HOW DID PARLIAMENT ENGAGE NON-LEGISLATIVELY WITH UNIVERSAL CREDIT (2017-2019)?

INTRODUCTION

This paper reports a detailed examination on how parliament engaged non-legislatively with Universal Credit (UC). Drawing on methods from the existing literature, I analyse engagement through three key non-legislative functions of parliament: select committee evidence sessions, parliamentary debates and representation. Here, the paper adds new data with three key findings: 1) there is a lack of diversity in, and clear preferences for, certain oral evidence witnesses; 2) there is an overtly adversarial nature to parliamentary debates, owing to the influence of party affiliations on MPs; and 3) constituency representation, and the representation of women in particular, is well fulfilled. In sum, this article deepens our understanding of parliament's non-legislative functions and presents new data in the context of UC on who gave oral evidence, the nature of debate contributions, and quality of representation on the issue.

PART 1: SELECT COMMITTEE EVIDENCE

Existing Literature

Select committees are empowered to draw on an "extraordinary range" of evidence to supplement 'inquires' and inform their scrutiny of policy (Defty & White, 2018:153). However, existing studies have raised questions about the diversity of witnesses called to give evidence (Berry & Kippin, 2014; Geddes, 2017). Select committees are found to have clear organisational preferences towards government departments, charities, and higher education institutes; a clear geographical bias towards London and the South of England and, perhaps most concerning, a significant gender disparity where three-quarters of witnesses are men (Ibid:285). Beswick and Elstub's (2019) interviews reveal that while committee members and staff value a greater diversity, these "usual suspects" are favoured to ensure efficiency. Nevertheless, the literature concurs that this potentially hinders the quality of evidence for select committee's scrutiny work, prompting further investigation about how to improve diversity and broaden public engagement (Liaison Committee, 2018).

Methodology

Adopting the methodology of Geddes (2017), part 1 examines the representativeness of select committee evidence. In answering to the policy focus of UC, this report looks at the House of Commons Work and Pensions Select Committee during the 2017-19 parliamentary session. In this session, the Committee's lead inquiry on "Universal Credit roll out" produced 12 committee hearings, featuring 57 witnesses, who are the focus of this study. In line with Geddes, I collected data on the witnesses as per their organisational affiliation, geographical location, and gender (Ibid:291-297). Accordingly, the data collection relied on the information published by the House of Commons in oral evidence records: name and organisational affiliation; inferences on gender and geographical location could often be made from this. Where inferences were not obvious, I utilised other public information; for example, the Register of Charities, Companies House, and organisations' websites.

Findings and Analysis

A full summary of who gave oral evidence is given in Table 1.

Table 1: Summary breakdown of witnesses

Category	Total	Percentage of total	Percentage of category
Government	**4**	**7**	
Secretary of State	1	1.8	25
Minister of State	2	3.5	50
Other (junior) Minister	1	1.8	25
Civil service and public sector	**11**	**19.3**	
Central government department	4	7	36.3

Local or regional official	3	5.3	27.3
Arms-length body	2	3.5	18.2
Other official	2	3.5	18.2
Higher education	**1**	**1.8**	
Russell Group	1	1.8	100
Non-profit	**28**	**49.1**	
Business/trade association	3	5.3	10.7
Professional association	4	7	14.3
Charity/campaign group	16	28	57.1
Think tank/research institution	3	5.3	10.7
Trade union	1	1.8	3.6
Other	1	1.8	3.6
Private sector	**6**	**10.5**	
Business (size not known)	4	7	66.7
Small/medium sized business	2	3.5	33.3
Large	0	0	0
Politician	**5**	**8.8**	
Local	3	5.3	60
MPs/Peers	2	3.5	40
Other	**2**	**3.5**	
Member of the public	2	3.5	100

Table 1 reaffirms some of the trends from the existing literature; notably, the regularity of and reliance on 'non-profit' and 'civil service and public sector' witnesses, of whom account for 49.1% and 19.3%, respectively. This is perhaps not surprising given the association of UC with vulnerable groups who are central to the work of many 'charities and campaign groups', who accounted for nearly 60% of the 'non-profit' witnesses. Reasons of efficiency, i.e., gathering evidence from interest groups that have already collated information about UC, apply here also (Beswick & Elstub, 2019:961).

Nevertheless, the data does not confirm the prominence of higher education institutions, nor of multi-national businesses and large/national businesses (Geddes, 2017:294). However, the 1 witness called in the Higher Education category was from a Russell Group University, which would supplement Geddes observations of a preference for witnesses from these institutions (Ibid). Although, the smaller sample size impedes this data from offering any meaningful insight on higher education representation at large.

The data, like the existing literature, also shows "a clear geographical bias among those called to give evidence" (Defty & White, 2018:154).

Table 2: Geographical distribution

Place	Total	Percentage of all witnesses
London	36	62.9
South of England	3	5.3
North of England	8	12.4
Midlands	1	1.8
Scotland	5	8.8
Wales	1	1.8
Unknown	4	7

London is shown to dominate, with 62.9% of the witnesses coming from the capital, a similar proportion to that found by Geddes (62.2%) (2017:296). This can be explained, at least in part, by the convenience of selecting witnesses with a close proximity to the House of Commons. It is thought less likely to impede their ability to attend; an approach that the Chair of the Committee, Stephen Timms, confirmed to us during our 'Westminster Visit' (2020). Nonetheless, the North

of England is relatively better represented than might be expected (given trends in the literature), while the South of England (excluding London) fares worse.

Furthermore, the data does reveal an improved gender balance among witnesses, when compared to trends in the existing literature.

Figure 1: Gender distribution
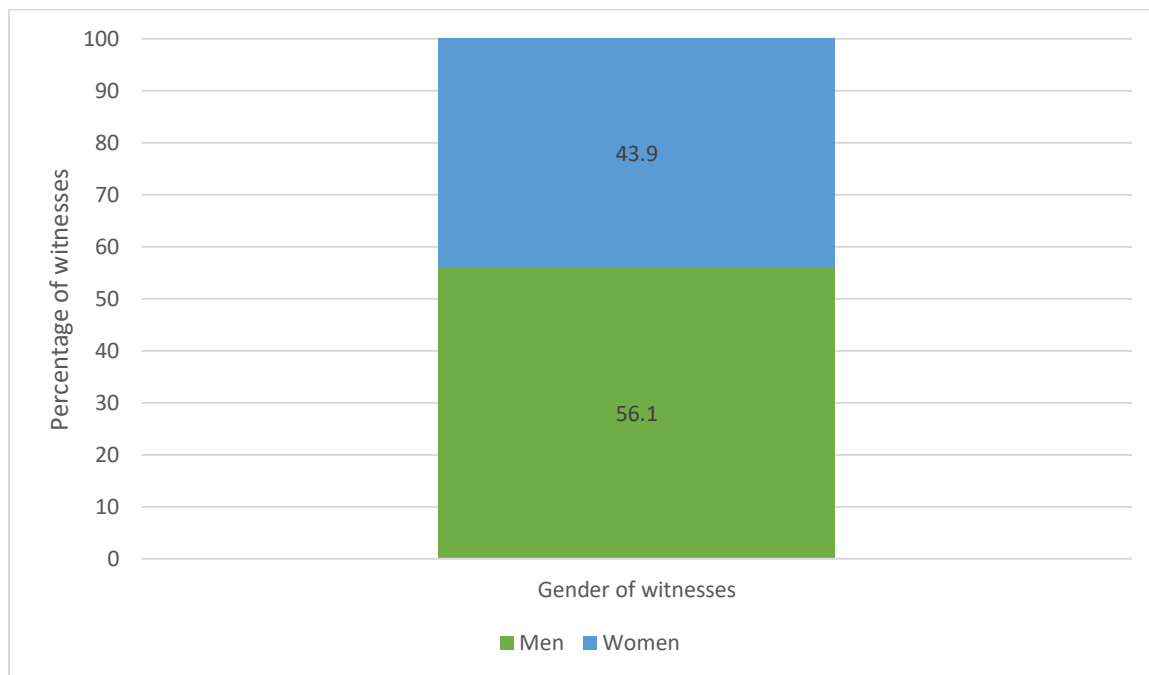
Both Berry and Kippin (2014) and Geddes (2017) find that more than three-quarters of all select committee witnesses are male. However, the data in this report reveals a far higher proportion of female witnesses (43.9%). Being limited to examining one inquiry prevents this report from establishing whether this is part of a growing trend toward an improved gender balance among oral evidence witnesses on the Work and Pensions Committee (and select committees more widely), or whether it is simply a 'one-off'. The gender distribution of witnesses still, however, fails to be representative relative to the population.

PART 2: EXECUTIVE SCUTINY (PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES)

Existing Literature

Parliament's central non-legislative function is to scrutinise the government. The principle means of performing executive scrutiny include varying types of debates and question time – the most well-known being PMQs (Norton, 2013:111-125). The many motivations behind parliamentary questions, be it requesting information, seeking an urgent ministerial response, instrumenting representation or indeed to contribute to wider scrutiny functions, are well researched (e.g., Bennister & Larkin, 2018; Saafiled, 2011; Rogers et al., 2019). However, trends in the literature show that these formal functions of parliamentary questions – particularly with regard to PMQs - have gradually been "eroded and replaced" with 'adversarial', 'macho', verbal jousting and political performance (Bates et al., 2018:176). In their (2014) research, Bates et al. found that PMQs has become increasingly "dominated by a mixed bag of helpful and unanswerable questions, often used for the purposes of political point scoring" (276). The studies of Bull and Wells (2012), Waddle, et al. (2019) and Shepard and Braby (2020) also make similar observations. These trends have caused concern among scholars as to the detrimental effect it has on the quality of executive scrutiny in the UK, as well as having negative impacts on Parliament's reputation (Hansard Society, 2014)

Methodology

Adopting the methodology of Bates, et al. (2014), part 2 of this report examines the type of questions asked in parliamentary debates. In answering to the policy focus of UC, I looked at three House of Commons debates on its 'roll

out' during the 2017-19 parliamentary session (HC Deb 18 October 2017, cc860-959; HC Deb 13 March 2018, cc756-809; HC Deb 17 October 2018, cc649-724). The sample produced 293 contributions, of which were coded using Bates et al.'s – 'standard', 'unanswerable', 'helpful' question - scheme as laid out in their article (Ibid:263). However, given the nature of the debates, a significant proportion of contributions were statements/speeches; here Bates et al.'s methodology was adapted to fit the context (see Table 3). Also, in line with Bates, et al., the Party affiliation and gender of the questioner was recorded for analysis (Ibid:271).

Table 3: Categories of statements

| Category	Definition
Standard Statement	A statement which appears to take a cross-party approach, offering genuine proposals to improve the policy, information seeking, not necessarily supportive or dismissive.
Unhelpful Statement	A statement which appears designed to bash the government, for political point scoring, and/or completely disregards the policy.
Helpful Statement	A statement which appears to support the policy, complement the department/minister responsible, denounce opponents, prompts the minister to set out policy/ attack opposition.

Findings and Analysis

A summary of the types of questions/statements put is given in Table 4.

Table 4: Breakdown of questions/statement types

Type of question/statement	Number put	% proportion of total
Standard	71	24.2
Unhelpful	124	42.3
Helpful	98	33.5
Total	**293**	

Table 4 reaffirms the key trends from the existing literature. Most notably, the data appears to confirm the 'erosion and replacement' of serious parliamentary scrutiny with adversarial discourse and political performance (Bates, et al., 2018:176; see also Bull & Wells, 2012). Less than a quarter (24.2%) of the contributions were coded as 'standard', with the three debates dominated by a series of 'unhelpful' or 'helpful' questions/statements (75.8%). The data also appears to further validate the concerns that executive scrutiny is becoming an increasingly partisan activity rather than a serious facet of parliamentary business (Bercow, 2010). The partisan nature of the contributions is illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Question/statement types by party
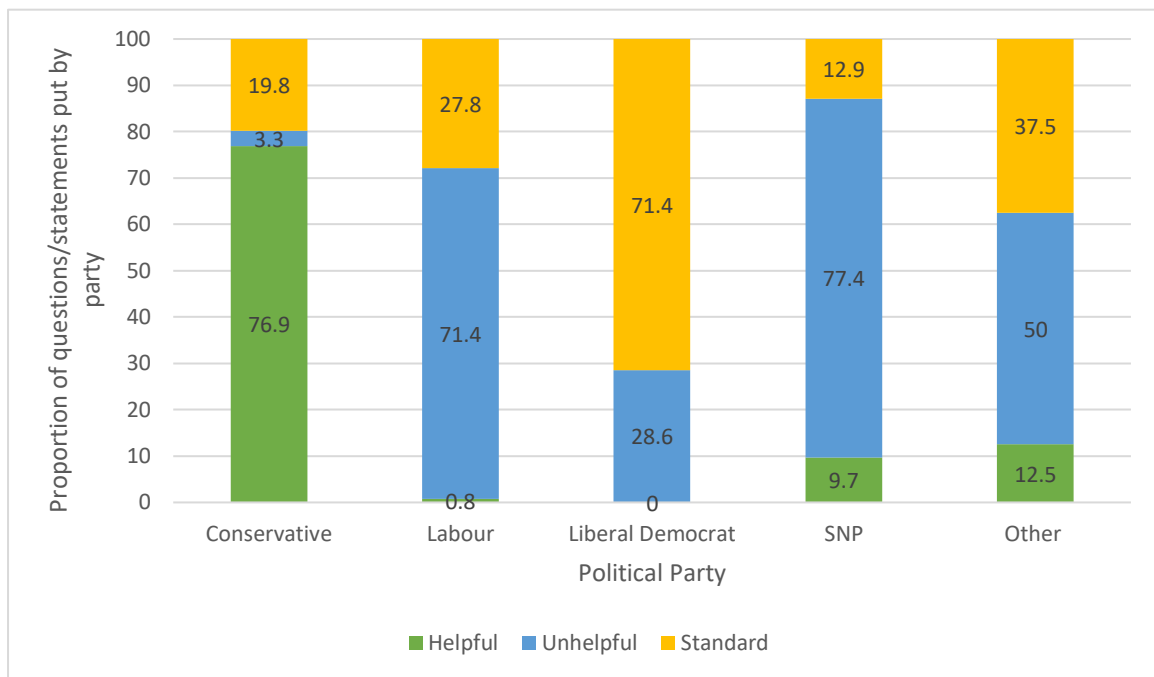
Unsurprisingly, government (Conservative) MPs overwhelmingly put 'helpful' questions/statements (76.1%), whereas the vast majority of opposition MPs posed 'unhelpful' questions/statements, with the exception being the Liberal Democrats. Moreover, the data reveals that government was more likely to face an 'unhelpful' contribution than it was a 'helpful' one, a trend that is not consistent with Bates et al. who find a much more even split (2014:269). This can be explained to some extent by the type of debates the sample included (all three were opposition motions), and also by the fact that during this period, the Government was a minority, with perhaps fewer than usual supporting voices in the Chamber.

Where the data in this report significantly differs from that of Bates et al. (2014), is when discussing how gender impacts the type of questions/statements. A breakdown is given in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Question/statement types by gender
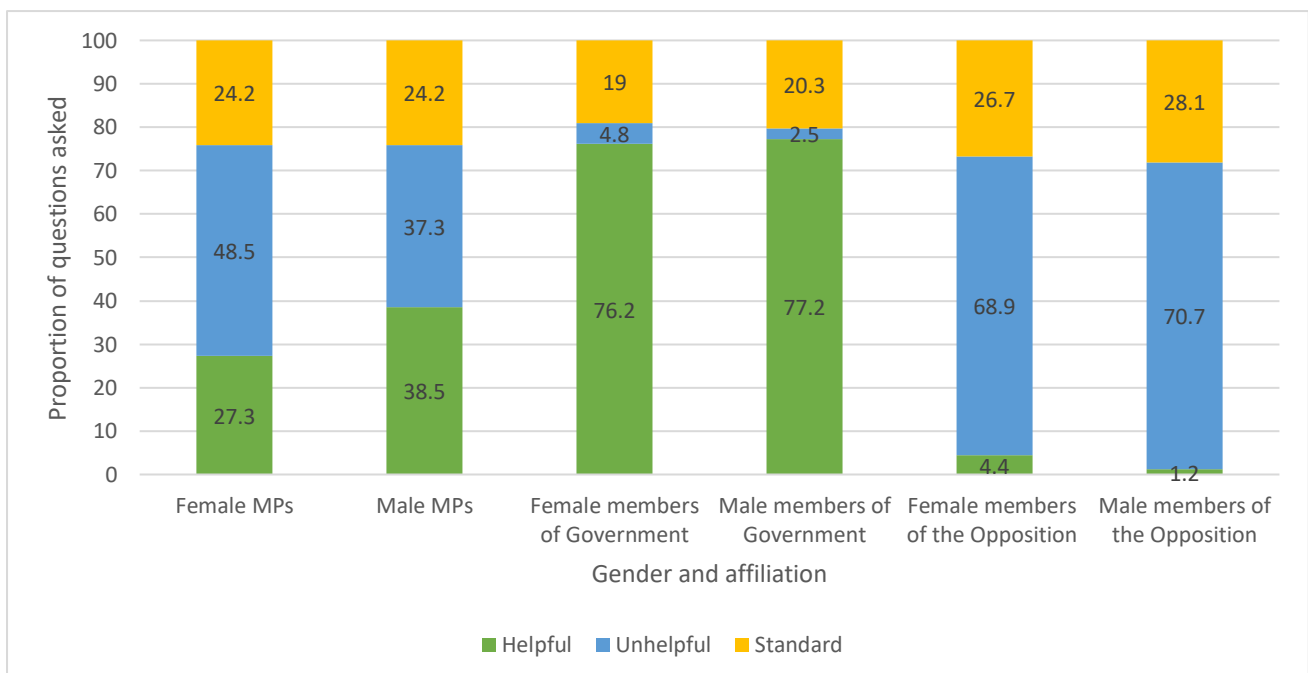
Bates et al. find that female MPs are less likely to ask adversarial questions than their male counterparts (Ibid:274). However, the data in this report shows that the difference between male and female MPs was minimal, with the real difference depending on which party MPs (of any gender) belonged to. Figure 3 details how female MPs were equal to their male counterparts in the proportion (75.8%) of adversarial questions/statements they put. Moreover, it also shows that when broken down further to look at party affiliation, female MPs were almost as likely as male MPs to both: make helpful contributions while their party was in government and, ask unhelpful questions when in opposition.

PART 3: REPRESENTATION

Existing Literature

Representation in the UK political system begins with constituencies. According to Norton, MPs fulfil a range of functions when representing constituents, identifying seven "constituency roles" (2013:219-220). Indeed, trends in the literature show that MPs have come to spend a greater proportion of their time dealing with constituency concerns than performing their 'parliamentary' duties (Judge & Partos, 2018:267; see also Norris 1997:30). As such there is a perceived dichotomy between the constituency work of MPs and their parliamentary work, reflected in the prioritisation of constituency service by MPs (Vivyan & Wagner, 2016:96). Nevertheless, much research has shown that the "constituency roles" of MPs can be captured through their parliamentary work, with the former often informing the latter (see McKay, 2020; Oonagh, 2018; Kellermann, 2016).

However, representation must also consider the composition of Parliament and what this means for women has become the subject of substantial academic research. Over the last 20 years there has been a steady increase in the number of women elected to the House of Commons; the proportion of female MPs is now at an all-time high of 34% (Watson, et al., 2020). However, Campbell et al. argue that "it is mistaken to confuse women's bodies with feminist minds – simply increasing the number of women in Parliament will not necessarily deliver 'better' policies for women" (2018:235). But while academics disagree about the extent to which descriptive representation truly leads to substantive representation, the evidence suggests that women MPs have a higher propensity to raise women's concerns, interests, and perspectives in parliament (Bates & Sealy, 2019; Catalano, 2009; Bird, 2005). Scholars have also researched other ways in which the struggle for true representation of women is ongoing, including the institutional constraints of parliament (Lovenduski, 2005) and how what is deemed as a 'women's issue' is defined by ideologies (Celis, et al., 2014).

Methodology

Part 3 of this report examines constituency and women's representation through parliamentary contributions. Using the same sample of UC related debates referenced in part 2, I identified those contributions with 'constituency mentions'. I then conducted a qualitative analysis of these contributions, in line with Norton's seven "constituency roles", to interpret which role the MP were fulfilling (2013:219-220). To examine the extent of women's representation, I recorded the gender of the MPs for all 293 contributions and then conducted a qualitative examination of these contributions, identifying those which related/spoke to 'women's issues'. There is of course no universally agreed set of 'women's issues' (Campbell, et al. 2018:235) and thus I relied on my own interpretation, for which the range of issues identified is given in Table 5.

Table 5: 'Women's issues' identified

Women's Issues
Violence against women/Domestic violence
Single mothers' access to public recourse
Childcare affordability
Period poverty
Scrapping the two-child tax credit and 'rape clause'
Other: "vulnerable single women", "homeless women", and "women in precarious situations"

Findings and Analysis

Of the 293 contributions, 44% (131) included a 'constituency mention', supporting the studies of McKay (2020) and Kellerman (2016) in indicating that the constituency focus of MPs is often captured through their parliamentary work. Moreover, the data also reveals that 5 out of the 7 "constituency roles", as identified by Norton (2013:219-220), are fulfilled; a breakdown of which can be found in Table 6.

Table 6: Constituency roles fulfilled

Constituency role	Number of contributions	% proportion of all 'constituency mentions'
Safety valve	90	68.7%
Advocate	23	17.6%
Powerful friend	7	5.3%
Promoter of constituency interests	6	4.6%
Information provider	5	3.8%

In line with the observations of Norton, the data shows an emphasis on certain roles over others (Ibid:221). In well over two thirds of mentions (68.7%), MPs were acting as a 'safety valve', raising their constituents' experience of UC, using casework to inform their contributions. The 'advocate' role was the second most fulfilled role, with 17.6% of contributions giving support to and voicing the policy positions of their constituency's non-profits. The other roles which were fulfilled made up a smaller proportion, with examples of MPs directly asking ministers to see to constituent cases, advancing the interests of collective groups, and seeking information on behalf of constituents, included in the sample.

Then we have women's representation. Descriptively, 45% of contributions across the three debates were made by women. While the Chamber of these debates was, therefore, not fully representative of the population, it was more so than parliament as a whole. The data also shows that the larger presence of female MPs did manage to influence attention to 'women's issues', as detailed in Table 7.

Table 7: Contributions speaking to 'women's issues' by gender

Gender of MP	Number of contributions speaking to 'women's issues'	% proportion of contributions
Male	8	20%
Female	32	80%

A small but still significant 13.7% (40) of the contributions made directly addressed 'women's issues' and of those, 80% were made by female MPs. Women asked 4 times as many questions about 'women's issues' than their male counterparts, supporting Phillip's (1995) thesis that women's presence in Parliament means that greater attention will be paid to women's issues.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings in this report produce three distinct conclusions. First, there is a lack of diversity in, and clear preference for certain oral evidence witnesses. The data shows the Work and Pensions Committee to have overwhelmingly relied on non-profit and public sector affiliates, from London, who – despite improvements - mostly happened to be male. Consequently, as Geddes argues, 'if Parliament only listens to small sections of society, and the lack of diversity is not addressed, the quality of evidence is pulled into question' (2017:301); engaging substantively with the problems that ordinary members of the public face with UC requires more of their voices. Second, the data shows executive scrutiny

in relation to UC was overtly adversarial and partisan. The debates were dominated by a series of unhelpful and helpful contributions, owing to the influence of party affiliations (rather than gender). Consequently, the concerns that scrutiny is becoming a partisan tool for 'political point scoring', rather than a proper check on the government, is shown to hold truth. Third, constituency representation, and the representation of women in particular, is well fulfilled in the debates. The data shows nearly half of all contributions had a constituency focus, supporting the argument that the constituency focus of MPs is often captured through their parliamentary work. Moreover, women were better represented in these debates than if there were a fully participating House of Commons Chamber. Female MPs also raised 4 times as many questions relating to women's issues than their male colleagues, reaffirming the thesis that the increased presence of women in Parliament results in greater attention to women's issues. In sum, this paper shows how Parliament engaged with the issue of Universal Credit non-legislatively, and that the trends of the existing literature still largely apply.

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