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# Regulating the Regulators: Parliamentary Discourse on Expenses Scandals and Other Crises in the United Kingdom

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines how legislatures debate the regulation of their own members, focusing on parliamentary self-regulation as a form of self-regarding legislation and using the UK expenses scandal of 2009 as a central case. Using automated content analysis, the study investigates thematic patterns in the parliamentary debate of 29 June 2009 and compares them with five additional debates on MPs' conduct spanning from 1975 to 2021. The analysis identifies six recurrent themes: procedural, institutional, advocacy, legal, ethical, and financial and tests three hypotheses: that procedural and substantive (institutional) themes dominate; that partisanship is limited; and that these thematic structures are robust over time. The findings confirm that procedural and institutional frames consistently shape parliamentary discourse on internal regulation, with little partisan differentiation and surprising thematic stability across decades. The 2009 debate, while emerging from a moment of acute political crisis, reflects a durable pattern of rhetorical self-regulation characterised by cross-party consensus, procedural formalism, and normative appeals to institutional accountability.

## KEYWORDS

Parliamentary debates; automated content analysis; legislative discourse; UK politics; MP's expenses scandal; parliamentary self-regulation

## Parliamentary discourse and self-regulation after the 2009 expenses scandal

Misconduct among legislators remains a persistent feature of parliamentary democracies. Despite repeated reform efforts, legislatures across political systems continue to grapple with how to regulate the behaviour of their own members while maintaining institutional legitimacy and public trust (Corrado and De Sousa 2025; Dávid-Barrett 2022; Villoria and Cruz-Rubio 2022). Moments of reform triggered by the scandal are analytically distinctive because they concern self-regarding legislation: instances in which representatives debate and design rules that apply directly to themselves (Cini 2019; Wickberg and Phélippeau 2022). Such episodes raise fundamental questions about accountability, institutional credibility, and the capacity of parliaments to act as effective regulators of their own conduct.

While a substantial literature examines legislative debates on public policy, moral issues, and distributive conflict, comparatively little attention has been paid to how parliaments talk about themselves when confronted with institutional failure. Debates

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over internal regulation differ from conventional policy debates in that they implicate legislators collectively, often reducing incentives for overt partisan conflict and encouraging procedural, technocratic, and legitimacy-seeking forms of discourse. Understanding these debates is therefore important not only for the study of parliamentary ethics but also for broader theories of legislative behaviour and institutional reform.

This article examines these dynamics through the case of the UK Parliament, focusing on debates surrounding the 2009 MPs' expenses scandal<sup>1</sup> and situating this episode within a longer historical trajectory of parliamentary self-regulation from 1975 to 2021. The UK provides a particularly instructive case: despite repeated reforms and extensive public scrutiny, parliamentary misconduct has remained a recurrent concern, and debates over standards regulation have become a regular feature of legislative life.

While the 2009 expenses scandal was not the first instance of financial misconduct by MPs, it significantly deepened public cynicism. More recent cases, such as those involving House of Commons Committee on Standards (2021) and House of Commons Committee on Standards (2023), have sustained this negative perception (Crewe and Walker 2019; House of Commons Committee on Standards 2021, 2023; Jayanetti 2021; Lewis 2019). Nonetheless, the 2009 scandal marked a pivotal moment in the regulation of MPs' financial conduct, prompting the creation of the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority (IPSA) through the expedited Parliamentary Standards Act. This reform was deemed necessary to improve the administration of MPs' allowances and expenses, enhance transparency, and restore public trust in both Parliament and its regulatory mechanisms. The Parliamentary Standards Bill was fast-tracked through all legislative stages by July 2009, in preparation for the 2010 general election. Debated over three consecutive days, the second reading on 29 June is the most analytically significant, as it sets out the bill's core provisions, government intentions, and cross-party perspectives, offering key insights into the rationale and scope of the proposed reform.

Rather than analysing MPs' conduct directly, we focus on the institutional setting of parliament and its internal regulatory discourse. Debates of this kind are important yet underexplored, offering insight into how legislatures craft rules for themselves. While existing studies of parliamentary debate largely address public policy or moral issues (Steiner et al. 2004; Weale, Biquelet, and Bara 2012), this article, by treating parliamentary standards reform as a form of self-regarding legislation, examines how legislators justify, contest, and legitimate rules that apply directly to themselves under conditions of public scrutiny. Our analysis operates at two levels: the thematic structure of debates and the rhetorical strategies of individual MPs.

Research on parliamentary discourse has demonstrated that legislative speech is shaped not only by party competition but also by institutional context and the nature of the issue under debate (Bara, Weale, and Biquelet 2007; Steiner et al. 2004; Weale, Biquelet, and Bara 2012). Because such debates concern the internal governance of parliament, they are less easily framed in adversarial or partisan terms and more likely to emphasise procedural integrity, institutional design, and appeals to legitimacy. Prior research therefore suggests that consensus-oriented discourse and technocratic framing may dominate, even in the context of political crisis.

Guided by Steiner et al.'s (2004) distinction between procedural and substantive themes, we categorise the debates thematically. While prior studies have focussed on deliberative debate, this framework is equally applicable to self-regulatory contexts. Against this theoretical backdrop, the article addresses the following research question:

What form does parliamentary discourse take when legislatures debate the financial regulation of their own members? To answer this question, we analyse the thematic structure of parliamentary debates using automated content analysis and develop three hypotheses grounded in the literature on legislative discourse and institutional reform.

**H1:** Procedural and substantive (institutional) themes will dominate parliamentary debates on MPs' financial regulation, reflecting the technocratic and regulatory nature of self-regarding legislation.

**H2:** Partisan differentiation in debate content will be less evident than cross-party consensus, outweighing adversarial positioning due to the collective nature of the reputational threat.

**H3:** The thematic structure of parliamentary discourse on self-regulation will be robust over time, indicating a durable pattern in how legislatures address internal reform.

Previous research into debates on moral or conscience-based issues (e.g. Weale, Bicquelet, and Bara 2012) suggests that party lines can become blurred, and advocacy can dominate. We expect similar dynamics in debates on institutional reform, where shared concerns may override partisan division. By scrutinising a series of debates on related issues across time we can examine the consistency of language and examine whether there is a similar theme structure to all such debates on a related set of themes. To assess whether the themes identified in the 2009 debate are typical or exceptional within the broader parliamentary discourse, we extend our analysis to relevant debates spanning from 1975 to 2021. This longitudinal approach enables us to evaluate the persistence and evolution of key themes over time. For the 2009 debate, we also analyse cross-party differences in speech content and identify the topics associated with each theme, adding granularity to our findings. Since the 2009 legislation was fast-tracked, possibly affecting debate quality and rhetorical style, the broader time series helps assess whether these were anomalies or part of a consistent discourse.

Analysis of parliamentary debates aids our understanding of how parliamentary democracy works because MPs make arguments supportive of their positions and these contribute to how debates are framed. As Bäck, Debus, Fernandes, Debus, and Bäck (2021) emphasise, legislative debates serve both substantive and instrumental purposes while studying legislative debates offer insights on both representation and party politics. Additionally, comprehending the underlying rationale of parliamentary speeches yields benefits that extend beyond enhancing our understanding of the operations of legislative institutions and political parties; it also offers additional analytical value (Proksch and Slapin 2014).

In other words, 'talk' matters, where parliamentary speech is apprehended as a form of legislative behaviour (Proksch and Slapin 2014). As Proksch and Slapin (2014) argue, treating parliamentary speech as a form of legislative behaviour provides analytical leverage that cannot be obtained from voting records or institutional rules alone. In the present case, analysing debate content allows us to identify how MPs collectively frame institutional failure, manage reputational risk, and articulate reform priorities through language, even in the absence of clear partisan division. This approach is particularly well

suited to the study of self-regarding legislation, where formal conflict may be muted but discursive strategies remain central. Building on Steiner et al.'s (2004) distinction between procedural and substantive themes, we identify the main argumentative dimensions of the debate. Substantive themes focus on the specific content and argument of debate, and several might emerge and vary according to the nature of the topic under discussion. Procedural themes relate to the conduct of debate within the rules and conventions of the parliament under investigation. In their work on British parliamentary debates on abortion reform, Bara, Weale, and Bicquelet (2007) found six themes, four of which were substantive, one was procedural, and the other was associated with advocacy. Following on from this, our expectation was that procedural themes to dominate, given the focus on setting up new regulatory mechanisms, with substantive themes likely to centre on institutional, legal, financial, and ethical aspects. We also explore whether advocacy or other themes emerge, and how consistently these appear across different time periods. Since the purpose of the debate was to establish new machinery to deal with MPs' expenses claims, the main substantive theme to emerge would be institutional in nature. Given that concern with the misuse of public money at the heart of the issue, we also expected that there would be additional themes reflecting financial, legal, and ethical considerations and possibly one associated with advocacy.

Our material is drawn from near verbatim accounts of parliamentary debates provided in digitalised form by Hansard.<sup>2</sup> Focusing on the content of a central debate, we identify a series of thematic categories and examine their role within the debate using automated content analysis. This approach enables the systematic examination of large-scale text corpora and represents a form of data mining that has gained increasing significance over the past three decades (see Grimmer and Stewart 2013).

In short, this article examines how Parliament talks about itself when addressing institutional failure, asking whether such discourse is shaped more by shared responsibility than partisan contestation. By comparing the 2009 debate to other key moments of self-regulation, we assess the durability and structure of parliamentary language on internal reform.

## **The evolution of parliamentary standards and financial regulation**

The expenses scandal erupted in May 2009 following revelations in the *Daily Telegraph* (Winnett and Rayner 2010). The ensuing media frenzy created a range of allegations against MPs, primarily with respect to the apparent misuse of public money and brought about an impetus for reform. This scandal, rather than being a unique event, was in many ways the latest in a long line of moral panics about perceived dishonesty among MPs which encompassed a broad range of peccadilloes and have usually been followed by changes in procedure and practice which sought to make MPs more accountable for their financial actions. Prominent among earlier waves of scandal and reform are the Poulson affair, which involved concerns about corruption and conflicts of interest and led to the establishment of a Register of Members' Interests by 1977 and the 1994 'cash for questions' affair, which led to a new ethics regime centring on a Code of Conduct, a new Committee on Standards and Privileges and an independent Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards from 1995 (Allen 2011).

Such efforts to support ethical behaviour among MPs largely neglected their parliamentary expenses and allowances. Traditionally MPs resisted the imposition of rules and procedures that they regarded as curtailing their freedom of action in carrying out what they perceived as their proper responsibilities (Allen 2009; Mancuso 1995) yet calls to protect the Commons' constitutional right to govern its own affairs were often a smokescreen to defend traditions of institutional self-regulation. In the case of parliamentary expenses, the origins of the 2009 scandal can also be attributed in part to successive governments' failures to raise MPs' salaries even in line with inflation. Fearing public condemnation, governments sought instead to compensate MPs by expanding the system of allowances and expenses incurred in pursuit of their duties. This has enabled the development of an impression that vast amounts of public money have been used to subsidise extravagant lifestyles and second homes. John Bercow, the Speaker of the House, who presided over the passage of the Parliamentary Standards Act, suggested that the old expenses regime had been 'excessively secretive, overly generous, loosely administered and patently indefensible' (Bercow 2020, 160).

A combination of recent technology, a 24-hour news media regime, constitutional reforms such as freedom of information legislation, and the omnipresence of social media has placed MPs under scrutiny as never before. This inevitably revealed unsavoury elements of their behaviour. Allegations of sleaze, corruption, and impropriety amplified in the media, led to MPs being regarded as corrupt, greedy, self-seeking, and untrustworthy. As the Hansard Society (2010) pointed out, such perceptions also fed into a general lack of trust in public institutions. It was investigations of these allegations which led the Brown government, with the support of opposition parties, to introduce legislation to ensure that future recording and monitoring of MPs' allowances and expenses in the line of duty are managed effectively, independently, and transparently. The IPSA was established by the Parliamentary Standards Act in the summer of 2009 to provide for this. The debates concerning IPSA are intrinsically important as examples of representatives discussing rules directed at themselves and were subject to similar structural and context-related themes of argument as any other.

### **Debating the rules: dimensions of parliamentary discourse**

The debates about the creation of IPSA are intrinsically important as examples of representatives discussing rules directed at themselves so there is no reason why they cannot be studied like other debates. After all, they were subject to similar structural and context-related dimensions of arguments as any other type of topic.

Riker (1996) suggested that we can understand the dynamics of the debate in terms of a series of dimensions. The crux of this assertion is that any given disagreement in politics, rather than being uni-dimensional, encompasses a number of different considerations. This is hardly surprising since most political competition involves stressing different constellations of ideas which favour one political position or another. Of course, at the extreme, Riker would argue that this may lead to partisans 'talking past one another', although this is not a problem in the case of the current study where there was a high level of cross-party agreement.

Bara, Weale, and Biquelet (2007, 577–8) suggest that the analysis of parliamentary debates has an important role in aiding our understanding of how parliamentary

democracy works because ‘... representatives offer arguments in support of positions they adopt and an important function of such arguments is to frame issues in certain ways’. Steiner et al. (2004, 1) suggest that ‘... the nature of speech acts inside legislatures is a function of institutional rules and mechanisms, and bears an influence on political outcomes that transcends those rules and mechanisms’. Or, as Eggers and Spirling (2014, 877) put it, legislative debate is a ‘generic term for a sequence of utterances pertaining to the same subject at a particular time as demarcated by parliamentary recorders’. In other words, ‘talk’ matters.

As indicated above, Steiner et al. identify two types of dimensions to parliamentary debates. Substantive dimensions focus on the specific content and argument of debate; several substantive dimensions may emerge and will vary according to the nature of the topic under discussion. Procedural dimensions relate to the conduct of debate according to the rules and conventions of the particular system under investigation. For example, in the case of research on British parliamentary debates concerning abortion reform which used a similar approach, there were six dimensions, four of which were essentially substantive and concerned, the social, moral, legal, and medical aspects of the debate content. Of the other two, one was clearly procedural in nature, and the final dimension was associated with advocacy (Bara, Weale, and Bicquelet 2007).

Following on from this, our expectation was that a procedural dimension would be the most prominent in the debates. We also anticipated that, since the purpose of the debate was to establish new institutional machinery to deal with MPs’ expenses claims, the main substantive dimension to emerge would be institutional in nature. Given the concern with misuse of public money at the heart of the context of our subject matter, we also expected that there would probably be a dimension reflecting financial aspects and possibly also one reflecting moral or ethical considerations, although these would probably contribute less to debate content.

## **Analysing parliamentary language: a computational methodological approach**

Text analysis has played a growing role in aiding our understanding of the underlying ideas and policies of political parties as well as a range of other political activities including parliamentary debates. A particularly effective way to make this evidence manageable is to collect and organise it in a summarised, often numerical, form. In research on party manifestos, this was achieved by means of standardised content analysis undertaken by the Manifesto Project<sup>3</sup> (Budge et al. 2001). It was a short step from this to adapt such techniques to the study of coalition government formation, party pledge fulfilment, televised leadership debates, and parliamentary debates. The Manifesto Project also raised the idea that the more parties emphasise particular issues in their programmatic, the more we can imply that these are of greatest salience for parties. These emphasises can then be used to establish patterns of difference among parties and over time. This idea can be extended to the analysis of other institutions, including parliament.

The methodology employed in our research is automated content analysis, and we use HAMLET software (Brier and Hopp 2013). This is applied to the digitalised texts of relevant

debates dealing with regulation of MPs' expenses and allowances which form our input data.<sup>4</sup>

HAMLET was developed by Alan Brier of Southampton University and Bruno Hopp of the Central Archive for Empirical Social Research Cologne (Brier and Hopp 2013). It has been used, *inter alia*, in the analysis of party manifesto content (Allen and Bara 2017) and leadership debates (Allen, Bara, and Bartle 2013, 2017). Using a dictionary established based on word counts, HAMLET searches within specified text units, normally sentences, for inter-connections between keywords. It is these connected words which form the basis of the categories or themes which make up a dictionary. This can then be applied to large texts, such as entire debates, or small ones, such as individual contributions by MPs, to compare language usage over time or across parties.

The construction of our dictionary and its thematic parameters is based on the content of the second reading debate of the Parliamentary Standards Bill on 29 June 2009, while subsequent debates are analysed using this fixed dictionary to assess thematic consistency rather than change. As an initial step is to preprocess the documents. To achieve this, HAMLET generated a basic word count, excluding function words such as 'with', 'and', and 'the', which carry limited semantic content and serve primarily grammatical or syntactic purposes. Additionally, the vocabulary was simplified through stemming, a process that removes word endings to consolidate related terms and reduce the total number of unique word forms in the dataset. For example, 'electorate', 'election', and 'elector' are all reduced to the root form 'elect' (Jurafsky and Martin 2009). Words which occurred three times or more were then scrutinised by a 'keyword in context' facility to establish their proper use within themes, as words sometimes appear in different settings; for example, 'accountability' could refer to either an ethical or financial context.

The next step is to classify documents into known categories via a dictionary method, to identify

words that separate themes (also referred to as categories) and measure how often those words occur in texts. Using HAMLET, we employed a supervised learning approach to classify documents into predefined categories, informed by insights from prior studies, particularly Steiner et al. (2004) and Bara, Weale, and Biquelet (2007). In addition, the broader context of the expenses scandal was taken into account (see Allen and Birch 2015; Van Heerde Hudson 2014). This analysis resulted in the identification of six distinct themes, which are presented in Table 1 alongside illustrative examples of the corresponding dictionary terms. Following earlier research (Bara, Weale, and Biquelet 2007; Ladi and Tsagkroni 2019; Rheault et al. 2016; Van Dijk 2006; Young and Soroka 2012) our discussion of the results of the analysis is thus based on each theme's contribution to the overall presence of the dictionary in the relevant text. To ensure the reliability and validity of the

**Table 1.** Themes and examples of dictionary inputs.

| Themes        | Examples of dictionary inputs     |
|---------------|-----------------------------------|
| Procedural    | Chamber; Right Honourable; Bill   |
| Institutional | electors; cabinet; European Union |
| Advocacy      | argument; reason; irrefutable     |
| Legal         | acquit; bribery; criminal         |
| Ethical       | duty; moral; conscience           |
| Financial     | audit; expenses; receipts         |

source: authors' work.

classification process, the data were divided into three subsets. The first subset, the training set, was used to develop and apply the coding scheme and to sample the documents. Once the final model was selected, its performance was tested using a second subset of hand-coded documents. The model was then applied to the remaining data to complete the classification.

We now turn to the propositions regarding the nature of parliamentary debates on the financial regulation of Members of Parliament. Our analysis begins with the key debate held on 29 June 2009.<sup>5</sup> An additional topic model was developed to assess the distribution of attention across the identified themes and to examine contributions by speakers from different political parties. Finally, we provide a brief overview of six additional debates related to the oversight of MPs' financial conduct, spanning the period from 1975 to 2021, in order to evaluate the consistency of thematic dimensions over time.

## Results of analysis

### *Dominant themes in the 2009 parliamentary standards debate*

It is worth reiterating that this debate deals with a type of issue which concerns changes to the conduct of MPs rather than relating directly to the public. For this reason as well as the fact that MPs wished to be seen to be doing something to mitigate public outrage about alleged financial impropriety and unethical behaviour, we expect that there will not be the same degree of antagonism reflected in the debate as we would normally find in debates on public policy. We will firstly consider the results for the debate of 29 June 2009 in terms of the proportions of the six HAMLET dimensions present and then move on to examine whether party affiliation makes any difference. We will then consider differences among the speakers by party in terms of their individual emphases on the six themes.

Given that this debate is concerned with the establishment of a new institutional framework to manage MPs' expenses and allowances, it is expected that the most prominent dimensions to this debate are the procedural and the institutional and this is exactly the case. We see in [Table 2](#) that these two themes account for some 67% of dictionary usage. This reflects the assertion by Steiner et al. (2004) regarding the procedural-substantive division being at the heart of the content of all parliamentary debates. What is slightly more surprising is that, considering there was little controversy about the need to bring about institutional change in this area and that the parties were not interested in creating unnecessary conflict, the role of the advocacy dimension was also reasonably strong and reflective of the style of discussion as well as content. This is the way in which MPs try to persuade not only each other but also the world beyond

**Table 2.** Debate of 29 June 2009: dictionary representation.

| Theme         | Contribution to dictionary (%) |
|---------------|--------------------------------|
| Procedural    | 42                             |
| Institutional | 25                             |
| Advocacy      | 15                             |
| Legal         | 7                              |
| Ethical       | 6                              |
| Financial     | 6                              |

source: authors' work.

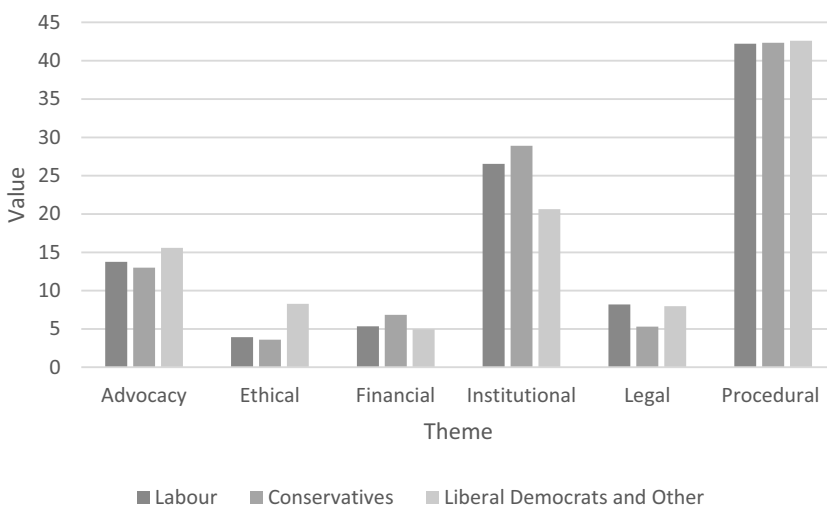
Westminster. The remaining three themes did not figure prominently in the debate overall, although we will see some variation in this regard when we consider the input of individual protagonists. However, as indicated above, we would not expect a great deal of difference in the importance afforded to the different themes on the basis of party affiliation.

### *Cross-party patterns and rhetorical convergence*

Just over 5% of the House of Commons spoke in the debate of 29 June 2009. Eleven of these speakers were Labour, 18 were Conservative and 8 were from other parties.<sup>6</sup> It is clear that this distribution in no way reflected the composition of the House of Commons and provides only an estimate of any differences between parties.

As Figure 1 demonstrates, the proportions of the debate contributed by the six dimensions are generally in the same order of magnitude for all three party groups, and that there is no discernible difference among them in the case of the procedural aspect. Regarding the other two more salient themes, the Conservatives appear to favour the institutional aspect above other parties, although only slightly more than Labour. The smaller parties do not use this type of language as frequently and there is about an eight-point gap between them collectively and the Conservatives, whereas that between Labour and Conservatives is only two to three points. In the case of the advocacy aspect, there is slight variation, with the speakers representing smaller parties being more likely to prioritise it than the two main parties.

With regard to the three themes of lesser importance to the language of the debate, the use of the financial theme by speakers from the different parties follows the same pattern as that for the institutional theme. The ethical and legal themes follow a similar pattern as that for advocacy. We must remember that the collective contribution to the language of debate by these themes is very small, but this is not to say that their



**Figure 1.** Debate of 29 June 2009: party positions on six themes in (mean %;  $n = 34$ ) (source: authors' work).

contribution is undervalued. The use of language by individual speakers is more erratic, even among MPs from the same party, than the overall figures for the debate might suggest. The contributions by individual MPs on a party basis show a slightly more nuanced picture.

Labour's interventions in the 29 June 2009 debate articulated the expenses scandal as a multidimensional institutional crisis, mobilising a complex framing strategy across six themes (Tables 3 and 4). Procedural framing dominated with consistent emphasis on appointment processes, recruitment, and transparency. This technocratic orientation positioned reform as an administrative task centred on procedural integrity and institutional design. Institutional themes, bureaucratic constraints, governance structures, and organisational culture, further displaced blame from individual conduct to systemic dysfunction, legitimising structural reform. Advocacy and institutional themes frequently co-occurred. Engel and Prentice registered the highest advocacy scores, though Prentice's intervention was notably brief and devoid of procedural framing, a pattern inverted in Mann's short but highly procedural contribution. This suggests that thematic emphasis partly reflects variation in intervention length, though a general correlation between institutional and advocacy framing is evident. Ethical and legal dimensions were invoked selectively. Ethical framing, focusing on accountability, fairness, and conflict of interest, constructed reform as a normative imperative, while legal references, particularly from Wright, Prentice, and Dismore, situated the crisis within a constitutional register, stressing

**Table 3.** Debate of 29 June 2009: labour speakers (%;  $n = 11$ ).

| Speaker  | Dimension |         |           |               |       |            |
|----------|-----------|---------|-----------|---------------|-------|------------|
|          | Advocacy  | Ethical | Financial | Institutional | Legal | Procedural |
| Dismore  | 14        | 14      | 2         | 20            | 14    | 36         |
| Keeley   | 18        | 5       | 5         | 22            | 3     | 47         |
| Prentice | 25        | 0       | 0         | 50            | 25    | 0          |
| Macshane | 16        | 3       | 3         | 22            | 0     | 57         |
| Winnick  | 6         | 0       | 18        | 12            | 0     | 65         |
| Ffield   | 18        | 5       | 8         | 29            | 1     | 38         |
| Mann     | 0         | 0       | 0         | 25            | 0     | 75         |
| Straw    | 16        | 6       | 5         | 24            | 9     | 40         |
| Engel    | 24        | 8       | 8         | 25            | 2     | 33         |
| Bell     | 14        | 2       | 11        | 35            | 7     | 31         |
| Wright   | 0         | 0       | 0         | 29            | 29    | 43         |

source: authors' work.

**Table 4.** Debate of 29 June 2009: labour thematic frames.

| Theme         | Associated Topics                                                                                                                                                                             |
|---------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Procedural    | Appointment process, Eligibility criteria, Nomination and selection, Performance review, Procedural fairness, Recruitment mechanisms, Transparency in process, Conflict resolution mechanisms |
| Institutional | Institutional autonomy, Institutional bias, Governance structures, Organizational culture, Advisory roles, Bureaucratic constraints, Committee design                                         |
| Advocacy      | Advocacy for fairness, Advocacy for independence, Civil society engagement, Representation of marginalized groups, Public campaigns, Speaking out against injustice                           |
| Legal         | Access to justice, Legal framework, Jurisdictional complexity, Barriers to legal redress, Human rights obligations, Compliance with legal norms                                               |
| Ethical       | Ethical standards, Accountability, Conflict of interest, Bias in decision-making, Transparency, Perception of fairness, Moral responsibility                                                  |
| Financial     | Resource constraints, Budget limitations, Funding allocation, Cost of implementation, Financial accessibility, Influence of donors                                                            |

source: authors' work.

compliance, access to justice, and rights-based governance. Financial themes were marginal, aside from Winnick's emphasis on fiscal inequality and resource concerns, which reframed the scandal as symptomatic of deeper structural imbalances in parliamentary resourcing. In aggregate, Labour's resulting discourse sought to re-legitimise parliamentary authority through a comprehensive reform narrative responsive to both institutional malfunction and public disaffection.

Conservative contributions to 29 June 2009 debate exhibited the most heterogeneous thematic distribution among the three party groups (Tables 5 and 6). While procedural and institutional frames were dominant overall, individual speaker variation was pronounced. Luff, for example, recorded the highest institutional score but the lowest procedural, with Jenkin showing a similar, though less marked, pattern. Both speakers placed structural reform above the procedural process, contrasting with the broader trend. Most Conservative MPs prioritised procedural framing, particularly around legislative scrutiny, reform mechanisms, and institutional efficiency. Yet Garnier and Soames departed from this pattern in brief interventions that foregrounded legal (Garnier) and advocacy/financial themes

**Table 5.** Debate of 29 June 2009: Conservative speakers (%;  $n = 18$ )).

| Speaker    | Dimension |         |           |               |       |            |
|------------|-----------|---------|-----------|---------------|-------|------------|
|            | Advocacy  | Ethical | Financial | Institutional | Legal | Procedural |
| Afriye     | 17        | 7       | 17        | 26            | 0.4   | 3          |
| Duncan     | 19        | 7       | 9         | 29            | 7     | 30         |
| Tyrie      | 16        | 6       | 8         | 19            | 3     | 49         |
| Jenkin     | 16        | 6       | 3         | 37            | 7     | 32         |
| Grieve     | 21        | 3       | 3         | 20            | 11    | 42         |
| HeathcottA | 15        | 6       | 5         | 33            | 8     | 34         |
| Garnier    | 6         | 0       | 9         | 9             | 29    | 49         |
| Howarth    | 5         | 5       | 10        | 32            | 0     | 50         |
| Young      | 13        | 3       | 4         | 33            | 7     | 41         |
| Swire      | 5         | 0       | 5         | 21            | 5     | 63         |
| Redwood    | 10        | 0       | 10        | 36            | 0     | 45         |
| MField     | 17        | 5       | 12        | 23            | 4     | 39         |
| Soames     | 30        | 10      | 20        | 0             | 0     | 40         |
| Cormack    | 10        | 3       | 8         | 33            | 4     | 41         |
| Goodman    | 16        | 1       | 1         | 32            | 8     | 42         |
| Luff       | 0         | 0       | 0         | 77            | 0     | 23         |
| Tapsell    | 13        | 0       | 0         | 25            | 0     | 63         |
| Shepherd   | 9         | 3       | 1         | 35            | 3     | 49         |

source: authors' work.

**Table 6.** Debate of 29 June 2009: Conservative thematic frames.

| Theme         | Associated Topics                                                                                                                          |
|---------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Procedural    | Committee process, Legislative delays, Parliamentary scrutiny, Procedural fairness, Reform process, Rules and procedures                   |
| Institutional | Leadership, Leadership dynamics, Leadership qualities, Political leadership, Power structure, Structural reforms                           |
| Advocacy      | Gender representation, Representation, Representation of constituents, Support for transparency, Transparency advocacy                     |
| Legal         | Constitutional change, Judicial enforcement, Legal framework, Legal mandate, Legal responsibility                                          |
| Ethical       | Accountability and roles, Accountability, Collaboration ethics, Ethical expectations, Fairness and equality, Morality, Trust and integrity |
| Financial     | Financial concerns (unease over parliamentary spending), Financial inequality (disparities in remuneration or access to resources)         |

source: authors' work.

(Soames). Grieve, more balanced in thematic distribution, combined notable use of advocacy (21%) and legal framing (11%), second only to Soames and Garnier respectively. Despite this variation, the overall thematic distribution among Conservative speakers did not significantly diverge from that of Labour MPs. Conservative discourse articulated a multidimensional response to misconduct, grounded in procedural and institutional priorities. Procedural themes framed the crisis as a breakdown in parliamentary function, while institutional frames, focussed on leadership, hierarchy, and reform, constructed it as a governance challenge. These themes collectively emphasised system-level correction over individual culpability. On advocacy, including references to representation, gender equity, and transparency, linked institutional repair to democratic legitimacy, positioning reform within a broader participatory frame. Legal and ethical themes, while less prominent, served to normatively anchor the discourse. Legal references (e.g. constitutional change and judicial enforcement) implied juridical responsibility, while ethical appeals to accountability and fairness reinforced expectations of public conduct without resorting to personal moralisation. The financial theme remained marginal but acknowledged, particularly in references to spending concerns and inequalities, framing the scandal as symptomatic of deeper imbalances in parliamentary remuneration and public perception. In summary, Conservative MPs framed the scandal primarily as a procedural and institutional failure, advocating structural recalibration and administrative reform in response to the crisis. Supplementary legal, ethical, and advocacy themes reinforced this agenda, collectively constructing a narrative of technocratic competence and governance renewal over blame attribution.

Seven speakers from four other parties, including the Liberal Democrats, largely mirrored the thematic distribution of the major parties, emphasising procedural, institutional, and advocacy frames (Tables 7 and 8). While minor variations were evident, particularly among smaller party MPs, the overall pattern remained consistent. Independent MP Spink was the sole outlier, with a brief intervention composed of 70% procedural content, slightly skewing the aggregate. Excluding Spink, the remaining speakers demonstrated balanced engagement with dominant themes, while minor themes, ethical, legal, and financial, surfaced more in individual cases but lacked statistical significance. Liberal Democrat and allied non-governmental speakers prioritised procedural and institutional reforms while

**Table 7.** Debate of 29 June 2009: Liberal Democrat and other speakers (%;  $n = 8$ ).

| Speaker    | Dimension |         |           |               |       |            |
|------------|-----------|---------|-----------|---------------|-------|------------|
|            | Advocacy  | Ethical | Financial | Institutional | Legal | Procedural |
| Beith      | 13        | 9       | 8         | 26            | 13    | 32         |
| Carmichael | 17        | 8       | 3         | 23            | 7     | 41         |
| Robertson  | 20        | 0       | 0         | 27            | 13    | 40         |
| Spink      | 0         | 0       | 0         | 10            | 20    | 70         |
| Llwyd      | 14        | 10      | 3         | 20            | 9     | 44         |
| Durkan     | 18        | 4       | 9         | 30            | 2     | 37         |
| Harvey     | 6         | 22      | 17        | 17            | 0     | 39         |
| Smith      | 38        | 13      | 0         | 13            | 0     | 38         |

source: authors' work.

**Table 8.** Debate of 29 June 2009: Liberal Democrat and other speakers thematic frames.

| Theme         | Associated Topics                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|---------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Procedural    | Collaboration and critique, Concerns about legislation, Critique of legislation, Debate, Decision-making, Legislative process, Legislative processes, Process critique                                                                            |
| Institutional | Authority, Governance, Governance concerns, Government accountability, Organizational structure, Oversight, Parliamentary privilege                                                                                                               |
| Advocacy      | Advocacy, Call for action, Civic engagement, Political advocacy, Political engagement, Representation, Social justice                                                                                                                             |
| Legal         | Constitutional concerns, Constitutional issues, Constitutional principles, Due process, Judicial process, Legal analysis, Legal awareness, Legal compliance, Legal concerns, Legal implications, Legal principles, Legal procedures, Legal rights |
| Ethical       | Accountability, Accountability issues, Conflict of interest, Ethics, Fairness, Civic responsibility, Public trust                                                                                                                                 |
| Financial     | Financial oversight                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |

source: authors' work.

integrating advocacy, legal, and ethical themes. Procedural framing focussed on legislative scrutiny and decision-making, signalling a deliberative and non-partisan approach, institutional references, oversight, governance, and privilege, framed the scandal as symptomatic of systemic failure requiring structural correction, while advocacy frames, centred on civic engagement, representation, and social justice linked reform to democratic legitimacy. Legal framing, invoking due process, constitutional norms, and rights discourse, elevated the issue to one of juridical legitimacy, ethical topics, accountability, fairness, and public trust, reinforced the moral rationale for reform, avoiding personalised moralisation and financial oversight, though acknowledged, remained marginal, secondary to procedural, institutional, legal, and ethical concerns. Collectively, this framing presented the scandal as both a constitutional failure and a democratic crisis, necessitating systemic, normative, and participatory renewal, portraying the expenses scandal as simultaneously a constitutional failure and a crisis of democratic legitimacy.

Following Searing (1994), it is useful to ask whether those MPs who demonstrated slightly different patterns of emphasis across the themes were reflecting particular interests or concerns with certain topics. With regard to the three Labour 'outliers' placing more emphasis on 'legal' aspects of the debate, only Dismore had a legal background. Prentice had been a teacher and Wright, an academic, and neither had shown particular concern for legal matters in the past. Prentice had held several different junior ministerial posts, and Wright had been an active backbencher. Winnick, who placed more emphasis on financial matters, was an active backbencher with a known interest in the 'proper' use of public money and was prominent in the 2009 campaign to replace the former Speaker, Michael Martin, for his perceived mishandling of the expenses scandal.

The two main Conservatives 'outliers' were Garnier and Soames. Garnier, a QC, who emphasised legal aspects in his contribution, had an obvious professional interest but held a number of government posts which dealt with different policy areas. Soames, a former stockbroker and defence minister, emphasised financial aspects. There were no serious 'outliers' from other parties. To place this in a slightly broader context, five speakers had participated in at least one earlier debate concerning the question of parliamentary standards. It would be interesting

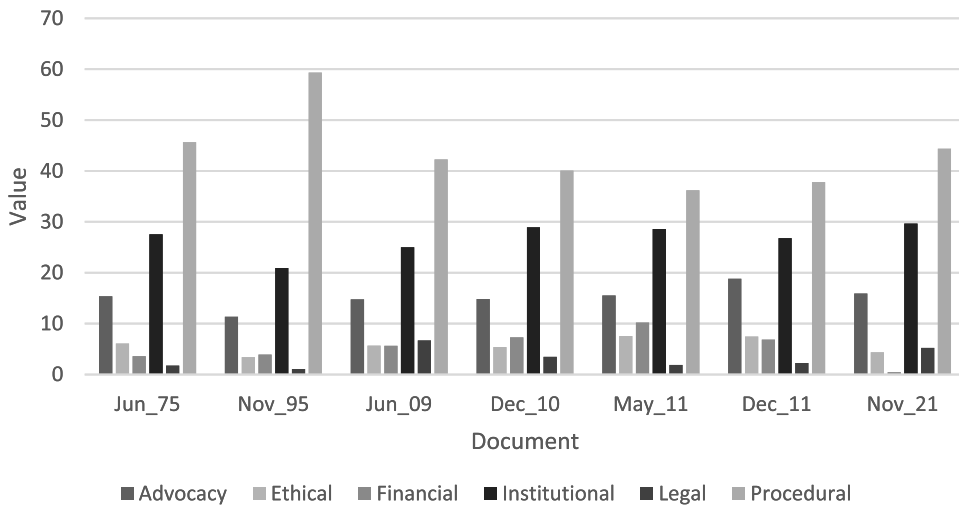
to see whether any were members of the Standards and Privileges Committee, but that is a research project for the future.

### ***A durable discourse: thematic continuities from 1975 to 2021***

We examined the robustness of the thematic nature of debates over time by comparing the use of language in five additional debates on financial regulation, transparency, or flouting rules of conduct between 1975 and 2021. Our decision to use the dictionary based on the debate of 29 June 2009 might appear questionable, but we argue that what we are examining here is the nature of the vocabulary in use in discussions about the financial propriety of MPs across time. Certainly, some of the vocabulary will have changed, but earlier research (Bara, Weale, and Bicquelet 2007) suggests that in terms of the British parliamentary language there is a considerable degree of similarity across 40 years or more. This would be especially true of procedural vocabularies and, to some extent, advocacy.

The additional debates comprise the two preceding 29 June 2009 debate. The first, on 12 June 1975, concerned the establishment of a register of members' interests and the second, on 6 November 1995 was a debate on the (Nolan) Report on Standards in Public Life. The first of the three debates following that of 29 June 2009, on 2 December 2010, was a debate on a publication by the Backbench Business Committee about complaints against members of parliament. This committee had been established in the wake of the expenses scandal to give backbench MPs a greater role in the work of the House of Commons. The second, on 6 December 2011, related to a report by the Committee on Members' Expenses on the Operation of the Parliamentary Standards Act, 2009. The final debate of 16 November 2021 relates to a report by the Standards Committee regarding the alleged infringement of parliamentary rules governing paid lobbying activities and use of parliamentary offices on the part of Owen Paterson. His case was examined by the Parliamentary Standards Commissioner, who reported to the House of Commons Standards Committee with recommendations. The Committee concluded that Paterson's conduct was an appalling case of paid lobbying activity which brought the House into disrepute and recommended a suspension of 30 days. A debate on the report was scheduled for 3 November 2021, which the Johnson government attempted to undermine by tabling an amendment on the grounds that the procedures were unfair. Following Paterson's resignation on 4 November and the highly negative response to this amendment, the government sought to rescind it. The debate of 16 November 2021 thus incorporated elements of the original committee report and the statement by the Leader of the House that the amendment had been rescinded. This episode suggests that parliamentary sleaze is still a problem, and it is important to examine relevant parliamentary business to assess the robustness of the themes. Indeed, in March 2024, Scott Benton, the MP for Blackpool South, resigned from the House of Commons following his suspension from the Conservative party in April 2023. This was due to allegations of improper lobbying and related conduct which were upheld by the Standards Committee in their report of December 2023.

The lack of significant differences regarding procedural themes across these debates, apart from one occasion, as seen in Figure 2, is extremely interesting. The exception is the 1995 debate on the Nolan Report, where the procedural theme far exceeds its



**Figure 2.** Comparison of use of six themes in six debates on MPs' expenses and related matters, 1975–2021(%) (source: authors' work).

contribution to any other debate. This may reflect the fact that the focus was on parliamentary procedures themselves. In all others, the contribution of each of these themes across more than 40 years is quite similar. This is the case for both the order of importance of the most prominent of the six themes and the level of input each contributes to the separate debates. This finding lends support to the view that recognisable parliamentary speech patterns persist beyond procedural contexts.

### Discussion: reforming parliament: stability, consensus, and the language of institutional self-scrutiny

This study demonstrates that automated content analysis can uncover structural patterns in parliamentary debate that are not readily observable through conventional readings focussed on adversarial exchange. Our analysis operated at three levels: treating each debate as a discrete event, examining the rhetorical contributions of individual speakers and associated topics, and locating debates within a broader longitudinal frame. This multi-level approach enabled us to identify recurring thematic configurations and assess their distribution across time and party lines.<sup>7</sup> By analysing debates on parliamentary standards as a form of self-regarding legislation, this article contributes to broader comparative debates on how legislatures manage institutional failure and legitimacy under conditions of public scrutiny.

All three hypotheses were supported by the findings. First, the dominance of procedural and substantive (institutional) themes was evident both in the 2009 debate and across the wider time series. Procedural language alone accounted for 42% of content in the 29 June 2009 debate, with institutional themes comprising an additional 25%. The predominance of these themes aligns with the regulatory function of the Parliamentary Standards Bill and the institutional focus of the reform. This confirms the centrality of procedural-substantive distinctions (Steiner et al. 2004), especially in the context of

legislation concerning self-regulation. Moreover, our analysis indicates that this is as true for debates on matters pertaining to members of parliament as for debates on public policy or matters of conscience (Steiner et al. 2004; Bara, Weale, and Bicquelet (2007).

But our findings suggest more than this. The second hypothesis, anticipating minimal partisanship, is also borne out in the results. Analysis of individual speakers' contributions reveals only minor variation across parties in thematic emphasis. Procedural themes were universally prominent, while institutional and advocacy frames followed a similar pattern among Labour, Conservative, and other party speakers. Although individual MPs displayed distinctive rhetorical emphases, often shaped by intervention length or professional background, these did not translate into partisan divergence. This confirms that consensus-driven debate prevailed, reflecting a shared commitment to urgent institutional reform in the wake of the expenses scandal.

Third, the robustness of thematic structures over time was confirmed by comparison with five additional debates from 1975 to 2021. Procedural and institutional frames consistently dominated, with only marginal variation in secondary themes (ethical, legal, financial). The 1995 debate on the Nolan Report, which showed elevated procedural focus, underscored the expected prominence of procedural discourse when parliamentary rules are under scrutiny. Notably, advocacy framing remained a recurring feature, even in technocratic or institutional contexts, suggesting the persistence of a rhetorical style that combines formal proceduralism with appeals to civic legitimacy.

These patterns suggest that debates on MPs' self-regulation are governed by a relatively stable thematic architecture, marked by procedural formality, institutional focus, and rhetorical consensus. While the 2009 debate was precipitated by a political scandal, its discourse was not exceptional but rather representative of a broader parliamentary logic that emphasises internal discipline, shared responsibility, and legitimacy-building.

Our use of the HAMLET software facilitated this analysis by identifying recurring language patterns across debates and among speakers. While automated methods cannot capture every nuance of parliamentary speech, they offer a systematic way to extract dominant themes and track their evolution. In comparing procedural and advocacy vocabularies to those found in debates on unrelated issues, such as abortion, we found striking parallels. While procedural language is predictably ubiquitous, the consistent presence of advocacy frames in self-regulatory debates is more surprising and suggests the existence of a generalisable parliamentary register that transcends subject matter. The content of the November 2021 debate certainly suggests this.

Moreover, the consistency of rhetorical styles over time implies the possible existence of a shared institutional language of self-governance. In addition, the role of individual MPs' backgrounds in shaping thematic emphasis, e.g. legal professionals prioritising legal themes, merits closer investigation. Future work might explore whether patterns of speech correlate with committee membership or policy specialisation, shedding additional light on the micro-dynamics of parliamentary discourse.

Together, these findings demonstrate that parliamentary debates on internal regulation are structured by a relatively stable thematic architecture that transcends partisan lines and persists over decades. The 2009 debate, while sparked by an acute political crisis, reflects a broader and enduring discourse of institutional self-regulation, shaped by

procedural formality, cross-party consensus, and normative appeals to legitimacy and accountability. While the intensity of public scrutiny may vary, the internal logic of parliamentary self-examination appears both coherent and remarkably consistent.

## Notes

1. The 2009 MPs' expenses scandal followed the public release of leaked expense claims revealing widespread misuse of parliamentary allowances, including claims for non-essential or personal expenditures. The revelations led to resignations, repayments, criminal prosecutions, and a sharp decline in public trust in Parliament, ultimately prompting the creation of the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority (IPSA).
2. Hansard (The official report), <https://hansard.parliament.uk>. Various dates 1974–2022.
3. What is now referred to as the Manifesto Project was previously known as the Manifest Research Group (1979–1989) and the Comparative Manifestos Project (1989–2009). Since 2009 its work has been consolidated into the Manifesto Research on Political Representation (MARPOR) project at the Wissenschaftszentrum, Berlin. <https://manifesto-project.wzb.eu>
4. The authors are indebted to Dr Aude Bicquelet-Lock for her assistance in carrying out the analysis.
5. Although our research is essentially qualitative, we have not included an analysis of the debates of 30<sup>th</sup> June 2009 and 1<sup>st</sup> July 2009 in our discussion to avoid potential issues associated with endogeneity.
6. Of these, four were Liberal Democrats, one was a Scottish Nationalist, one was Plaid Cymru, one represented the Social Democratic and Labour Party (of Northern Ireland) and there was one Independent.
7. As noted in the beginning of the article, the expedited passage of the IPSA may have influenced the debate's language, though our analysis finds no clear evidence of this. However, some provisions, such as the Commissioner for Parliamentary Investigations and IPSA's role in overseeing MPs' financial interests, were later revised in the 2010 Constitutional Reform and Governance Act, suggesting initial shortcomings.

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## Data availability statement

The raw data associated with the study (parliamentary debates) are openly available in Hansard at <https://hansard.parliament.uk/>. Derived data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author on request.

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