

Representation of the UK Parliament's Power in the National Media: Too Weak, or Too Strong?

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ABSTRACT

Representations of UK parliamentary power in the popular media have attracted little attention, despite shaping citizens' impressions of the institution. We begin to close this gap, through a content analysis of 657 articles in the national newspapers 2013–2019—a period straddling the Brexit referendum. Pre-referendum, media representations of parliamentary power were mixed, while afterwards, as parliament exerted influence over Brexit, it was presented as more powerful. But right-leaning newspapers shifted their normative position from lamenting parliament's weakness to criticising its strength. Parliament hence faced a lose-lose situation, with key media outlets depicting it either as dangerously weak or dangerously strong.

Keywords: Brexit, House of Commons, Media Framing, Newspapers, Parliamentary Power, Westminster

The Westminster parliament is famously central to the UK's democratic order. Not only is the UK a parliamentary democracy, in the typical sense of the executive depending on parliamentary confidence, but the doctrine of 'parliamentary sovereignty' also puts parliament at the heart of the constitution. In the absence of a constitutional document with the status of higher law, parliament traditionally remains the UK's supreme legal authority. Nonetheless, there exists a seeming paradox of parliamentary power. Despite its high formal status, the Westminster parliament has frequently been stereotyped as weak, executive-dominated, and/or

in decline, perhaps serving as little more than a legislative rubber stamp (Flinders and Kelso, 2011). But this is a perspective that more recent academic work has increasingly come to challenge.

Amidst these sometimes lively academic debates, we know little about what messages citizens receive about parliamentary power from the popular media. This matters because as the UK's central democratic institution, parliament depends on public support. Indeed, there is an endogenous relationship between parliamentary power and public opinion; a lack of support from citizens will weaken a legislature's de facto power (Mezey, 1979). Yet most citizens' understanding of parliament's role will be significantly shaped by how it is depicted in the media.

Before the Brexit referendum of June 2016, the UK's membership of the European Union had frequently been seen as partial justification for the parliamentary decline thesis, given its impact on parliament's traditional sovereignty. Eurosceptics had often argued that withdrawal from the EU would create an opportunity to restore parliamentary power. But after the referendum, Prime Minister Theresa May faced repeated parliamentary clashes and defeats over her Brexit policy. This generated significant negative public rhetoric towards parliament (Russell, 2021; Russell and James, 2023), and led some to speculate that, rather than being too weak, the institution had perhaps even become too strong (Norton, 2019).

This article explores how parliament's power has been communicated in popular debate in the UK in recent years, through an analysis of national newspaper coverage 2013–2019. It addresses two closely connected research questions: first, what messages the UK public has recently received from the national media regarding the power of parliament; and second, how this may have changed after the Brexit referendum.

The article proceeds as follows. The first section sets out a brief background in three areas: academic debates about parliamentary power; the role of the UK popular media and parliament's role in Brexit 2016–2019. Two subsequent sections, respectively, outline our core hypotheses, and briefly discuss our methods. The results section then reports on a content analysis of newspaper coverage over the period. In line with expectations, this finds that the media communicated a growing sense of parliamentary power post-referendum, but that there were clear differences between representations in the left-leaning and right-leaning (i.e. Brexit-supporting) newspapers. Initially, newspapers across the spectrum presented parliamentary power as a good thing, that should be enhanced—with those on the right particularly likely to depict the institution as disappointingly weak. In contrast, after the referendum, right-leaning newspapers shifted to presenting parliament as too strong, and criticised it for exercising its power. We explore this seeming contradiction further in the article's penultimate section, based on a more qualitative reading of the articles. We conclude that the UK parliament has struggled in recent years to achieve positive representation through right-leaning newspapers in particular, being criticised variously for being either too weak or too strong.

1. Background and context

1.1 *The power of the Westminster parliament*

Parliament formally sits at the pinnacle of the UK's constitutional arrangements. In line with other parliamentary systems, the executive depends on the House of Commons' confidence for its authority, and parliament is the location in which much of UK politics plays out. But beyond this, the UK's famous absence of a 'written constitution', in the sense of a single document with the status of higher law, also leaves parliament as the ultimate legal authority. This tradition of 'parliamentary sovereignty' gives the courts a more limited role in policy adjudication than typically exists in many other states (Dicey, 1962 [1885]; Lijphart, 1999; Goldsworthy, 2010).

Despite the Westminster parliament's *de jure* status, the *de facto* extent of its power has long been questioned. For decades, the dominant understanding has been that supplied by the 'Parliamentary Decline Thesis' (Flinders and Kelso, 2011)—which decries a weak parliament sidelined by an overbearing executive. Proponents of the thesis have tended not to identify a clear parliamentary 'golden age', but have suggested a series of reasons for parliament's alleged decline, including the development of the modern party system, the frequent presence of single-party majority government, and growing policy complexity.

Recent academic analyses have tended to challenge the parliamentary decline thesis, for various reasons (Norton, 2015; Russell and Cowley, 2016, 2018). First, specialist scholars have long noted that some of the most important forms of parliamentary influence are invisible and anticipatory, including through exercise inside the governing party (King, 1976; Mezey, 1979; Judge, 1993)—making such influence difficult by its nature to detect and measure. Second, from the 1970s onwards, Westminster has shown clearer visible indications of such intra-party tensions, through increasingly 'rebellious' behaviour by governing party MPs (Norton, 1975, 1980; Cowley, 2002, 2005). Third, various structural changes at Westminster, including the strengthening of specialist select committees, and reform of the House of Lords, have enhanced scrutiny mechanisms and boosted parliamentarians' confidence (Benton and Russell, 2013; Russell, 2013; Russell and Gover, 2017). Fourth, parliament has encroached in areas previously governed by the Royal prerogative (i.e. in practice by ministers): through both the development of putative conventions, notably regarding the deployment of military force, and in legislation, notably the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011 (Strong, 2014; Schleiter, 2016; Hazell and Foot, 2022).¹

¹The Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011 was subsequently repealed by the Dissolution and Calling of Parliament Act 2022, but this postdates the study period for the articles.

An additional source of doubt about parliament's power, which inclines in the opposing direction, concerns the change to its de facto sovereignty. Frequently-cited developments include 1990s reforms to introduce devolution in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and the Human Rights Act 1998—which all deliberately sought to retain parliament's formal sovereignty, but saw some transferral of its power to other actors (Bogdanor, 2009; Elliott, 2019). But the most significant factor was the United Kingdom's membership of the European Union (and its predecessor institutions) post-1973. Particularly following key court cases in the 1990s, this clearly significantly restricted parliament's freedom to decide policy (Wade, 1996; Barber, 2011; Drewry, 2016), as further discussed below.

These dynamics have all contributed to changing academic perceptions of parliamentary power, though such power remains difficult to quantify in practice. A further key consideration is Mezey's (1979) important observation that a legislature's de facto power may differ from its de jure power, depending on the level of support that it enjoys from the public and political elites. Negative attitudes towards the legislature by voters, or negative rhetoric by politicians and commentators, may limit a parliament's ability to use its formal powers.

1.2 *The role of the media*

Despite decades of academic debate on parliamentary power, and the acknowledged importance of public perceptions, systematic investigation of how such power is depicted by the UK media has been lacking. Indeed, studies of the interaction between parliament and the media have generally been limited.² Yet the media plays a widely recognised role in communicating and translating political events to the public. While it may not straightforwardly lead public opinion (Banducci, 2017), there is broad consensus about the media's role in framing debates—including through both the strength and prevalence of frames—and how these affect the attitudes of the audience (Chong and Druckman, 2007a, b; Lecheler and de Vreese, 2012). This has recently included the study of how the media may have affected the outcome of the Brexit vote itself (Simpson and Startin, 2023).

Media framing of parliament thus has significant potential to shape public perceptions of the institution and, through this, of UK democracy itself. Opinion surveys have frequently suggested that, despite its centrality, parliament is held in relatively low

²Recent exceptions include the studies by Kubala (2011) and Gaines *et al.* (2019) about media representation of select committees, which have focussed primarily on the volume, rather than tone or content, of newspaper coverage.

public esteem, and that such perceptions have grown more negative (Hansard Society, 2019). Yet we have little understanding of how the popular media may contribute, through communicating messages to the public about parliament and its power.

Any exploration of this question must clearly take into account the structure and particularities of the UK media. While the broadcast media is highly regulated, and required to provide balanced political content, the same is not true of the UK national newspapers, which are often highly partisan (Curran and Seaton, 2018). There has also been a traditional divide between high-circulation popular (or 'tabloid') outlets and lower-circulation 'quality' (or 'broadsheet') newspapers, with the newspaper market dominated by the right-leaning tabloids. Though broadcast media is the most common source of news, newspapers continue to play an important role in news dissemination, with around half of UK adults reporting that they used either print copies or newspaper websites as a news source in a 2019 survey (Ofcom, 2019). Importantly, newspapers also help to set the agenda for broadcast coverage (Wring and Ward, 2010; Cushion *et al.*, 2016). Likewise, despite its growth, social media coverage draws extensively on newspaper and broadcast media content, and the 'legacy' media remains the most highly trusted source (Rogstad, 2016; Newton, 2021). These factors mean that newspapers have very significant reach and influence.

UK newspaper coverage in general elections has—except for a period in the 1990s and 2000s when Labour attracted tabloid support—tended heavily to favour the Conservatives (Wring and Deacon, 2010). Similar divisions have characterised the print media's attitude to Europe, which has overall tended towards Euroscepticism, with right-leaning newspapers developing an increasingly strongly held editorial line prior to the Brexit referendum of 23 June 2016 (Daddow, 2012; Hawkins, 2012). In coverage of the referendum itself, the press polarised sharply along Leave-Remain lines, broadly mirroring the typical left/right divide. The right-leaning *Telegraph*, *Daily Mail*, *Sun* and *Express*, plus the more centrist *Sunday Times*, backed Leave, while the left-leaning *Guardian* and its Sunday equivalent the *Observer*, plus the *Mirror*, the relatively centrist *Times*, and the right-leaning *Mail on Sunday* backed Remain (Daddow, 2016; Wring, 2016a; Moore and Ramsay, 2017; Simpson and Startin, 2023).³ Consequently overall, by circulation, Leave attracted more than 80% of the market share (Wring, 2016b).

1.3 Parliament and Brexit

As already indicated, debates about parliamentary power have been closely intertwined with questions about EU membership. Before the Brexit referendum,

³As described below, we have dealt with the pro-Remain position in the right-wing *Mail on Sunday* by excluding the small number of otherwise relevant articles in this outlet from our analysis.

the desire to restore parliamentary sovereignty was a frequently stated objective of UK Eurosceptics. The Leave campaign's central slogan in the referendum expressed the need to 'take back control'—a broad-brush demand, which was at times explicitly linked with calls for greater parliamentary power. Boris Johnson, who played a visible role in the Leave campaign, claimed that remaining in the EU would mean 'the steady and miserable erosion of parliamentary democracy in this country' (quoted in [Ringeisen-Biardeaud, 2017](#)). One *Daily Telegraph* columnist even suggested during the campaign that 'the Brexit vote is about the sovereignty of Parliament. All else is noise' ([Evans-Pritchard, 2016](#)). The Leave victory in the referendum was unforeseen, but might therefore have been expected to trigger celebration of parliamentary power regained.

In fact, the referendum result sparked a period of significant turmoil in British politics, in which parliament's assertiveness came increasingly to be questioned. Prime Minister David Cameron resigned, and his successor Theresa May spent most of her premiership presiding over a minority Conservative government, and a parliamentary party deeply divided over Brexit. Consequently, parliament clashed repeatedly with the executive over the implementation of the result ([Thompson, 2020](#); [UK in a Changing Europe, 2020](#); [Russell, 2021](#); [Russell and James, 2023](#)). May's withdrawal agreement with the EU was heavily defeated in the House of Commons three times in early 2019. MPs repeatedly took control of the Commons agenda, in order to stage votes on alternative Brexit options, and legislated against the government's wishes to extend the negotiating period ([Fleming, 2020](#)). The UK Supreme Court was twice drawn in to uphold the power of parliament. On the second occasion, after Theresa May had been ousted as Conservative leader and replaced by Boris Johnson, this reversed an attempted lengthy prorogation (i.e. parliamentary shutdown) sought by the Prime Minister ([Young, 2021](#)).

In clear contrast to the parliamentary decline thesis, complaints began to emerge during this period that parliament had become too strong ([Norton, 2019](#)). Johnson's party manifesto for the December 2019 general election which finally resolved the Brexit deadlock alleged that the country had been 'paralysed by a broken parliament' ([Conservative Party, 2019](#): 2). This sought to capitalise on public attitudes towards parliament that had become increasingly polarised along Brexit lines, with 59% of Leave voters having supported the prorogation, against 16% who opposed it, versus 19% and 58% of Remain voters, respectively ([Curtice, 2020](#)).

2. Research question and hypotheses

This article aims to fill a major gap in understanding of UK politics, by exploring representation of the Westminster parliament's policy power in the national newspapers. The core research questions are, first, whether the newspapers present

parliament as strong or weak, and second, how this presentation was changed by the circumstances around the Brexit referendum.

A key sub-question is how these presentations differed between the left-leaning and right-leaning newspapers. As emphasised above, the already-disputed nature of parliamentary power became contested in new ways as a result of the referendum. The right-leaning newspapers (which overwhelmingly supported Brexit) faced a particular conundrum: having backed a cause that promised to return power to parliament, how they should respond to parliamentary assertiveness regarding the policy that they had espoused.

Prior to the referendum, there was reason to expect that the newspapers would pay relatively little attention to parliamentary power, and that the coverage that did exist would tend to represent the institution as relatively weak, as the long-dominant parliamentary decline thesis would suggest. The lack of detailed parliamentary reporting has long been lamented (Riddell, 1999; Norton, 2000), and standards for judging 'newsworthiness' tend to prioritise conflict and drama, and to skew towards the negative (Harcup and O'Neill, 2001, 2017; Boukes and Vliegthart, 2020). These factors point towards parliament's often subtle methods of influence having been largely invisible to busy journalists—while changes to parliamentary practice such as growth in select committee influence, or parliamentary encroachment on prerogative powers, may have largely evaded notice. Meanwhile, prior studies of media discourse have emphasised the right-leaning media's Euroscepticism, including its use of sovereignty-based arguments—which tend to emphasise how European Union membership eroded the power of the UK and its parliament (Bijsmans, 2017). This combination of factors suggests that pre-referendum, newspaper coverage which did exist would tend to present parliament as weak, perhaps particularly in right-leaning newspapers.

Some of these same factors suggest that the media will have (i) given more attention to parliamentary power post-referendum and (ii) presented the institution as increasingly strong. Parliament's repeated clashes with the executive, as described above, clearly met the criteria of drama and conflict. Meanwhile, perceptions of greater strength could flow naturally both from these conflicts, and potentially from the decision to exit the European Union—in the words of the Leave campaign, to 'take back control'. This leads to the following hypotheses:

- H1. Newspaper coverage of parliamentary power increased after the Brexit referendum.
- H2.1 Pre-referendum, newspapers tended to present parliament as relatively weak.
- H2.2 Post-referendum, an increasing proportion of articles presented parliament as strong.

Whether or not these changes occurred, an important additional question arises regarding how parliamentary power was normatively presented. In the pre-referendum period, right-leaning newspapers in particular might be expected to advocate for greater parliamentary power. Afterwards, the Eurosceptic newspapers faced opposing pressures: they might in principle welcome a growth in parliamentary power; however, parliament's most prominent exercises of its power post-referendum placed obstacles in the way of the executive's delivery of Brexit. The Conservative side in parliament was divided, but these newspapers' long-standing Euroscepticism made it likely they would prioritise Brexit, even if this meant moving away from championing parliamentary power:

- H3.1 *Pre-referendum, right-leaning (Eurosceptic) newspapers in particular tended to advocate for greater parliamentary power.*
- H3.2 *Post-referendum these newspapers shifted their position, to more often criticise parliament for exercising too much power.*

This dilemma for the dominant right-leaning newspapers clearly had important implications for the messages UK citizens received about their parliament post-referendum. The newspapers' chosen route would potentially affect how UK citizens perceived the working of their democracy.

3. Data and methods

We investigate these hypotheses through a detailed content analysis of articles about parliamentary power in the UK national newspapers. This is a commonly adopted method to investigate media framing and has been recently used with respect to other key UK constitutional concepts and topics (e.g. [Davies and Wincott, 2021](#); [Rone, 2023](#)).

The post-Brexit arguments in parliament took place largely between the June 2016 referendum and the general election of December 2019. To generate a dataset which fairly reflected both pre- and post-referendum attitudes, we searched for articles (including news, comment and editorial) dating from January 2013 to December 2019: representing equivalent before and after periods of three-and-a-half years each. The newspapers used were the *Guardian* and *Observer*, and the daily and Sunday editions of the *Telegraph*, *Times*, *Express*, *Mirror* and *Sun*, plus the *Daily Mail* but excluding (to maintain a clear-cut alignment between newspapers' left/right position and their Brexit position) the *Mail on Sunday*.⁴

⁴The *Independent* and *Financial Times* were excluded because of their comparatively lower circulation numbers and—in the case of the *Independent*—due to difficulties with obtaining data for the full period under consideration. We initially included the *Mail on Sunday* in our dataset, and its subsequent removal resulted in only 18 articles being excluded, with no noticeable impact on the findings.

Table 1: Newspaper circulation and sampling

Newspaper group	Total weekly readership 2018 (000s)*	Articles generated by initial search	Sampling rule	Articles coded (% of total sample)
Left-leaning	12,376	1,256		192 (29.2)
Guardian/Observer	8,031	1,117	20%	153 (23.3)
Mirror	4,315	139	100%	39 (6.0)
Centre-ground	4,492	1,155		120 (18.3)
Times	4,492	1,155	20%	120 (18.3)
Right-leaning	21,270	1,060		345 (52.5)
Telegraph	4,828	503	50%	126 (19.2)
Mail	9,623	204	100%	96 (14.6)
Express	1,802	164	100%	67 (10.2)
Sun	5,017	189	100%	56 (8.5)
Total	38,138	3,471		657 (100.0)

*Source: Ofcom (2019), including both print and online editions.

Articles were identified through the Nexis database, using the search terms 'power', 'influence' and 'impact' within five words of 'parliament', 'House of Commons', 'House of Lords' or 'select committee'.⁵ This generated an initial total of 3471 articles, as shown in Table 1. Given the importance of the tabloid press, which published fewer articles on these topics, we kept all relevant articles from the *Express*, *Mail*, *Mirror* and *Sun* in our analysis. In contrast, to balance volume of coverage, we sampled 50% of articles from the *Telegraph*, and 20% from the more prolific *Guardian/Observer* and *Times* (in each case by selecting every second or fifth article respectively in date order). Articles of under 100 words were excluded as having inadequate content for analysis, and a small number that exceeded 1500 words were also omitted (as were any duplicates).

The articles remaining were then read for topic relevance, excluding those which referred for example to a devolved or overseas parliament, rather than the UK parliament.⁶ Where articles were excluded for any of these reasons from the *Telegraph*, *Guardian/Observer* and *Times* they were, where possible, replaced with substitutes from within the same three-month date range; but this was clearly not always possible and was completely impossible for the tabloid papers. This series

⁵Some other search terms (e.g. 'MPs') were excluded on the basis that they tended to return relatively high numbers of irrelevant articles.

⁶We also excluded articles which discussed interpersonal power—for example, articles about bullying allegations which noted MPs' positions of power over their staff.

of processes resulted in a final dataset for coding of 657 articles, of which 258 (39.3%) were drawn from the tabloids and the remainder from the broadsheets.

Of the 657 articles, 29.2% came from the left-leaning press (defined as the *Guardian/Observer* and *Mirror*), 18.3% came from the relatively centrist *Times*, and the remaining 52.5% from the right-leaning press (*Telegraph*, *Mail*, *Express* and *Sun*). Although left- and right-leaning newspapers are largely analysed separately below, the split between them was broadly in line with circulation, as shown in [Table 1](#). Hence our overall results approximate to the messages received across the board by the public.

While parliamentary power is clearly multifaceted, our core interest was in the broad-brush impression received by the public from the media.⁷ Articles were therefore coded against three primary variables. First, whether parliament was presented in the article as having significant power or having little/no power (or whether this was unclear). Second, whether the power of parliament was presented as increasing or decreasing (or neither). Third, whether parliamentary power was presented as normatively desirable or undesirable (or this was mixed or unclear).⁸

Following initial data collection, three coders worked from a detailed coding scheme. This began with a training exercise, and subsequently, any cases where a coder identified ambiguity against the scheme were discussed with the team to enhance reliability and a consistent approach. With the initial coding complete, we undertook a detailed close reading of a subsample of articles in order to supplement the quantitative results with more qualitative findings, as further discussed below.

4. Results

In broad terms, the data offered support to all three hypotheses.

H1. *Newspaper coverage of parliamentary power increased after the Brexit referendum.*

⁷Parliament' here included references to the institution as a whole, either chamber, the Speaker(s), groups of MPs or peers, and select committees. This could be exercised (or described as lacking) regarding a number of other actors—most notably the government, but also, for example, EU or devolved institutions, the courts or the private sector. We make minimal use of these codes below, but is worth noting that very few articles focused solely on intra-parliamentary power (e.g. just four in total discussed only the House of Lords' power over the House of Commons or vice versa). A substantial majority—430 of 657—focused on parliamentary power over the government, while a further 76 considered parliament's power with respect to EU institutions.

⁸In order to capture more implicit normative judgements, we not only coded overt statements but also took into account any clear 'steering' of the audience through one-sided selection of facts or quotations.

Articles referring to parliamentary power grew significantly after the referendum, as shown in Table 2. In all, while the sample was selected proportionately (either all articles in a given newspaper or every second or fifth article by date) across the time period, 62% of the sampled articles appeared in the post-referendum period, and 38% pre-referendum. More articles in the sample dated from 2019 than any other single year, amounting to 25% of the total over the seven-year period.

This post-referendum growth in articles referring to parliamentary power occurred across all three newspaper groups. However, the increase for right-leaning newspapers was less pronounced than that for other groups. While articles in left-leaning newspapers almost doubled in the post-referendum period, and the centre-ground *Times* increased its coverage almost threefold, the coverage in the right-leaning press increased by less than 50%. This reflects how right-leaning newspapers seemed more focused than others on the power of parliament before the referendum.

- H2.1 *Pre-referendum, newspapers tended to present parliament as relatively weak.*
- H2.2 *Post-referendum, an increasing proportion of articles presented parliament as strong.*

Turning to the nature of representations of parliamentary power, overall pre-referendum coverage was more balanced than might have been expected regarding whether parliament was presented as strong or weak (see Table 3). The data therefore offer only limited support to hypothesis 2.1 and suggests that the counterarguments to the parliamentary decline thesis had been breaking through. The left-leaning press, in particular, generated three times as many articles indicating parliamentary strength over weakness. These covered disparate topics, including backbench rebellions over cuts in health funding (Helm, 2014), Prime Minister David Cameron's defeat in a 2013 vote on military action in Syria (Hughes and Beattie, 2013), backbenchers' role in holding the executive to account through Prime Minister's Questions (Burnell, 2014) and the work of

Table 2: Number of articles about parliamentary power pre- and post-referendum

	Pre-referendum (%)	Post-referendum (%)	Total
Left-leaning	69 (35.9)	123 (64.1)	192
Centre-ground	33 (27.5)	87 (72.5)	120
Right-leaning	145 (42.0)	200 (58.0)	345
Total	247 (37.6)	410 (62.4)	657

Table 3: Alleged level of parliamentary power

	Left-leaning	Centre-ground	Right-leaning	Total
Pre-referendum				
Powerful	46 (66.7)	11 (33.3)	74 (51.0)	131 (53.0)
Not powerful	16 (23.2)	12 (36.4)	58 (40.0)	86 (34.8)
None/unclear	7 (10.1)	10 (30.3)	13 (9.0)	30 (12.1)
Total	69 (100.0)	33 (100.0)	145 (100.0)	247 (100.0)
Post-referendum				
Powerful	79 (64.2)	64 (73.6)	141 (70.5)	284 (69.3)
Not powerful	28 (22.8)	22 (24.7)	34 (17.0)	84 (20.5)
None/unclear	16 (13.0)	1 (1.1)	25 (12.5)	42 (10.2)
Total	123 (100.0)	87 (100.0)	200 (100.0)	410 (100.0)

‘influential’ select committees (Boffey, 2013; Hiscott, 2013).⁹ The small number of articles depicting parliament as weak in the left-leaning newspapers also covered a broad range of topics. These included drawing unflattering comparisons with the power of the press (Kettle, 2013), suggesting that English devolution and the forthcoming Brexit referendum were disempowering parliament (Behr, 2016), and a handful of Eurosceptic articles that lamented the leaching of parliamentary power to the EU (e.g. Fraser, 2016).

The pre-referendum picture was less clear in the right-leaning newspapers, where articles were far more evenly split between presenting parliament as strong or weak. In terms of strength, such articles covered similarly broad topics to the left-leaning press, including backbench rebellions (Espinoza, 2016), parliament’s influence over military action (Groves, 2013), select committees’ powers to summon witnesses (Oborne, 2016) and the Speaker’s role in helping backbenchers hold the government to account (Mensch, 2014). But a difference between the left-leaning and right-leaning press was the many pre-referendum articles in the latter depicting parliamentary weakness due to the role of EU institutions (e.g. Schofield, 2013; Little, 2014), and the UK or European courts (Clark, 2013; Doughty, 2014). For example, in 2013, the *Sunday Express* criticised successive governments for ‘giving power away from our Parliament to a coterie of greedy, grasping, bureaucrats in Brussels’ (Young, 2013).

The post-referendum data far more strongly supported hypothesis 2.2. In this period, both the number and proportion of articles presenting parliament as powerful rose significantly. This change was driven predominantly by a shift in coverage in the centre-ground and right-leaning newspapers. While 51% of articles in

⁹Readers are generally directed to the citations for greater detail, though some quotations are given later in the article.

right-leaning papers had presented parliament as powerful pre-referendum, this increased to 70.5% post-referendum. In the more centrist *Times*, the proportion of articles depicting parliament as strong rose from 33% to 74%. In contrast, the proportion of articles presenting parliament as powerful in the left-leaning press remained broadly stable, despite the increase in the overall volume of articles in these papers.

As in the pre-referendum period, post-referendum articles about parliamentary power often addressed legislative rebellion and the work of select committees. Some dealt with topics not related to Brexit (e.g. Elgot, 2017; Javed, 2018; Jeeves, 2019); but unsurprisingly Brexit was the focus of many such articles. This was particularly true for the right-leaning papers. In May 2018, for example, the *Daily Express* reported on the government's difficulties with its own backbenchers, as the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill returned to the Commons after multiple defeats in the Lords (Hall, 2018). The *Daily Telegraph* meanwhile reported the possibility that backbench rebellion could collapse Theresa May's government (Maidment, 2018). Similar stories appeared in the left-leaning press (e.g. Glaze and Smith, 2018).

In sum, the different newspaper groups began from very different starting points pre-referendum—with left-leaning papers detecting parliamentary power and right-leaning ones less likely to do so, while being more likely than left-leaning papers to note its absence. Later, in the post-referendum period, both groups ended up in a similar place in terms of acknowledgement that such power existed.

A side question concerns whether the newspapers themselves explicitly communicated to readers that there had been a shift in the trajectory of parliament's power. Many of the 657 articles did not address this, but a subset of 397 made some kind of relevant comment—as shown in Table 4. This again demonstrates some clear differences between the newspaper groups, and the two parts of the time period. Pre-referendum, a majority of relevant articles in left-leaning outlets (52%) suggested that parliamentary power was growing, while a majority (58.5%) in right-leaning outlets claimed that it was decreasing. Post-referendum, the proportion of articles on the left remained largely stable (56%), but that in the papers of the right grew sharply, with 71% of articles now claiming that parliamentary power was increasing. For example, in the pre-referendum period, the *Daily Express* (2016) claimed that the EU had 'obsessively clawed powers away from our national politicians'. Later, by contrast, various stories in the right-leaning press reported on the growing power of MPs vis à vis the government, for example regarding its minority status following the 2017 general election (Riley-Smith, 2017), and the backbench rebellion which secured a statutory 'meaningful vote' in parliament on the Brexit deal (Stevens, 2018).

- H3.1 *Pre-referendum, right-leaning (Euro-sceptic) newspapers in particular tended to advocate for greater parliamentary power.*
- H3.2 *Post-referendum these newspapers shifted their position, to more often criticise parliament for exercising too much power.*

A key question remains the newspapers' normative positioning regarding the identified exercise of (and growth in) parliamentary power, and how this was presented to the public. Here hypotheses 3.1 and 3.2 found particularly clear support in the data (Table 5).

A total of 468 articles expressed some kind of normative judgement on parliamentary power. Of those appearing pre-referendum, 61% presented this in a positive light, while just 27% presented it negatively (the remaining 12% presented a mixed or unclear picture). At this point, while the different newspaper

Table 4: Alleged changes in parliamentary power (excluding those expressing no opinion)

	Left-leaning	Centre-ground	Right-leaning	Total
Pre-referendum				
Power growing	22 (52.4)	6 (46.2)	27 (32.9)	55 (40.1)
Power decreasing	12 (28.6)	6 (46.2)	48 (58.5)	66 (48.2)
Power unchanged	8 (19.0)	1 (7.7)	7 (8.5)	16 (11.7)
Total	42 (100.0)	13 (100.0)	82 (100.0)	137 (100.0)
Post-referendum				
Power growing	52 (56.5)	27 (48.2)	80 (71.4)	159 (61.2)
Power decreasing	27 (29.3)	16 (28.6)	21 (18.8)	64 (24.6)
Power unchanged	13 (14.1)	13 (23.2)	11 (9.8)	37 (14.2)
Total	92 (100.0)	56 (100.0)	112 (100.0)	260 (100.0)

Table 5: Normative judgements about parliamentary power (excluding those expressing no opinion)

	Left-leaning	Centre-ground	Right-leaning	Total
Pre-referendum				
Power good	27 (60.0)	17 (70.8)	69 (66.3)	113 (61.4)
Power bad	13 (29.0)	6 (25.0)	30 (28.8)	49 (26.6)
Unclear	5 (11.1)	1 (4.2)	5 (4.8)	11 (12.0)
Total	45 (100.0)	24 (100.0)	104 (100.0)	173 (100.0)
Post-referendum				
Power good	68 (72.3)	34 (58.6)	32 (22.4)	134 (44.8)
Power bad	8 (8.5)	20 (34.5)	98 (68.5)	126 (42.1)
Unclear	18 (19.1)	4 (6.9)	13 (9.1)	35 (13.0)
Total	94 (100.0)	58 (100.0)	143 (100.0)	295 (100.0)

groups disagreed on the extent to which parliamentary power existed, there was broad agreement between them about its desirability. In the right-leaning press, this approval was again in many cases explicitly linked to the newspapers' Euroscepticism. Hence [Oborne \(2014\)](#) wrote in the *Daily Telegraph* in January 2014 that 'It is hard not to agree with [the] urgent demand to ... giv[e] Parliament the power to block new legislation from Brussels.' But it could also sometimes celebrate parliamentary power over the government: for example, [Johnston \(2015\)](#) wrote favourably in the *Daily Telegraph* about the Fixed-term Parliaments Act, claiming that 'It removes power from the executive, which should be welcomed by constitutional reformers, and gives a vote to Parliament, which is more democratic.'

However, there was a very sharp change post-referendum. Overall the level of positivity towards parliamentary power declined, from 61% to 45%, while negativity rose to 42%.

The left-leaning newspapers underwent little change, remaining positive about parliamentary power (if anything, more so) post-referendum. In particular, they tended to celebrate the exercise of parliamentary power over Brexit. For example, a [Guardian \(2016\)](#) editorial following the High Court's ruling that parliamentary authorisation was needed to start the formal 'Article 50' process to withdraw from the EU, claimed that 'Parliament is back where it should be, at the heart of the debate.' Likewise, an article shortly before the 2019 general election heralded MPs for 'defend[ing] parliament against the power-grabbing instincts of the executive' ([Freedland, 2019](#)).

But the picture was very different in the right-leaning press. While 66% of articles in these papers approved of parliamentary power pre-referendum, this flipped completely, to 69% expressing disapproval after the referendum. As parliament came into conflict with the government over implementing Brexit, these newspapers—rather than celebrating the achievements of the institution that they had previously sought to empower—became extremely critical. For example, reporting in the *Daily Mail* on a government defeat in the House of Commons which put the requirement for a parliamentary meaningful vote on the Brexit deal into statute, [Littlejohn \(2017\)](#) suggested that 'What we were subjected to on Wednesday night was a rebellion against democracy.' This contrasted starkly with Johnston's words two years previously.

5. Discussion

The quantitative analysis above uncovered interesting patterns: prior to the Brexit referendum, newspaper representations of parliamentary power were more balanced than might have been expected, with various stories highlighting achievements of, for example, backbench rebels or select committees. These depictions of strength increased further (as anticipated) post-referendum. This was driven primarily by shifts in the right-leaning press, which had frequently presented

parliament as a weak institution pre-referendum, and argued for greater parliamentary power—but switched to presenting parliament as strong after the referendum, while also sharply criticising its power. We explored the roots of this seemingly contradictory development through a closer qualitative reading of a subsample of articles in the right-leaning papers (unsurprisingly, opinions were often most clearly expressed in editorial and comment pieces).

There are two different but compatible possible explanations for such a change in the right-leaning press. The first—and perhaps most obvious—is that newspapers displayed instrumental views of parliament’s role, rather than holding to consistently-held constitutional principles. If newspapers’ clear Eurosceptic and Conservative leanings meant that they prioritised the implementation of Brexit and support for the Conservative government, they might simply turn against an institution which stood in the way.

In practice, the government’s parliamentary difficulties over Brexit arose primarily from disagreements among Conservative MPs (Russell, 2021; Quinn, Allen and Bartle, 2024; Russell and James, 2023). Most opposition parliamentarians, along with some Conservatives, preferred either to remain in the European Union or agree a ‘softer’ Brexit than that being offered by the Prime Minister. But other Conservatives favoured a complete break from the bloc. Both Conservative rebel groups presented some obstacle to the approval of Theresa May’s moderate Brexit deal, but the latter one ultimately proved to hold the key deciding votes. Meanwhile, public blame was often pointed at ‘Remainers’—including by the Prime Minister herself.

This was frequently (though not always) strongly echoed in the attitudes of the right-leaning press. Wooding (2017), for example, wrote in the *Sun* about ‘Brexit-bashing peers ... plotting to derail Theresa May’s timetable for quitting the EU’. Likewise, the *Daily Express* (2019), quoting a Eurosceptic MP, referred to an attempt by MPs to take control of the House of Commons’ agenda as an ‘act of betrayal’ by those opposed to Brexit. This frequent focus on the behaviour of some groups at the expense of others demonstrated an instrumental logic—defending the position of the Conservative government, while focusing blame on opposition parties rather than highlighting Conservative splits. Notably, these newspapers often accused pro-Remain MPs of themselves holding instrumental or hypocritical attitudes towards parliamentary sovereignty. Hence the *Daily Telegraph* suggested that ‘It is fascinatingly macabre that MPs whose Europhilia has for years led them to reduce the powers of Parliament have now become ardent in defence of “parliamentary sovereignty”’ (Moore, 2019).

Instrumentalism thus played a significant part in the right-leaning newspapers’ presentation of post-referendum parliamentary power. But a second explanation for this depiction relates to the newspapers’ interpretation of parliamentary sovereignty, and to long-held assumptions about the respective roles of parliament and the executive—as reflected in the parliamentary decline thesis itself.

Prior to the referendum Eurosceptic former MEP Daniel Hannan (2016) wrote for the *Sunday Telegraph* that following exit day, '[Parliament] will be sovereign again, its sovereignty serving as a shorthand for our sovereignty'. This exemplified a frequent blurring of language concerning different forms of sovereignty. Legal scholars draw a distinction between 'internal' sovereignty—relating to which institution has the highest status domestically, and 'external' sovereignty—regarding the status of the nation-state (Gordon 2016). While the UK was in the EU, 'parliamentary sovereignty' was often used by Eurosceptics, and Brexit-supporting newspapers, as a shorthand for the latter. Similarly, Lawson (2016) argued in the *Daily Mail* before the referendum that EU membership meant 'the British Parliament and Government are not sovereign'. This elided the sovereignty of parliament and government—as consistent with the classic emphasis in the parliamentary decline thesis on executive and parliamentary fusion at Westminster (Flinders and Kelso, 2011).

In contrast, articles from the post-referendum period often engaged more consciously with the role of parliament as a constitutional actor distinct from the executive—due to the conflict between the two. Hence a *Daily Mail* (2019a) article about a rebel amendment aiming to force the government to extend the Article 50 negotiating period claimed that 'such a power grab would be unconstitutional. Parliament is there to hold the government to account – not do its job'. Likewise, Moore (2019) in the *Daily Telegraph* argued that the 'Benn-Burt Act' (a parliamentary initiative to require the government to request an Article 50 extension) turned parliament into 'a pseudo-government' and, therefore, 'a vulture upon the constitution'. Again, these cases suggest that the 'parliamentary sovereignty' demanded by the Brexit-supporting newspapers may not, if forced to choose, have necessarily been focused on parliament at all. The particular circumstances of the Brexit referendum provided another layer of complexity to such arguments. Post-referendum, the executive frequently sought explicitly to depict itself as the champion of 'the people', while some Eurosceptics suggested that 'parliament ... is deliberately trying to thwart our democracy'.¹⁰ Criticism of parliament in right-leaning newspapers adopted this framing, turning clashes between parliament and executive into ones between parliament and people. Hence Littlejohn (2019) argued in the *Daily Mail* that '[t]his rotten, cynical Parliament has shown nothing but contempt for democracy'; Hartley-Brewer (2019) in the *Daily Telegraph* accused pro-Remain MPs of 'a blatant attempt at a political coup' and the *Daily Mail* (2018) painted one Conservative rebel MP as 'an out-and-out saboteur, intent on reversing the popular vote'.

When May's successor Boris Johnson sought to prorogue parliament for a lengthy period potentially to force a 'no deal' Brexit on resistant MPs, there was

¹⁰John Redwood, House of Commons Hansard, 4 September 2019, column 272.

some explicit acknowledgement of the seeming contradictions. Johnston (2019) noted in the *Daily Telegraph* that ‘the principle that Parliament is supreme and the executive is answerable to it is not seriously questioned’, but suggested that ‘When Parliament is preventing the implementation of a majority decision of the people taken in a referendum, it is arguable that it is Parliament, not the executive, that is behaving unlawfully’. On the day of the prorogation announcement, the *Daily Mail* (2019b) lamented that it was ‘not glorying in this sobering, significant step. Leave campaigners always insisted quitting the EU meant regaining Parliamentary sovereignty – not circumventing it. But in truth, what choice has [Johnson] got?’. The article concluded that, in order to achieve Brexit at any cost, the Prime Minister needed to ‘fight fire with fire’.

These newspaper representations demonstrate long-running confusion and disagreement among the political class and in the media about the meaning of parliamentary sovereignty, and the relationship between parliamentary and executive power. But the messages newspaper readers received about ‘parliament’ was that it was initially too weak, and then, following the referendum, suddenly too strong.

6. Conclusion

This article has reviewed representations of parliamentary power in UK newspapers, which are likely, in turn, significantly to shape wider public understanding of the role of this most central democratic institution. Parliamentary power takes many forms, but the broad impression given to citizens by the media is clearly important.

The analysis demonstrates that in the years immediately before the Brexit referendum newspaper coverage tended to echo the complex picture presented in the academic literature on parliament, with the institution sometimes presented as weak and at other times as strong. This captured, to an extent, the realities of parliamentary life: that the executive and other actors may sometimes appear to elude parliamentary control, and at other times be visibly subject to it. Coverage also displayed fairly predictably different patterns between the left-leaning and right-leaning (Euro-sceptic) newspapers, with the latter more likely to complain of parliament’s relative powerlessness—particularly in the face of policy-making at the EU level—and to argue for it to be stronger.

Across the whole period 2013–2019, readers of the left-leaning press received a reasonably consistent picture of the levels of parliament’s power, and were generally—and, indeed, increasingly—encouraged to see this as positive. Such a presentation was to an extent instrumental, being congruent with scepticism on this side of the media about the Conservative government and Brexit, and hence with putting obstacles in the way.

In contrast, post-referendum coverage in the more widely read right-leaning newspapers underwent two changes. First, parliament was more frequently depicted as a powerful institution (by 70.5% of articles, compared to the 51% pre-referendum). But—notwithstanding these newspapers' previous advocacy of increased parliamentary power—this change was presented in a highly critical light. Post-referendum 69% of articles depicted parliamentary power negatively, compared to 29% prior to the referendum. Again this was partly instrumental, with pro-Brexit newspapers objecting to parliament's challenges to Brexit. Whether instrumentalism would drive such newspapers to again switch and present parliamentary power more positively under a future left-leaning government remains an open question.

But a closer investigation of the seeming contradictions in the right-leaning newspapers' stance demonstrated a further contributing factor: their conflicting interpretations of the UK's traditional 'parliamentary sovereignty'. While Eurosceptics had long celebrated such a notion, and argued that it should be boosted, a close reading of articles found that they conflated parliamentary and national sovereignty, and also parliamentary and executive power. The referendum added a further twist, of parliament versus 'the people'.

Throughout the whole study period 2013–2019, readers of the influential right-leaning press therefore received negative messages about parliament and its power, though the nature of these messages changed fundamentally over time. Initially, readers were told that parliamentary power was desirable but sadly absent, in significant part because of infringement by the European Union. Subsequently, parliament was presented as powerful, but with suggestions that this was now inappropriate, illegitimate or even somehow unlawful.

The anti-parliamentary rhetoric of the right-leaning newspapers following the Brexit referendum echoed that of some Conservative politicians, occasionally including Prime Minister Theresa May, and more frequently her successor Boris Johnson (Russell and James, 2023). Such coverage in turn almost certainly encouraged Brexiteer politicians to amplify that rhetoric. The *Conservative Party (2019)* manifesto at the end of this period decried 'the way so many MPs have devoted themselves to thwarting the democratic decision of the British people in the 2016 referendum'. The fact that many of those who had voted against May's Brexit deal were hardline Conservative Eurosceptics who considered it too 'soft' was conveniently glossed over, attracting limited media attention.¹¹

Parliament sits at the core of UK politics, to a greater extent than equivalent bodies do even in most parliamentary democracies. It is the venue in which

¹¹Boris Johnson himself was among the group of Conservative MPs who voted against May's Brexit deal on the first two occasions that it was defeated in the House of Commons.

political clashes play out, but also where compromises are agreed and deals are done. Following the referendum, survey data suggested that the UK public's faith in democratic institutions, including parliament, had further decreased from an already low level. The [Hansard Society \(2019\)](#) found that only 34% of people trusted MPs to do what was best for the public, 42% agreed that 'many of the country's problems could be dealt with more effectively if the government didn't have to worry so much about votes in Parliament' and 54% agreed that 'Britain needs a strong leader willing to break the rules.' Such views were often polarised along Brexit lines.

Studies have suggested that the framing of Brexit by the dominant right-leaning newspapers sufficiently influenced UK public opinion to affect the referendum result ([Simpson and Startin, 2023](#)). It seems plausible that these same newspapers' relentlessly negative depiction of parliamentary power may similarly influence public attitudes to the institution. As [Mezey \(1979\)](#) noted many years ago, legislatures crucially depend on public support in order properly to perform their democratic functions. The role of the media in shaping such support deserves far closer attention.

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None.

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