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Governing Coalition Agreements and Legislative Vote Outcomes
in the 55th British Parliament

Abstract

An emergent field in comparative legislative studies focuses on the connection between party policy pledges and executive and legislative behavior during the parliamentary term. In this paper, I focus on the 2010 governing coalition agreement (CA) forged between the Conservative and Liberal Democratic parties in Britain and its impact on executive and legislative behavior in the first session of the 55th Parliament of the House of Commons. I find that, on the major issues dealt with thus far, most CA pledges were advanced during the first session, and that legislative motions lacking CA have a independent negative effect on partisanship, even in the majoritarian Westminster system.

Key words: British parliament, coalition agreement, legislative vote outcomes

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Introduction

Partisanship is interesting in its own right, as is its complement: the degree of consensus achieved between government and opposition parties. In his 1998 book *Pivotal Politics*, Keith Krehbiel suggested that "a good theory of lawmaking should identify covariates of coalition sizes." In a recent study, I found that the development in the multi-party system in New Zealand led to a significant increase in legislative consensus (Williams 2012). In this paper, I will argue that, during coalition governance, an important covariate of consensus is the commitment to a particular legislative agenda established in the governing coalition agreement (CA) between coalition partners.

At the structural level, it is well established that, given social heterogeneity, proportional representation leads to multiparty systems (Clark and Golder 2006), which in turn regularly necessitate the formation of multiparty coalition governments (Laver and Schofield 1990). Coalition government should be more prone to fragmentation than single party government (Laver and Schofield 1990, 26; Strøm and Müller 1999).

To overcome the 'unity-distinctiveness dilemma' inherent to coalition government, a number of different institutional mechanisms are created by coalition partners (Boston and Bullock 2012). One of these mechanisms is the CA, which serve as a contract between coalition parties, committing them to a legislative agenda and thus reducing uncertainty by maintaining coalition cohesion and stability (Strøm and Müller 1999).

In this paper, I focus primarily on how CA policy pledges effect the degree of partisanship in legislative vote outcomes. I begin with a theoretical discussion of why we should expect CA to maintain partisan outcomes, and why its absence should increase consensus. I then present evidence from the British House of Commons which supports this expectation.

Theory

Uncertainty and formation of oversized coalition

Theories of post-election governing coalition formation emphasize the positive effects of uncertainty on coalition size. For instance, Riker (1962, 88) observed that, "If coalition-makers

do not know how much weight a specific uncommitted participant adds, they may be expected to aim at more than a minimum winning coalition." Later, Weingast (1979) argued that the expected payoffs from the minimal winning coalition game were outweighed by that of the more certain universalistic approach. More recently, Carruba and Volden (2000) have argued that formateurs will establish oversized coalitions to protect the government from votes of no confidence should parties defect after acquiring their slice of the legislative pie.

I argue that uncertainty can have similar effects in the formation of coalitions on individual legislative motions as well. If CAs serve as a contract between coalition parties, and if they provide information to MPs about the commitments of the governing coalition parties, when a CA is lacking on a particular issue there should be more uncertainty about whether the governing coalition will remain cohesive on votes pertaining to that issue. In such cases, ministers and bill sponsors should be more likely to seek support outside of the governing coalition, in order to ensure the bill has sufficient support to be passed.

Coalition agreement and strategic opposition

Uncertainty should have a consensual effect on the opposition side as well. Building on Cox and McCubbins (2005) procedural cartel theory, Dewan and Spirling (2011) suggest that in majoritarian settings, opposition MPs can credibly commit to strategically opposing government legislation, so that opposition MPs will vote against government legislation even when preferred to the status quo, leading to legislative outcomes closer to the preference of the opposition MPs. This "Westminster model" of strategic opposition predicts consistent government-vs-opposition voting outcomes in majoritarian settings.

I argue that strategic opposition can often apply even in non-majoritarian settings. CAs essentially compensate for the lack of institutionalized majoritarian control, creating roughly the same level of certainty that the government will be able to vote cohesively against the wishes of the opposition, and thus creating, on a motion-by-motion basis, similar incentives for strategic opposition (see Figure 1 below).

Figure 1: Coalition agreements compensate for lacking majoritarian institutions
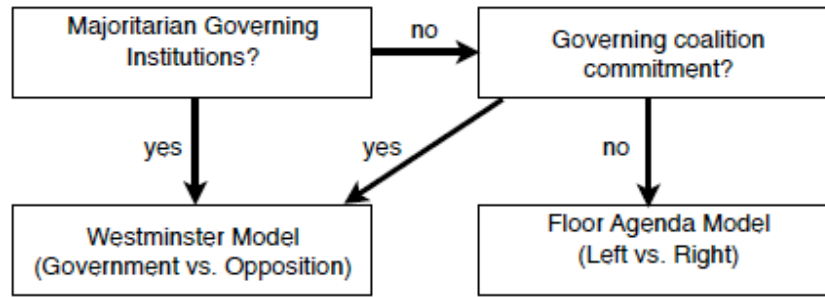
On the other hand, in multiparty settings where CA is lacking, both the government and opposition legislative coalitions should be more prone to fragmentation, in some cases more closely approximating a free vote where legislators divide by ideology rather than partisanship,and the vote margin will be a function of the status quo and proposal ideal points, similar to Krehbiel's floor agenda model (Krehbiel 1998). Though I don't use ideal point estimation in this study, I predict that "freer votes" will tend to have higher consensus levels than partisan votes, particularly where the seat share of the government is minimal winning.

Propositions

Given these expectations about the effects of CA on both government and opposition behavior, my main proposition can be identified as follows:

Proposition 1a *Consensus levels should be higher on legislative motions lacking a CA than on issues for which a CA commitment has been established.*

Of course, given norms of collective responsibility and party discipline, government cohesion will remain high even when a CA does not establish commitment on a particular bill. However, even in the presence of collective responsibility and party discipline, I expect some reduction in certainty about whether the governing coalition will vote cohesively in the absence of a CA, and thus also lead to a marginal increase in the size of the voting majorities on individual motions. Thus, a cross-national hypothesis (not tested here) is as follows:

Proposition 1b *The negative association between CA commitment and consensus levels should become more pronounced as the level of structural majoritarianism declines.*

The British Coalition Government

Britain, home of the Westminster model of parliamentary governance, is generally recognized as an exemplar of majoritarian democracy. One aspect of this is having a strong executive vis-a-vis the parliament (Norton 2000, Smith 2000). For instance, Flinders (2002, 23) observes that, "parliament has two inherently contradictory roles – first, to sustain the executive, which it would appear to do well, and second, to hold the executive to account between elections, which it does rather less well."

Given Britain's tradition of single party majority government, party discipline, and concentrated government agenda powers (Kam 2009), it is perhaps not surprising that a norm of government-vs-opposition developed in the House of Commons. Thus, the current coalition government provides a useful case to study how coalition governance impact vote outcomes in an otherwise majoritarian parliamentary setting with collective responsibility and party discipline.

The 55th Parliament and the Coalition Government

Following the 2010 British general elections, no party had an outright majority, and the Liberal Democrats were in a good position to bargain with both the Conservative and Labour parties as a potential coalition partner. However, a coalition between the Liberal Democrats and Labour would not have amounted to a parliamentary majority. Rather than govern as a single party minority, Conservative party leader David Cameron formed a majority coalition with Nick Clegg of the Liberal Democratic party. It would be the first peacetime coalition government in Britain since the 1930s (Quinn, Bara and Bartle 2011). Table 1 below provides information about the parties in Britain during the 55th Parliament which was sworn into office in 2010.

Table 1: Parties in the 55th British parliament (2010 - 2012)

Party	Seats (percent)	Coalition
Conservative	304 (47)	Government
Liberal Democrat	57 (9)	Government
Labour	254 (39)	Opposition
DUP	8 (1)	Opposition
SNP	6 (1)	Opposition
Sinn Fein	6 (1)	Opposition
Plaid Cymru	3 (.5)	Opposition
SDLP	3 (.5)	Opposition
Independent	2 (.3)	Opposition
Alliance	1 (.2)	Opposition
Green	1 (.2)	Opposition
Respect	1 (.2)	Opposition
	Total seats: 646 (100)	Effective number of parties: 2.62

The governing coalition agreement

The 2010 Conservative-Liberal Democrat CA is organized into 31 issue areas, and within each issue area, there are a number of more specific policy pledges, which add up to 397. The table in the Appendix lists the issue areas of the British CA, as well as the number of specific pledges found in each area.

Quinn, Bara and Bartle (2011), comparing the CA to the parties' election manifestos find that both the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats won significant policy gains in the final CA. They note that the Liberal Democrats' made gains in their four manifesto priorities: fairer taxes, a pupil premium, a green economy, and political reform, while the Conservatives' priorities of deficit reduction, cracking down on immigration, national defense and Euroscepticism were all prominent in the CA as well.

In addition to mutual agreements such as the alternative vote referendum, financial sector reform, and preparing for the 2012 Olympic Games in London, there were also a few pledges

where the parties "agree-to-disagree" including on the Trident nuclear weapon, new nuclear plant construction, transferable tax allowances for married couples, and university tuition fees. Clegg and Cameron also agreed to hold a "free vote" on the repeal of the Hunting Act.

Do coalition agreements matter?

The propositions advanced in this paper assume that CAs are usually binding, and that the commitments which they establish provide reliable information to MPs regarding whether or not the governing coalition can be expected to vote cohesively on a motion. However, this has been a topic of some debate among comparative legislative scholars. Is the CA used by lawmakers as a 'bible', is it 'a ritual dance' used to appeal to voters while not really producing credible commitments, or is it somewhere in between?

Moury (2012) argues that CAs reduce the cost of inter-party compromising, reduce agency costs between the party/ies (principal) and the ministers (agents), and that CAs are enforced with a variety of mechanisms including screening, sacking and reshuffles, information-gathering, and reciprocal veto and amendments. Thus, Moury hypothesizes that CAs "effectively and consistently constrain ministers". To test this theory, Moury looks at the number of "precise" CA pledges[2] which are fulfilled by ministers in Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands and Italy, and finds that CAs pledges are usually fulfilled.

Because I am writing this paper in the midst of the 55th parliamentary sitting, and because I focus only on the first session of the coalition government (May 2010 - May 2012), I can only predict how many of the precise pledges from the British CA will have been fulfilled by the next general election in 2015. However, I can look at the major pieces of legislation advanced during the first session and assess how many pledges from the relevant CA issue areas were fulfilled. The results are shown in Table 2 below.

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[2] Moury focuses on "precise" pledges which provide the Minister's with little room for autonomous choice, and can be objectively coded as fulfilled or not. An example of a "precise" pledge from the British CA would be, "We will seek to ensure an injection of private capital into Royal Mail, including opportunities for employee ownership". In contrast an "imprecise" pledge would be, "We will *reform* the banking system to avoid a repeat of the financial crisis, to promote a competitive economy, to sustain the recovery and to protect and sustain jobs" (emphasis added to "reform" given the unspecified nature of the type of reform to be advanced).

Table 2: Pledge fulfillment in the first session of the 55th Parliament

Government bills advanced in first session	Corresponding CA issue area	Precise pledges fulfilled
Finance (No. 2) Bill; Finance (No. 3) Bill; Finance (No. 4) Bill; Financial Services Bill	Banking	4/5 (.80)
Postal Services Bill; Localism Bill	Business	8/11 (.73)
Police Reform and Social Responsibility Bill; Protection of Freedoms Bill; Terrorism Prevention and Investigation Measures Bill	Civil Liberties	6/8 (.75)
Local Government Finance Bill; Localism Bill; London Local Authorities Bill; Mayoral Referendum; Scotland Bill	Communities and Local Government	19/25 (.76)
Financial Services	Consumer Protection	2/7 (.29)
Police Reform and Social Responsibility Bill	Crime and Policing	9/12 (.75)
Sunday Trading Bill	Culture, Olympics, Media and Sport	1/5 (.20)
Public Bodies Bill; Savings Accounts and Health in Pregnancy Grant Bill	Deficit Reduction	6/6 (1.0)
European Union Bill	Europe	2/2 (1.0)
Welfare Reform Bill	Jobs and Welfare	3/9 (.33)
Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Bill	Justice	3/6 (.50)
Health and Social Care Bill	NHS	11/18 (.61)
Finance Bill; Pensions Bill	Pensions and Older People	4/4 (1.0)
Electoral Registration and Administration Bill; Fixed-Terms Parliaments Bill; Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Bill; Superannuation Bill	Political Reform	8/22 (.36)
Academies Bill; Education Bill	Schools	10/11 (.91)
Finance (No. 2) Bill; Finance (No. 3) Bill; Finance (No. 4) Bill; Finance Bill	Taxation	7/8 (.88)
Education Bill	Universities and Further Education	3/5 (.60)
	Total:	106/164 (.65)

To assess whether a particular motion was committed to in the CA, I used legislative debates found in the Commons Hansard provided at parliament.uk. A qualitative comparison between the debate on each particular motion and the CA pledges was made, and key words from the relevant issue areas of the CA were searched for in the Hansards. I also searched for key words from the CA pledges in the final drafts of the legislation found at legislation.gov.uk.

Focusing on the major pieces of legislation advanced in the first session, I find that about 65% of the pledges from the corresponding CA issue areas have been fulfilled, suggesting that the CA, while not adhered to religiously, provided guidance for the government in the first session.[3] It will be interesting to see how much of the remaining pledges will be fulfilled before the next general election in 2015.

Coalition agreement and legislative vote outcomes

I turn now to my main hypothesis, that legislative motions which fulfill a particular CA pledge will tend to divide the legislature more sharply between government and opposition. To test my proposition about the effects of CAs, I focus on legislative votes from the first session of the 55th parliament, spanning from May 2010 to May 2012. Vote data from the entire first session of the 55th Parliament can be gathered from the Hansard records provided by the UK parliamentary website, and is also available at publicwhip.org.uk (though it requires some cleaning).

There are several types of motions which are voted on, including amendments, clauses, deferred divisions, schedules, programme motions, and second and third readings. The legislative procedure for bills in the British Parliament includes the first reading, second reading, committee stage, report stage and third reading. This process is then repeated in the House of Lords before

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[3] A few cases emerged in which the government seemed to shun its CA pledge. For instance, despite the CA to "protect wildlife and promote green spaces", Mary Creagh of the Labour party accused the government of selling England's Public Forestry Estate (see Hansard, Opposition Day statement February 2, 2011). Also, discussing NHS reorganization, John Healey of the Labour party argued that "the Government…has failed to honour the pledges made in the Coalition Agreement to provide real-term increases each year to health funding" (see Hansard, Opposition Day statement November 11, 2010). Also, despite the CA pledge to "stop unacceptable financial sector bonuses", when pressed by Labour MP Gordon Banks, George Osborne replied, "Transparency should make it clear to the owners of these banks—the shareholders—what the pay and bonus levels and the remuneration levels are; it will then be for them to take action" (see Hansard, Question for Chancellor of the Exchequer December 6, 2011).

amendments are considered in both Houses. After Royal Assent bills are considered an Act of Parliament.

In my analysis I focus on motions from the major government bills in the House of Commons, primarily clauses, amendments, and second and third readings of a bill. There are a total of thirty-one government bills, each subsuming a number of more specific motions, included in the data set, with a total of 361 votes. In Appendix B is a table of the 31 votes and the number of particular divisions concerning each bill. The main outcome variable for this study is the level of consensus between government and opposition MPs. To measure consensus, I use the following measure:

$$weight = .5 + \left| .5 - \frac{\%GovAye + \%OppAye}{2} \right|$$

$$min(\%GovAye, \%OppAye) + min(\%GovNo, \%OppNo) \times weight$$

where "%GovAye" is the percentage of all voting government coalition MPs who vote in favor off a particular each motion. This measure ranges from zero (government-vs-opposition) to one (perfect consensus). Because the consensus measure for perfectly partisan outcomes is zero and because about a third of the vote outcomes were perfectly partisan, the frequency distribution exhibits a heavy right skew, as do the residuals of the linear regression. To deal with this issue, I transform the consensus measure by takings its cubed root, which allows a more normal residual distribution than log or square root transformations in this case. The fully specified statistical model used is

$$y_{ij}^{1/3} = constant + \alpha_j + \beta C_i + \mu Z_{ij} + \varepsilon_{ij}$$

where y_{ij} is the outcome variable, consensus, on motion i concerning bill j, α_j is a fixed-bill effect, C_i is the main variable of interest indicating whether or not a motion was committed to in the CA and Z_{ij} is a vector of control variables including the origin of the bill (Commons or Lords), the type of procedure (dummies are created for amendment, clause, second reading, third reading, et cetera), the share of government and opposition MPs not present for the vote, the

coalition of the initiator of the motion, and the percentage of the public who identified the issue area as most important in the 2010 British Elections Survey. The main coefficient of interest is β, which indicates the effect of governing party commitment on inter-party polarization.

Results

Figure 2 shows a negative relationship between consensus and CA, as expected. However, as we can see, there is still a large amount of unexplained variance in consensus. In Table 3, which displays the statistical model estimates, the goodness-of-fit (adjusted R^2) increases from .0204 in the bivariate model, to .5694 in the fully specified model. Figure 3 shows the residuals distributions for the bivariate and fully specified models. The residuals from the full model are more normally distributed than in the bivariate model.

Figure 2: Consensus and Coalition Agreement Jittered Plot
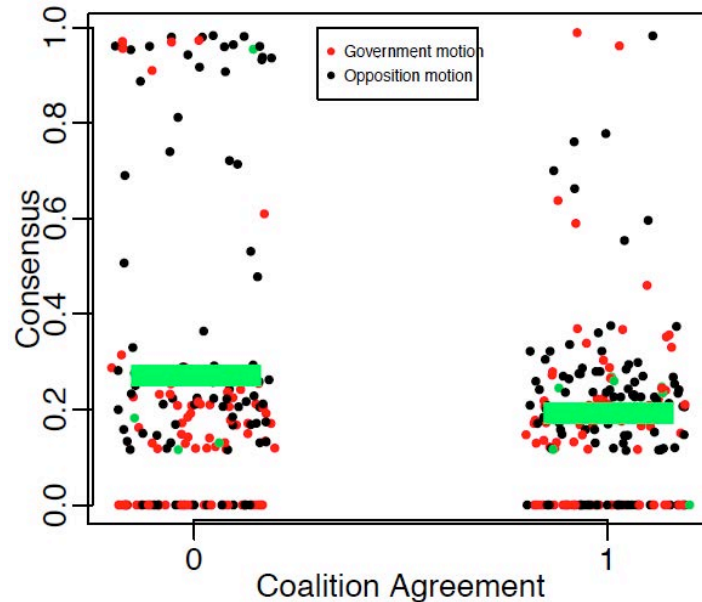
Note: Horizontal green bars indicate the mean consensus level when CA is and is not present. Red dots indicated motions introduced by a government MP and black dots indicate a motion which was introduced by opposition MP.

Figure 3: Residual distributions
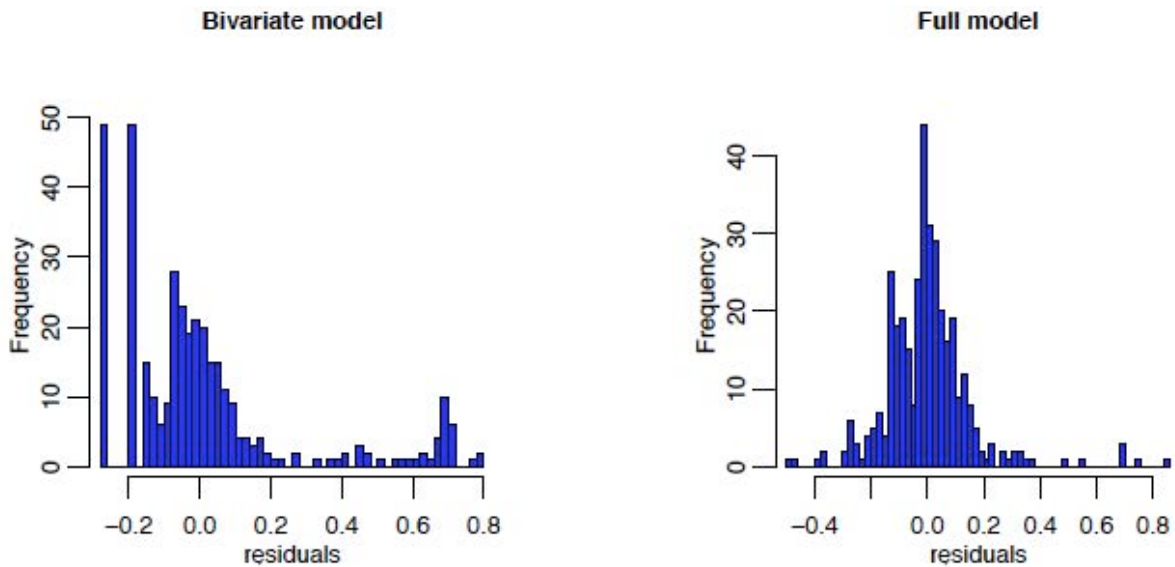
Note: the Figure on the left is the residual frequency histogram of the bivariate model (model 1 in Table 3), and the Figure of the right is the residual frequency histogram of the fully specified model (model 4 in Table 3).

Because of the cube root transformation of the dependent variable, we cannot interpret the results as we normally would for linear models. In this case, the coefficients would be interpreted by cubing both sides of the equation, so that a cubed unit increase in the coefficient is equal to a one unit increase in the response variable. We do find that in all four models, the effect of CA on legislative vote outcome is in the expected negative direction, and it is statistically significant in the first, second and fourth models. In model 3, inclusion of the share of the missing government and opposition MPs soaks up the significance of the CA. This may be because many MPs may not participate in a vote as a way of showing their opposition, and because smaller opposition parties generate much smaller vote participation rates. However, after controlling for bill fixed-effects, we find that the significant negative effect of CA reemerges.

Table 3: Models of legislative consensus during the 55th British coalition government

Independent variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Coalition agreement	-.0777*** (.0267)	-.0837*** (.0266)	-.0285 (.0220)	-.0462** (.0232)
Importance of issue to public	—	.0088 (.0266)	-.0062 (.0104)	-.0057 (.0161)
Originate in Lords	—	.0432 (.0448)	-.0068 (.0365)	.1791 (.1322)
Motion initiated by Opposition MP	—	-.1055*** (.0271)	-.0784*** (.0219)	-.0939*** (.0260)
Share Government Missing	—	—	.6227*** (.1034)	.2227 (.1702)
Share Opposition Missing	—	—	.4417*** (.0528)	.2784*** (.0541)
Bill dummies (31 total)	—	—	—	Included
Procedure dummies (19 total)	—	—	—	Included
N	361	361	361	361
adj. R^2	0.0204	0.0547	0.3864	0.5694

Note: * $p < .10$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$. Independent variable coefficients are reported with standard errors in parentheses. The `importance' variable is log transformed. The share missing variables are calculated by dividing the number of MPs from a particular coalition divided by the total number of MPs in that coalition.

The percentage of the public who identified the issue as most important appears to have no effect on the vote outcome, nor does the origin of the bill in the House of Lords. Both of these findings must be viewed with some skepticism however, given that, regarding the former, the importance of the economy far outweighed all other issues (why I log transformed this variable), and because there was an imperfect match between the issue areas identified in the British Elections Survey and the issues dealt with in the first session of Parliament.

Also, only ten percent of the vote sample concerned bills originated in the House of Lords, so its probably not the best representation of British bicameralism. Motions initiated by Opposition MPs appear to have a strong negative effect on consensus, probably because the

government MPs vote cohesively in opposition to any opposition party proposals, and because many of the opposition motions often come from small parties, such as the Scottish National Party and the Welsh Plaid Cymru party, which generate small vote turnouts often with consensual defeats.

Conclusion

In this paper, I proposed that in the absence of CA commitment, there should be more uncertainty about whether the governing coalition will vote cohesively, and that this uncertainty should lead to larger voting majorities. The evidence presented above provides initial support for this proposition. Given that Britain continues to have a majoritarian system with strong norms of collective responsibility, it is not surprising that CA has not had a huge impact on legislative consensus. Britain remains a majoritarian Westminster system rather than a consensus democracy, despite the occurrence of coalition government. However, that the CA seems still seems to diminish the government-vs-opposition tendency of the Westminster system is consistent with theory posited in this paper.

Appendix A: Overview of the British coalition agreement

Issue area	Policy pledges	Percent of total pledges	Issue area	Policy pledges	Percent of total pledges
Banking	11	2.77	Immigration	7	1.76
Business	20	5.04	International Development	18	4.53
Civil Liberties	14	3.53	Jobs and Welfare	11	2.77
Communities and Local Government	28	7.05	Justice	9	2.27
Consumer Protection	9	2.27	NHS	30	7.56
Crime and Policing	19	4.79	National Security	5	1.26
Culture, Olympics, Media and Sport	11	2.77	Pensions and Older People	7	1.76
Defense	7	1.76	Political Reform	27	6.8
Deficit Reduction	10	2.52	Public Health	4	1.01
Energy and Climate Change	24	6.05	Schools	17	4.28
Environment, Food and Rural Affairs	18	4.53	Social Action	7	1.76
Equalities	7	1.76	Social Care and Disability	5	1.26
Europe	9	2.27	Taxation	9	2.27
Families and Children	13	3.27	Transport	12	3.02
Foreign Affairs	10	2.52	Universities and Further Education	6	1.51
Government Transparency	13	3.27	**Total**	**397**	**100**

Appendix B: Major Government Legislation Advanced During First Session of 55th Parl.

Bill	Number of Motions	Percent of Motions
Academies Bill [Lords]	16	4.43
Daylight Saving Bill	7	1.94
Education Bill	6	1.66
Electoral Registration and Administration	11	3.05
European Union Bill	11	3.05
Finance (No. 2) Bill	2	0.55
Finance (No. 3) Bill	13	3.6
Finance (No. 4) Bill	15	4.16
Finance Bill	22	6.09
Financial Services	3	0.83
Financial Services Bill	7	1.94
Fixed-term Parliaments Bill	18	4.99
Health and Social Care (Re-committed)	7	1.94
Health and Social Care Bill	10	2.77
Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders	25	6.93
Local Government Finance Bill	19	5.26
Localism Bill	15	4.16
London Local Authorities Bill [Lords]	6	1.66
Mayoral Referendum	11	3.05
Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies	47	13.02
Pensions Bill [Lords]	3	0.83
Police Reform and Social Responsibility	14	3.88
Postal Services Bill	5	1.39
Protection of Freedoms Bill	11	3.05
Total	361	100

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