principal and her agent, i.e. the voters and their representative, is already well established, the need to signal trustworthiness, and thus to communicate, lessens (Lipinski, 2004; Kellermann, 2016; Bowler, 2010). Thus, we can expect MPs in safer districts to have less need to signal trustworthiness. This is true independently of whether their voters put trust in their party or their person; they can rely on having already gained a large amount of trust. In turn, MPs in more marginal seats have to try to increase the number of voters trusting them – and at the very least make sure they do not lose any trust until the next election – and thus have far greater incentives to invest in communication (Jackson and Lilleker, 2004).

> H1 *Safe seat holders*: The larger their electoral majority in the last election, i.e. the more secure their re-election, the less the MPs will invest in communication with their constituents.

In particular, long-time incumbents will have built up a reputation with their voters and a relationship of trust – again, based either on their own or their party's positions and performance – otherwise they would not have been repeatedly re-elected. The longer MPs have been incumbents, the longer they have enjoyed a privileged position with regard to visibility, name recognition and the ability to garner votes by providing services to

constituents (Akirav, 2015: 91; Cover, 1980; Edwards et al., 2012). This diminishes the need to signal trustworthiness, and thus to communicate.

> H2 *Seniors*: The longer the incumbency of MPs, the less they will invest in communication with their constituents.

Moreover, where MPs decide to retire from parliament and are thus not competing in the next election at all, the need to signal *their own* trustworthiness evaporates. Since we can assume that MPs standing down still have an interest to further the election prospects of their party, incentives to communicate still exist, but we expect them to be much lower than for MPs still running for office (Edwards et al., 2012).

> H3 *Retirees*: MPs not standing for re-election will invest less in communication with their constituents

Constituency Characteristics and Signalling Trustworthiness: Urbanites and Commuters

Second, we assume electoral incentives will depend also on the characteristics of the constituency that MPs represent, such as the distinction between rural and urban areas as well as distance to parliament (Edwards et al., 2012; Straus et al., 2013). Whether a closer link to the constituency in rural areas increases the focus on constituency service and case work is debated in the literature (Freeman and Richardson, 1996; Norris, 1997; Ellickson and Whistler, 2001; André et al., 2013b), but one can argue that rural constituencies are generally more homogeneous in their political interests. MPs from rural areas can also generally rely on being better known to their constituents due to a slower turnover in the electorate. Urban constituencies, in contrast, are more challenging as changes in the electorate happen more quickly, thus increasing the need for MPs to make their name known and to win over prospective voters continuously. In addition, urban constituencies are generally more heterogeneous in their interests, thus increasing the need to cater to more and more varied

groups of voters. In sum, we therefore expect MPs in urban areas to have greater incentives to invest in communication than MPs in rural constituencies.

> H4 *Urbanites*: The more urban the constituency they represent, the more MPs will
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> invest in communication with their constituents.

Distance to parliament is another constituency characteristic that can affect how much MPs invest in communicating with their constituents. Searing (1994) shows that representing an area that is close to the House of Commons significantly helps MPs to play their constituency role. One straightforward reason is that geographical distance decreases the time that MPs can physically be in their constituencies. Meeting hours of parliament are the same for all its members, but the time it takes for MPs to return to their constituency can vary greatly with distance; MPs representing areas closer to parliament can more easily communicate face-to-face with their constituents or provide constituency services. As Edwards et al. show, greater distance, in turn, has a positive effect on *written* communication, i.e. the use of the franking privilege by US representatives, suggesting 'that members of Congress substitute mailings for trips home' (Edwards et al., 2012: 543). Although distances in the United Kingdom are much shorter than in the United States, we nevertheless expect constituency distance to have an overall positive effect on the communication between MPs and their constituents in the United Kingdom.

> H5 *Commuters*: The greater the distance of their constituency from parliament, the
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> more MPs will invest in communication with their constituents.

Legislative Behaviour and Signalling Trustworthiness: Workhorses and Rebels

Having discussed the impact of re-election prospects and constituency characteristics on the likelihood of MPs to invest in communication, we now turn to parliamentary activity

as an explanatory factor. 'Assuming that [MPs] care about getting re-elected and voters care about MPs' responsiveness, MPs have incentives to communicate their policy proposals and explain their legislative activities to voters' (Saalfeld and Dobmeier, 2012: 314). Therefore, in the following we consider both, the general level of MPs parliamentary activity and what might be called, for want of a better term, deviant activity.

Regarding parliamentary activity, our first assumption here is rather straightforward: the more active MPs are within parliament, i.e. the more often they attend parliamentary votes, the more they actually have to communicate about (i.e. the more issues they will have taken positions on), the more they can advertise themselves as working hard for their constituents and the more they can therefore try to claim credit for both their legislative work and the results. In addition, the classic literature on the US Congress has pointed towards two types of representatives (Matthews, 1959: 1064–1089): the 'show horses', who get all the public attention, and the toiling 'workhorses' that the public never hear about (for a similar distinction see Payne, 1980; Clapp, 1963: 22–23; Müller et al., 2012). This suggests that the workhorses cannot rely on media publicity and thus have to make a greater effort to communicate their activities to their voters to secure re-election. More recent findings on the determinants of legislators' news coverage are mixed, but overall do not strongly contradict this assumption. According to Vos' (2014) meso-analysis of studies investigating news coverage of individual legislators, a number of studies have found workhorses to receive less news coverage (Cook, 1986; Squire, 1988; Sheafer, 2001), while others have found no (Fogarty, 2008, 2012) or only a fairly modest positive effect of parliamentary activity on news coverage (Arnold, 2004; Gershon, 2012; Midtbø, 2011; Tresch, 2009; Tsfati et al., 2010).

H6 *Workhorses*: The more often MPs attend votes in Parliament, the more they invest in communication with their constituents.

Following the logic of media newsworthiness (Galtung and Ruge, 1965; Harcup and O'Neill, 2001), we can also assume that legislators get more media attention when their behaviour deviates from the parliamentary norm, especially if they vote against the party line. According to Kam's (2009) profile effects hypothesis, this enhanced media profile results in electoral benefits (Kam and Zechmeister, 2013; Campbell et al., 2016; Vivyan and Wagner, 2012): The more often an MP votes against the whip, the more he or she has the potential to gain media prominence and, as a result, has to invest less in communication to secure re-election. This assumption receives support from studies showing that rebels are less likely to send e-newsletters (Jackson, 2004) or to have websites (Ward and Lusoli, 2005; Norton, 2007). Even more important in this context is the finding of Campbell et al. (2016) that dissent with the party line signals the MP's integrity and trustworthiness. They show that – even strongly partisan – voters in Britain view dissent as *unconditionally* positive since 'constituents infer from dissent that a legislator is willing to risk punishment and personal standing within his or her party' (Campbell et al., 2016: 2). This implies that rebels not only have less need to communicate with their constituents, they also have little to gain and much to lose by communicating. As the literature indicates, rebels benefit from dissenting votes because they demonstrate their personal integrity in the eyes of their voters. Explanations for dissenting votes, however, may lead part of the rebel's electorate to realise that the rationale for the rebel vote was entirely unrelated to or, worse, in opposition to their own preferences. Crucially, rebels may therefore actually *risk* the benefits by explaining their decision to dissent, as it might lead to disillusionment on the part of voters – a development we assume especially marginal rebels to be most keen to avoid.

H7a *Rebels*: The more often MPs vote against their party line, the less they will invest in communication with their constituents.

H7b *Marginal Rebels:* The more often MPs from *marginal* seats vote against the party line, the less they will invest in communication with their constituents.

Research Design – Measuring and Explaining the Signals

As part of a broader strategy for better connecting the parliament with the public, the House of Commons voted on 28 March 2007 for a new[2] parliamentary allowance to help its members communicate with their constituents about their parliamentary activities. They were able to claim up to £10,000 for the 2007–2008 parliamentary term, increased to £10,400 for the next two terms. From this allowance MPs were to meet expenses for 'regular reports and constituency newsletters, questionnaires and surveys, petitions, targeted communications, contact cards, distribution costs including direct mailing and postage, websites [and] some capital purchases' (House of Commons, 2007a: 13–14), thus covering a multitude of channels and instruments to inform citizens about the parliamentary business of its members. MPs were able to transfer funds from other allowances into the Communications Allowance, but they were not allowed to move funds from the Communications Allowance elsewhere. Designed for the purpose of communicating their parliamentary work, MPs were also not allowed to use the allowance for party political messages or campaigning. The allowance was under close review throughout its three-year existence, and stricter rules – including a closed

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[2] Until the introduction of the new allowance, MPs had been able to cover the cost of some of their communication to the public from different allowances, but this created 'anomalies' and failed to facilitate comprehensive communication between representatives and the represented (House of Commons, 2007b: 3). In addition, Parliament was advised on several occasions to take measures to increase communication between its members and the public (Power Inquiry, 2006; House of Commons, 2004; Hansard, 2005).

period before elections – were introduced before the UK general election of 2010.[3] Misuse was punished.[4]

Our dependent variable, *Expenditure*, is thus the amount in pounds sterling that MPs claimed from the Communications Allowance in a parliamentary term between 2007 and 2010.[5] In 2009, following the pressure by the media and public surrounding the parliamentary expenses scandal, the House of Commons published MPs' allowance claims on its official website – the source of our data. This creates a unique opportunity to analyse parliamentary investment in communication as the allowance provides data on the total level of investment in various communication means that would otherwise be inaccessible. As a measure that includes all communication activities about parliamentary affairs, but one that is regulated to exclude any party-political electoral campaigning, the amount claimed from the Communications Allowance is a very useful indicator of how much MPs invest in communicating with their constituents.

From the 2009–2010 parliamentary term onwards, the UK Parliament website also provides data on the expenses claimed within the different categories of the individual expenditure claims. Although this information is not available for the previous two terms, the data shows that the allowance was spent on items and activities that are all closely related to constituency communication and that expenditure was largely driven by the amount of publications. Figure 1 visualises the individual types of expenditures, demonstrating that the

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[3] After the start of the long campaign on 1 January 2010, MPs were only allowed to use funds from the Communications Allowance for constituency surgeries or previous contractual obligations (Kelly, 2010: 18) – one of the many rules that aimed to separate parliamentary communication from electoral campaigning. For a summary of all the rules for the use of the Communications Allowance, see Appendix A.

[4] The Standards and Privileges Committee found 9 cases of misuse of the Allowance. In one of these cases, for example, the Committee decided that Sadiq Khan MP misused the Allowance by displaying a section of the rose that appears in logo of his party, although there was no mention of the party name in the four-page document (House of Commons, 2007c).

[5] After three parliamentary terms, the Communications Allowance was abolished as an individual expenses category in reaction to the parliamentary expenses scandal in 2009 (Kelso, 2009) and the delegation of responsibility over expenses regulation to the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority (IPSA).

allowance was mainly spent on expenses such as publications and postage costs, advertising constituency surgeries, and maintaining websites. Royal Mail had the largest share, as more than 15 per cent of the overall Communications Allowance spent in 2009–2010 went to the then publicly-owned postal service. With regard to the type of publications, reports and newsletters proved the most popular, but the figure shows that British MPs use a large variety of publications to communicate with their constituents. Likewise, a majority of the equipment purchased seems to be geared towards publications and delivery as well, including risographs to print and franking machines to post in high volume. About 12 per cent was spent on advertising MPs' constituency surgeries, and another one per cent on the other ways that constituents could contact them. Finally, the cost of MPs' websites amounted to about 6 per cent of the overall allowance.

Figure 1. Percentage of Allowance Spent on Individual Types of Expenditure (2009–2010)
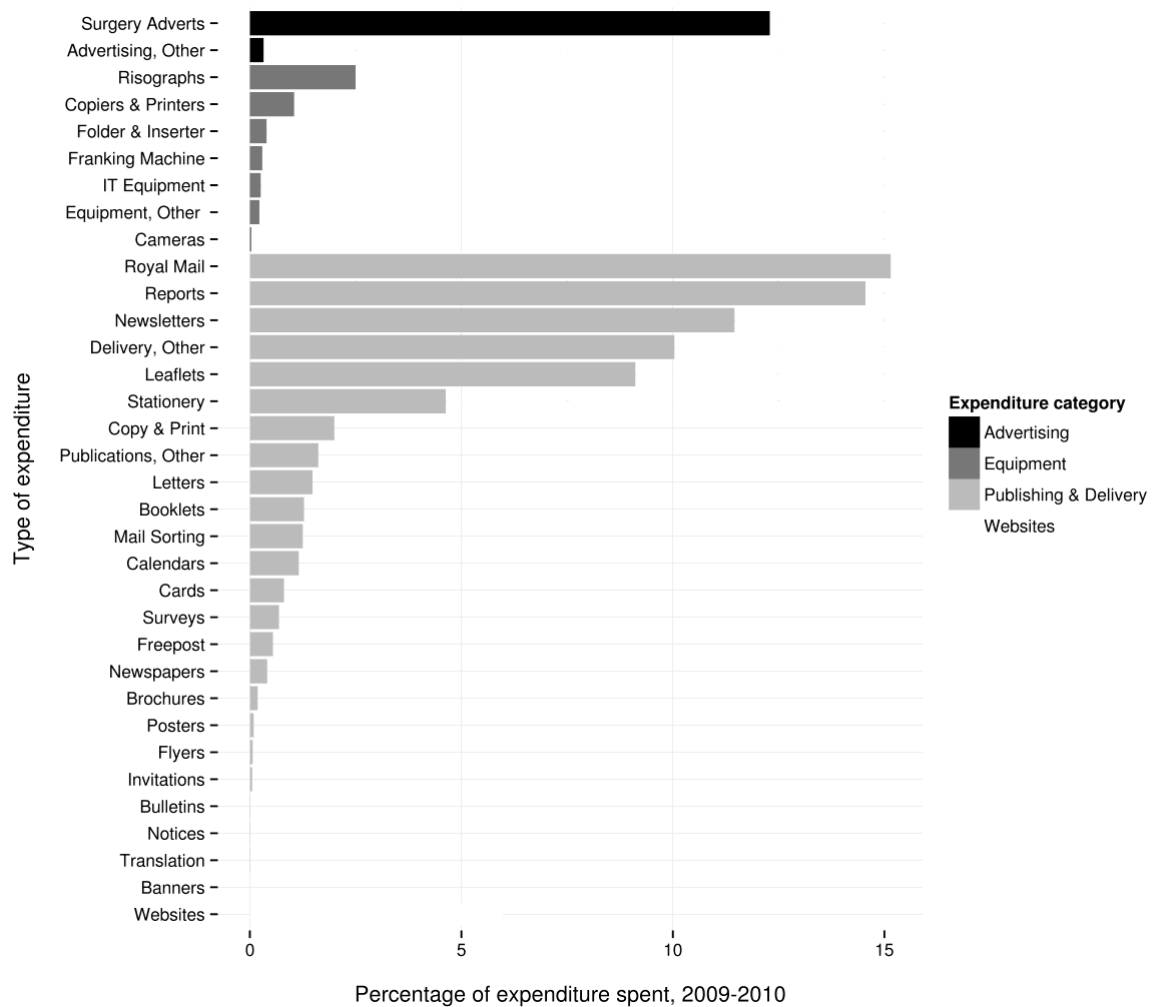

Figure 2 demonstrates how different spender groups of MPs divided their allowance between the four main categories of expenditure. It shows that, regardless of how much they spent on communication, i.e. from less than 3 (0–3k) to over 12 thousand pounds (12k+), most MPs spent a similar share of their allowance on advertising, equipment, and websites. The percentage of publishing and delivery, however, increases until the last spender group. Thus, those who spent more of their allowance did not use the additional funds to purchase more, or more expensive, equipment, but rather to produce and deliver publications. Overall, the data on the expenditure categories support the argument that the Communications Allowance is a good measure of how much MPs communicated to their constituents.

Figure 2. Percentage of Allowance Spent on the Main Categories of Expenditure (2009–2010)
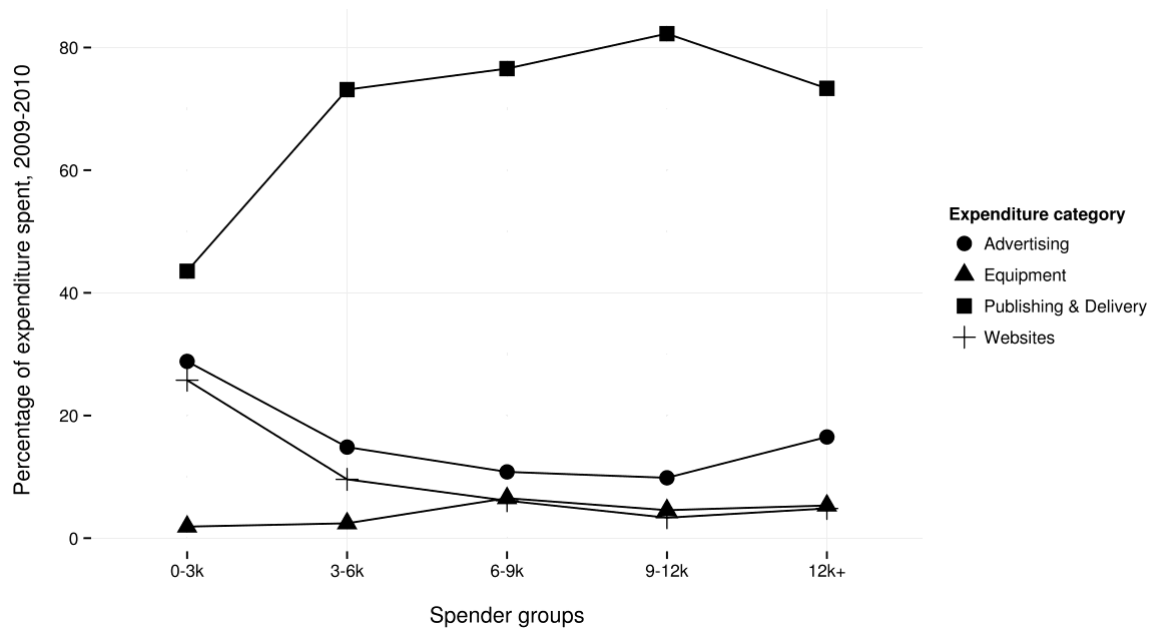
We now turn to a brief description of the independent variables used in this study.

Electoral Majority. This is the percentage difference between the votes for the incumbent MP and the candidate who came second in the most recent elections held in a constituency – i.e. the general election of 2005 unless there was a by-election in that constituency.

Standing Down. This is a binary variable designating whether an MP publicly announced, during or before that parliamentary term, that they would stand down at the following general elections (coded as 1) or not (coded as 0).

Seniority. This is a count variable for the number of years that incumbents had served as an MP at the beginning of each parliamentary term.

Population Density. This variable measures the number of people per hectare in the MP's constituency. The data for this variable come from a report published by the House of Commons Library based on the 2011 Census results (Cracknell et al., 2014). Compared with the Census of 2001, this is closer to the time frame we study, 2007–2010.

Distance. This is a logged variable measuring the distance between Westminster and MPs' constituencies. Taking the postcodes with the highest number of households in each constituency as the destination, we used the Google Maps Application Programming Interface (API) to calculate the driving distances in miles. We then logged these numbers to control for the multiplicative nature of distances.

Attendance. This is the percentage of the votes that MPs attended to vote or to act as a teller during a parliamentary term. For the data, we draw on *The Public Whip* (www.publicwhip.org.uk), a not-for-profit project that publishes the voting history of MPs and Lords in the United Kingdom.

Rebellion. This is the percentage of the occasions that MPs voted against the majority of the members in their party. As for *Attendance*, the data for this variable come from *The Public Whip*.

Finally, we include two control variables for government status and gender as well as dummies for the parliamentary terms 2008–2009 and 2009–2010.

Government. This is a binary variable designating whether an MP is a member of the party in government (coded as 1) or opposition (coded as 0). Throughout the existence of the Communications Allowance, the Labour Party was the only party in government.

Female. This is a binary variable indicating whether an MP is female (coded as 1) or male (coded as 0).

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for these variables.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics.

Variable	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Expenditure	7,132.77	4441.232	0	24,817.00
Electoral Majority	19.21	12.46	0.09	63.84
Seniority	12.73	8.35	1	48.00
Standing Down	0.13	0.34	0	1
Population Density	20.30	25.28	0.06	146.38
Distance	4.63	1.17	0.27	6.64
Attendance	66.21	17.21	0	98.23
Rebellion	1.09	2.15	0	20.85
Government	0.54	0.50	0	1
Female	0.20	0.40	0	1

Before we present our results in the next section, several caveats ought to be discussed: First, we have no data on the communication content, i.e. we can neither investigate what MPs communicate nor assess the quality of the communication. Second, this type of communication is clearly not the only way to signal trustworthiness. Direct contacts, meet and greet, or, especially, constituency service in the surgery are all forms of signalling trustworthiness. Thus, our argument refers to the incentives to invest in communication as *one* strategy *among many*, and not as one in competition with other strategies. Finally, the extent of communication by MPs with their constituents also depends on the frequency with which the former are contacted by the latter. While we have no data on the frequency of such contacts by constituents per MP, their impact is partly controlled for by the fact that the cost of reply letters to constituents was not covered by the Communications Allowance but rather by the provision of House stationery and pre-paid envelopes with an annual limit of, at the time, £7,000 per MP.[6]

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[6] For the annual limits of and the rules for the use of stationery and postage-paid envelopes provided by the House of Commons see http://www.parliament.uk/about/mps-and-lords/members/pay-mps/stationery-spend-hoc/

Results – Strategic Signalling Of Trustworthiness

Before the introduction of the Communications Allowance, the prevailing assumption was that MPs would use their new allowance to the maximum. During the plenary debate over the allowance, MPs predicted the cost of the allowance to be around £6 million for the taxpayer by simply multiplying the number of MPs with the £10,000.[7] The overview in Table 1 above shows that this was clearly not the case; on average, MPs claimed only a little over 70 per cent of their allowance. Yet there were also relatively large deviations from this mean. While a few MPs preferred not to use their allowance at all, others used almost two and a half times their limit by moving funds from other allowances into the Communications Allowance.

A more nuanced visualisation of how MPs used their allowance, however, shows that the predictions were not completely off the actual amount spent, at least for those MPs seeking re-election. Figure 3 brings the binary variable *Standing Down* into the picture and plots *Expenditure* for each parliamentary term that the Communications Allowance was in use. By dividing MPs into two categories according to whether or not they were standing down at the following general election, it shows that MPs who were seeking re-election spent significantly more money on communicating with their constituents. Within this category, MPs on the median (£8,518 across all parliamentary terms) and the upper quartile (£10,372) were somewhat tightly positioned around the limit for the allowance. Compared with MPs who stood down in the 2010 general election, the extreme cases spending double or more of the allowance were mostly among the MPs seeking re-election. A final aspect that the figure lays bare is the difference between the spending behaviour of two groups of MPs *across the*

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[7] Debate on 28 March 2007:
http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200607/cmhansrd/cm070328/debtext/70328-0007.htm

parliamentary terms. While the MPs seeking re-election spent on average more or less the same to communicate with their constituents in three parliamentary terms, the others significantly cut down their communication expenditure as the election year got closer. [8] Therefore, the figure is suggestive of our related hypothesis (*H3*) on *Retirees*.

Figure 3. Communications Expenditure of MPs in the House of Commons (2007–2010)
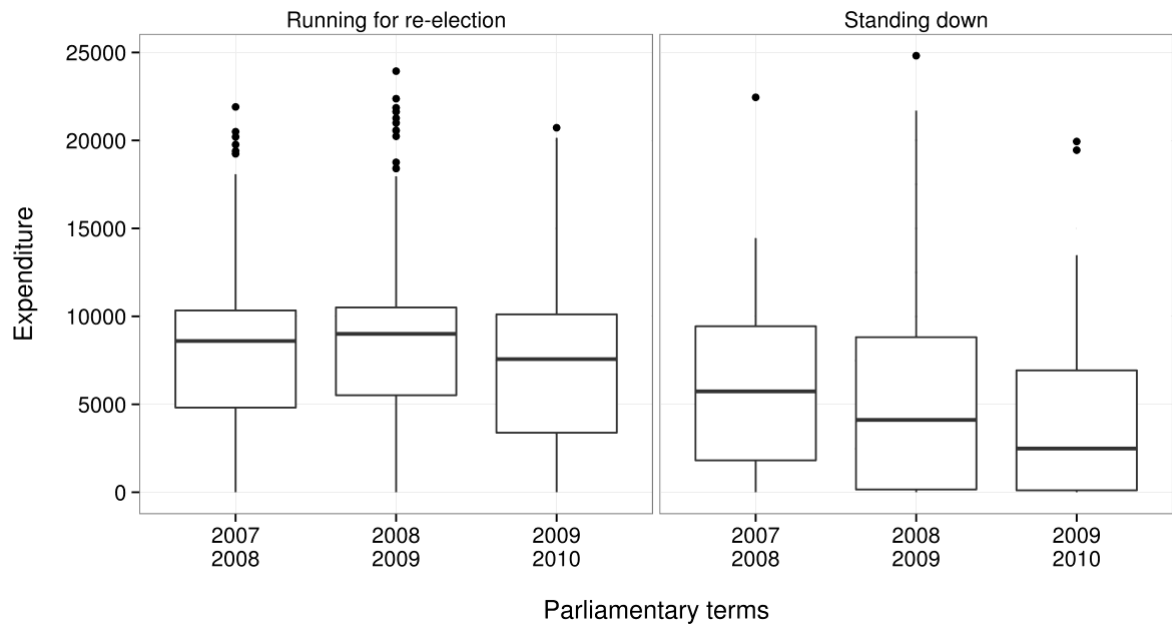
To analyse the causal mechanisms behind MPs' communication with their constituents, we test our data in two ordinary least squares regression models with robust standard errors for MPs and fixed-effects for the parliamentary terms. Table 2 presents the results from these tests. Here, the dependent variable is the amount that MPs claimed from the Communications Allowance in a parliamentary term. The results remain the same (except that the significance level for the final parliamentary term increases) when we adjust the dependent variable to reflect the fact that the allowance was increased by £400 (4%) for the last two terms. Appendix B presents the models with the adjusted dependent variable.

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[8] There were also stricter rules on expenditure from the Communications Allowance prior to the general elections in May 2010, see Footnote 3.

The results support all our theoretical expectations apart from the hypothesis concerning constituency distance (*H5*). In Model 1, the baseline model without any interaction term, we find that the three variables testing the hypotheses on electoral prospects are all negative and statistically significant. To begin with seeking re-election, MPs who had announced that they would be standing down in the following elections invested £2,212.66 less than others in communicating with their constituents. Similarly, electorally safe or senior MPs claimed significantly less allowance to communicate: while each percentage point of majority decreased *Expenditure* by £69.31, every year served as an MP lessened the claims by £56.69. Although these amounts might seem small compared with the coefficient of *Standing Down* at first glance, the differences between safe and marginal or junior and senior MPs can be very large (see the descriptive statistics of *Electoral Majority* and *Seniority* in Table 1 above).

Table 2. Ordinary Least Squares Regression Explaining MPs' Communication to their Constituents

Variable	Model 1		Model 2	
	Coefficient	Std. Error	Coefficient	Std. Error
Electoral Majority	–69.31***	11.79	–77.79***	12.38
Seniority	–56.69**	20.53	–57.91**	20.51
Standing Down	–2212.66***	421.35	–2189.97***	420.76
Population Density	16.36*	6.53	16.27*	6.49
Distance	–87.76	151.38	–81.72	150.90
Attendance	25.89**	9.18	26.05**	9.18
Rebellion	–140.63**	48.76	–291.32***	76.16
Majority X Rebellion			7.52*	3.32
Government	1260.21***	331.07	1259.26***	329.45
Female	78.33	309.82	67.03	310.30
2008–2009	919.39***	159.40	928.92***	155.87
2009–2010	–571.81**	184.27	–563.71**	183.80
Intercept	7184.00***	1086.62	7322.37***	1079.19
N	1913		1913	
Clusters (MPs)	645		645	
R^2	0.186		0.188	

Note: The dependent variable is the amount that MPs claimed from the Communications Allowance in a parliamentary term. 2007–2008 is the excluded parliamentary term. * = $p<0.05$, ** = $p<0.01$, *** = $p<0.001$. Both models employ robust clustered standard errors, where MPs are the clustering variable.

With regard to the hypotheses based on constituency characteristics, there are mixed results. Regarding the rural-urban differentiation, we find that, as we expected, MPs representing more densely populated urban constituencies spend significantly more than MPs from relatively rural constituencies to communicate with their constituents. The need for greater investment in communication for MPs from urban areas is nicely illustrated by Keith Hill, MP, who argued that:

> It is all very well for colleagues presiding over very stable electorates to be somewhat snooty about the uses of the communications allowance; they have the chance of building up long-term relationships with their constituents … many big city seats [meanwhile] have highly transient populations.[9]

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[9] Quote from House of Commons debate on 3 March 2010:
http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200910/cmhansrd/cm100303/halltext/100303h0006.htm

Regarding the constituency distance to parliament, however, there is no such significant effect. This suggests that the distance that MPs have to travel to be in their constituency does not, at least in the UK, significantly change how much they invest in communicating with their constituents.[10]

We find also significant support for our hypotheses on parliamentary activity as the determinants of representative communication. Model 1 shows that *Attendance* is positively and *Rebellion* is negatively significant at the 0.01 level. This means that the more MPs attend votes in parliament, the more these *Workhorses* invest in communicating with their constituents. However, where these votes are against the party line, the *Rebels* do the complete opposite and spend less on their communication with constituents. To be precise, we find that for every per cent of rebellion votes, MPs spent £140.63 less from their Communications Allowance.

Finally, to test Hypothesis 7b, we interact electoral security with dissent. The results, presented in Model 2, support our expectation that rebellious MPs have no incentive to invest in communication, especially if their seat is electorally not safe. This is evident in the positive and statistically significant interaction effect between *Electoral Majority* and *Rebellion*. To visualise this, Figure 4 plots the average marginal effects of *Rebellion* on *Expenditure* based on this model. It shows that the negative effect of voting against the party line on communicating with constituents decreases with increasing majority. For an MP with next to no *Electoral Majority*, being rebellious decreases *Expenditure* by £291.32, yet for an MP with a 20 per cent majority, the effect of the same rebelliousness decreases their investment

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[10] Coding *Distance* as the exact number of miles, instead of taking their logs, yields the same results.

in communicating with constituents by only £141.01. Once MPs are very safe, that is once they have reached an electoral majority of about 25 per cent, the effect becomes insignificant.

Figure 4. Average Marginal Effects of Rebellion on Change in Communications Expenditure, Conditional on Electoral Majority
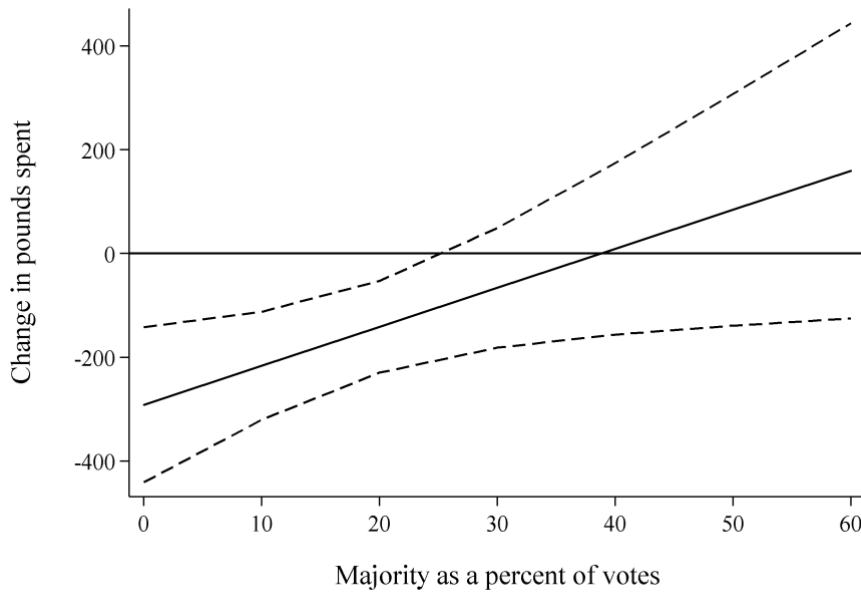
Note: estimates based on Model 2. Dashed lines represent 95 per cent confidence interval.

We controlled for a number of other explanatory factors while reaching these results. To start with, we found significantly different behaviour among MPs from the governing Labour Party compared to their colleagues in opposition: on average, Labour MPs spent £1,260.21 more to communicate with constituents. This contradicts most research as opposition MPs are often found more active communicators, i.e. by asking more questions in parliament (Walgrave et al., 2007; Vliegenthart and Walgrave, 2011) or being more active on social media (Sæbø, 2011; Straus et al., 2013; Golbeck et al., 2010) It is therefore possible that this result is to some extent time sensitive (for similar results during the same time period, see also Golbeck et al., 2010; Graham et al., 2016), with governing Labour MPs under greater pressure to communicate due to the somewhat difficult Prime Ministership of Gordon Brown.

As the Communications Allowance had been proposed by the Labour government, the MPs' attitudes towards the allowance as an expenses category may also have had an impact on this result.

Gender, by contrast, was not a significant factor, and our analysis suggests that female MPs do not differ from male MPs in their communicative behaviour. Finally, time was another factor that we controlled for. Overall, MPs spent significantly more within the second term, between 1 April 2008 and 31 March 2009. This indicates that it took a while for MPs to get used to the new allowance, which is reasonable especially because the House created the allowance only a few days before the start of the first term. In the third – and what would become the final – term of the allowance, however, MPs claimed significantly less. Measures to limit the use of this allowance during the election periods thus seemed to have worked – in this case, before the general election of 2010. In addition, we assume that the parliamentary expenses scandal that erupted in May 2009 (Kelso 2009) also had an impact. Although the scandal centred mainly on the misuse of the Additional Costs Allowance covering MPs' accommodation and living costs (Van Heerde-Hudson and Ward, 2014), it is likely that MPs claimed fewer expenses from the Communications Allowance in the aftermath of the scandal as well.

Conclusion

With the introduction of the Communications Allowance in 2007, the House of Commons provided its members with ideal conditions to communicate with their constituents by removing practically all budgetary constraints. With this allowance, MPs were able, for instance, to fund regular reports and constituency newsletters, prepare questionnaires and surveys, set up a personal webpage, or distribute contact cards. Yet, communication is still

time-consuming, and these are probably not the most attractive activities for MPs to spend their limited time on. Constituency communication is thus easily demanded, but it needs to be in the interest of MPs to invest in it: '[b]esides all their other charming idiosyncrasies, legislators are goal-seeking men or women who chose their behaviour to fit the destinations they have in mind' (Strøm, 1997: 158), and, despite all other aims they may have, for most legislators the most important destination is re-election. As we have argued, using communication to signal trustworthiness to their electorate is one way of getting there. Communicating with constituents may thus be seen as a normative aim by MPs, but is certainly also an electoral strategy.

In this article, we therefore analysed MPs' incentives to invest in constituency communication. The methodological difficulty of distinguishing constituency communication from party political campaigning has always been challenging for the existing literature on parliamentary communication. The Communications Allowance provides a unique remedy for this methodological challenge. Basing our analysis on two basic assumptions, namely that re-election is the main goal of legislators and that communication to signal trustworthiness is one way of securing that re-election, we examined the impact of electoral prospects, constituency characteristics, and parliamentary behaviour on MPs' investments in communication with their constituencies.

Overall, our findings indicate that MPs need to be challenged to invest in communication. With regard to electoral prospects, more junior MPs or those with marginal seats have far greater incentives to signal trustworthiness than the *Safe Seat Holders*, *Seniors* or *Retirees,* who can either rely on having already established such trust or who no longer need to, and thus invest less in, communicative efforts between elections. In addition, MPs invest more in communication if their re-election prospects are challenged by a difficult constituency: *Urbanites* representing more heterogeneous areas with a higher and quicker

turnover of constituents invest more in communication. These findings all underline that it is difficult, at least in practice, to separate communicative accountability from electoral accountability: what happens in between elections, and specifically how much MPs communicate with their constituents, also depends on what happened in the last elections and what might happen in the next one. Finally, our findings also suggest that MPs will invest less in communication if they can expect the media to do the advertising job for them: while *Workhorses* have to invest more in advertising and credit claiming than the show horses, parliamentary *Rebels* can rely on their dissents to gain them name recognition through the media and to signal trustworthiness to the voters. In addition, they have no incentive to shatter their positive image by spending much effort on explaining their behaviour, especially if their seats are vulnerable.

To conclude, Edmund Burke famously told the electors of Bristol (Burke, 1801 [1774]: 19) that it 'ought to be the greatest happiness and glory of a representative to live in …the closest correspondence, the most unreserved communication with his constituents'. However, our results show that to what degree MPs do invest in communication with their constituents depends very much on re-election related incentives. Perhaps Burke ought to have heeded his own advice.

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Appendix

A – Summary of the Guidelines on the Communications Allowance

The House of Commons Department of Finance and Administration was the authority in charge of the Communications Allowance. It provided advice for MPs prior to their use of the allowance, and assed their expenditure claims afterwards. Although MPs were not obliged to seek *prior* advice, 'doing so provided some comfort in the event of a complaint and ensured that reimbursement from the relevant allowance would be agreed by the Department' (House of Commons 2007c: 31). The Department also conducted random checks on the content of communication, such as on MPs' website for which the allowance was claimed (House of Commons 2007a: 30). In addition, all publications and websites were required to include a notice if the costs were met from the Communications Allowance, clearly stating where constituents could apply in case they saw a potential violation of rules (House of Commons 2007a: 22, 29).

The Department provided MPs with a 38-page long booklet, *the Communications Allowance and the use of House Stationary* (House of Commons 2007a), detailing the guidance on the content of communication and types of expenditure that the allowance could and could not be used to cover. Here we put together the examples of allowed content and types mentioned in various pages across Appendices 1–3 of the booklet (House of Commons 2007a: 12–30). For further details, see the publicly available booklet.

Examples of allowed content of communication

- Information
  - About MPs, including
    - The work that MPs do as parliamentary representatives
    - The ways that constituents can contact their MP, including
      - Details of constituency surgeries
  - About Parliament, including

- Parliamentary debates
  - About public services, including
    - MPs' own services as parliamentary representatives
    - Local authority services
  - About news, including
    - MPs' press releases
    - Articles about MPs' work as parliamentary representatives

- Feedback
  - Specific to the role of parliamentary representative, including
    - Measuring constituency opinion
    - Gathering information on constituency
    - Seeking views on issues of importance to constituents
    - Consulting with constituents or local groups

Examples of allowed types of expenditure

- Advertising
  - Contact and surgery details, including:
    - Advertisements
    - Calendars
    - Contact cards

- Publishing & Delivery
  - Reports
  - Newsletters
  - Targeted correspondence, including
    - Circular letters
    - Contact with local groups
    - Information sheets
    - Petitions
    - Surveys
    - Questionnaires
  - Publishing and printing of the above, including
    - Brought-in contractor time
  - Distribution of the above, including
    - Freepost facilities
    - Direct mailing
    - Postage

- Websites
  - Set-up and maintenance of websites

- Equipment
  - Purchase of equipment for the specific purpose of producing the above, including

- Photocopiers

B – Robustness Check for the Increase in Communications Allowance

As mentioned in the main text, the Communications Allowance was £10,000 for the 2007–2008 parliamentary term, which was increased to £10,400 for the next two terms. This was an increase due to an increase in the Retail Prices Index in the United Kingdom in the previous year.

Here we assess whether our results would look significantly different if we adjusted the dependent variable to control for the increase in the limit for the allowance. Table A1 runs the same regression models as in Table 2 after increasing the amounts that MPs claimed by 4 per cent. The results are almost exactly the same, except the increase in the significance of the third term from 0.01 to 0.001. Once adjusted, the new dependent variable has a mean of 7230.52 with the standard deviation of 4499.30.

Table A1. Robustness Check of Table 2: Models with the Dependent Variable Adjusted to the Increase in Communications Allowance

Variable	Model 3 Coefficient	Model 3 Std. Error	Model 4 Coefficient	Model 4 Std. Error
Electoral Majority	−70.31***	11.93	−79.07***	12.54
Seniority	−57.67**	20.80	−58.92**	20.78
Standing Down	−2217.01***	425.26	−2193.58***	424.64
Population Density	16.38*	6.60	16.28*	6.57
Distance	−93.23	153.14	−86.98	152.65
Attendance	26.34**	9.28	26.50**	9.28
Rebellion	−142.69**	49.11	−298.32***	76.54
Majority X Rebellion			7.76*	3.35
Government	1269.69***	335.18	1268.71***	333.50
Female	75.89	313.62	64.23	314.12
2008–2009	630.57***	161.44	640.41***	157.66
2009–2010	−860.62***	187.57	−852.25***	187.07
Intercept	7499.56***	1098.34	7642.46***	1090.71
N	1913		1913	
Clusters (MPs)	645		645	
R^2	0.188		0.190	

Note: The dependent variable is the amount that MPs claimed from the Communications Allowance in a parliamentary term, adjusted to the increase at the beginning of the second term. 2007–2008 is the excluded parliamentary term. * $p<0.05$, ** $p<0.01$, *** $p<0.001$. Both models employ robust clustered standard errors, where MPs are the clustering variable.