

Explaining Parliamentary Party Cohesion: Can Psychology Help?

Paper for International Society of Political Psychology conference, Paris, 9-12 July 2008

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Abstract

Parliaments in most established democracies are characterised by high levels of political party cohesion in voting. Political scientists tend to explain this behaviour in terms of individual incentives, implicitly or explicitly applying a logic of rational choice. Cohesion is linked to discipline, and the powers available to party whips: for example control over resources, reselection opportunities, and positions in government. This analysis has however been questioned through a study of the British House of Lords conducted by Philip Norton (2003). The House of Lords provides an example of ‘cohesion without discipline’, as parties vote almost uniformly together despite whips enjoying none of the aforementioned powers. Since members gain seats in the chamber for life, cannot be removed, and are often nearing the end of their careers, rational self-interest provides little reason to vote together. Alternative explanations are therefore needed. This paper makes some first attempts to provide such explanations. Drawing on data from a survey of members of the House of Lords, it tests alternative reasons for cohesion based on psychological theories. In particular it draws on ideas from social identity theory to test the effect of members’ attitudes of ‘groupishness’ to their voting behaviour. Our results suggest that group effects as understood by social identity theorists play an important role in explaining party cohesion. Through testing in the (perhaps uniquely) discipline-free arena of the House of Lords, these results provide the foundations for a future research agenda to explain cohesion in parliaments more widely.

This is an exploratory work, not intended to be a fully finished product. Comments on any aspect of the paper are welcomed by the author. Please do not cite this paper without the author’s explicit permission.

1. Introduction

Modern parliaments are characterised by strong political parties, and along with them cohesive party voting. The rise of parties has fed fears about the ‘decline of parliaments’ and, in countries such as Britain, a lament at the decline of the independent-minded MP. In explaining cohesive voting political scientists tend to focus on the system of punishments (e.g. deselection as a party candidate) and rewards (e.g. promotion to ministerial office) which frame the lives of individual parliamentarians. Such analyses are informed, implicitly or explicitly, by the paradigm of rational choice which is currently dominant in political science. This bases itself broadly on the notion of the individual as a utility maximiser. There are reasons, however, to cast doubt on the rational choice approach. Empirically, Philip Norton (2003), in a study of the British House of Lords, shows that voting cohesion is high even where the conventional system of punishment and reward does not exist. Meanwhile social psychologists have demonstrated that people’s behaviour in groups cannot be simply described as the sum of individual behaviour. Groups (of which parliamentary party groups are surely a prime example) can behave cohesively even where this is not evidently rational at the individual level. This paper therefore makes some tentative first steps at linking social psychological work on groups to the political science study of political parties in legislatures. It attempts to address the question left by Norton: that is, if parliamentarians’ behaviour cannot be explained by rational choice, what can it be explained by? The results suggest that theories and methods from social psychology may well be useful. Indeed the incorporation of social psychology approaches into legislative studies could help with the design of parliaments, and perhaps even with loosening the parties’ grip.

The paper starts with a review of the political science literature on voting cohesion in legislatures, up to and including the paper by Norton. It then asks whether, and how, theories from psychology might help in explaining what drives party cohesion, and the gap between his findings and the dominant theory. The bulk of the paper is based on a further study of the British House of Lords, with results principally drawn from a questionnaire survey of members. After a brief description of methods, the basic results setting out members’ attitudes to and experience of party cohesion are presented in crosstabular form. Then the impact of members’ social identity (with respect to their party group) on attitudes and behaviour is explored, using a principal components analysis based on a bank of eight questions. The results show that several factors concerning members’ ‘belongingness’ to their groups are significant in explaining their attitudes to party voting cohesion. The paper ends by concluding that there could be great benefits in a marriage between social psychology and legislative studies, and suggests some directions for future research.

This is very explicitly an exploratory study. The author’s background is in political science and legislative studies, not political or social psychology. It is an early attempt to create new links between these disciplines, and bears seemingly interesting results. It is not intended to be definitive - though it is based on a substantial dataset relating to the House of Lords. Comments are extremely welcome on all aspects of the paper, including both theory and methods, and more broadly on how the kind of interdisciplinary approaches suggested may be built.

2. Political Party Cohesion: Political Science Views

A good place to start with consideration of parliamentary party cohesion is the influential work of Ozbudun (1970), which not only considered the causes of cohesion but also provided the definitions that generally frame contemporary debate. Even political science writings on

this topic can use terms inconsistently, while terms such as ‘cohesion’ are used differently within political science and social psychology. Here we will adopt Ozbudun’s definitions. He defined cohesion, in the context of parliamentary party groups, as ‘the extent to which, in a given situation, group members can be observed to work together for the group’s goal in one and the same way’ (Ozbudun 1970, p. 305). The most obvious and visible sign of cohesion comes through members of the group voting together in parliament, rather than showing division, when they make formal decisions on legislation and other policy matters.

There may be many reasons for parliamentary party cohesion, as this paper explores. One reason, Ozbudun suggests, is discipline. This ‘refers either to a special type of cohesion achieved by enforcing obedience or to a system of sanctions by which such enforced cohesion is obtained’ (ibid). There may be various mechanisms available to party leaders and whips to enforce discipline, and sometimes these are supplemented by parliamentary (or even constitutional) rules. Examples include withholding funding or promotion, or expelling members from party groups. In extreme cases (notably India) members may even be forced to resign from parliament if they vote against the whip. Cohesion may therefore exist without discipline, but can also be reinforced by it. As Hazan (2003, p. 3) says, ‘discipline starts where cohesion falters’.

Explanations of why there is such a high degree of party voting cohesion in many modern legislatures are generally seen as divided between ‘sociological’ and rational choice approaches (Hazan 2003; Saalfeld 1998). The sociological approach to explaining parliamentary behaviour was promoted by Wahlke and his colleagues (1962) and more recently revived in the UK setting by Searing (1994). This approach holds that politicians’ behaviour is shaped by norms and the adoption of predetermined social roles, which become internalised to some extent by individuals. Within this broad category also come ‘normative reasons including ideological convictions, socialisation, party solidarity and so on’ (Hazan 2003, p. 3). Unsurprisingly perhaps, given this lack of conceptual clarity, ‘sociological’ explanations have fallen out of favour. Saalfeld (1998, p. 797) complains that ‘[t]he precise process through which norms and role orientations are internalised is difficult to trace empirically. The causal link between role orientations and norms on the one hand and behaviour on the other remains unclear’. Strøm puts it more abruptly, suggesting ‘role theory has not provided us with a theory’ (1997, p. 155). Aside from its complexity, the approach has been criticised for being too descriptive and not having predictive power.

Instead political scientists have increasingly looked to a theory which is more elegant and can be used for hypothesis testing. The rational choice approach fits this bill. This holds that parliamentarians are essentially utility-maximisers. As Strøm suggests ‘legislators are goal-seeking men or women who choose their behaviour to fit the destinations they have in mind’ (1997, p. 158). In doing so they respond to the incentives available to them as individuals, in particular to seek reselection as a party candidate at future elections, re-election to parliament, higher political office and other personal advantage (Mayhew 1974; Saalfeld 1995; 1998; Strøm 1997). Returning specifically to voting cohesion, therefore, members will be responsive to a system of punishment and reward. Discipline, in other words, is key. Party leaders and whips have a series of ‘sticks and carrots’ by which they can encourage cohesion. Sticks (punishments) include barring members from reselection as candidates, denying them resources such as salaries or office costs, and denying them speaking time, seats on parliamentary committees or promotion to ministerial office. Carrots (rewards) are largely the reverse: the ability to proffer these rather than deny them. The extent to which members are liable to behave cohesively will therefore be affected by the tools available to leaders and

whips, and these vary significantly between legislatures. Key factors include who controls reselection (leaders or local party members), who controls parliamentary resources and access to speaking time (parties or neutral parliamentary authorities), and what other patronage is wielded by party leaders (Hazan 2003; Longley and Hazan 1999; Owens 2003; Sieberer 2006).

The assumption that cohesion is driven by discipline, and parliamentarians' desire to maximise their own rewards, is however questioned by a study by Norton (2003). He focuses on the British House of Lords, which he suggests is a uniquely discipline-free parliamentary environment. Members of the chamber are appointed for life, and therefore do not face reselection or re-election. Senior ministers are not drawn from the chamber, and it therefore offers little opportunity for career advancement. In any case, most members are appointed towards the end of their careers and have already achieved significant status. Members of the chamber are paid no salary, receive little in the way of office allowances, and anyway none of these resources are in the gift of party groups. There is also no party control over speaking time in the chamber. In short 'leaders and whips - and the party organisation outside the house - lack the sticks and carrots that form the basis of discipline' (Norton 2003, p.60). Instead 'in so far as the whips in the Lords have sanctions, they are best characterised as twigs rather than sticks' (ibid, p. 62). If a member rebels against the party the best the whips can do is write him or her a 'sorrowful note' regretting the action taken (ibid).

The expectation, therefore, would be for cohesion in the House of Lords to be low. However, Norton finds, the reverse is true. Using data from three parliamentary sessions, 1999-2002, he demonstrates that there is no more voting dissent in the House of Lords than the House of Commons. The standard measure of party voting cohesion is the Rice Index. For any vote this is the absolute value of the proportion of the group voting one way minus the proportion voting the other. So if the group votes cohesively the Rice Index will be 100, and if it is split down the middle it will be zero. The average Rice Index for the House of Lords in the three sessions studied is shown in Table 1, broken down by party.

Table 1: Party cohesion (Rice Index) in House of Lords 1999-2002

	1999-2000	2000-2001	2001-2002
Labour	98.2	99.5	99.0
Conservative	99.5	99.3	96.0
Liberal Democrat	99.7	99.8	98.9

Source: Norton (2003).

This demonstrates that in fact there is very little voting dissent in the House of Lords. Over this period there were approximately 200 Labour members, 200 Conservative members and 70 Liberal Democrats. There were 380 separate votes (or 'divisions') held. Yet on only six occasions was there a party rebellion including more than 10 members. In the great majority of divisions there were no dissenting votes cast, and where there was dissent this usually comprised only one member. Furthermore, only a relatively small number of members ever cast dissenting votes. The Labour Party had the largest number of rebels (probably reflecting its position as the governing party) while the Liberal Democrats were the most cohesive (Norton 2003).

Norton concludes that these results support the sociological rather than the rational choice explanation of party cohesion. He suggests that given there are ‘no explanations attributable to discipline... the only other rational explanations are that members voters they do because they agree with their party on the issues in question or, at least, do not disagree’ (Norton 2003, p. 68). His own observation, however, suggests that this is unlikely.² Therefore ‘peers vote with their party not because they feel they *have* to, or... because they have rationally thought through the issues on which they vote... peers vote loyally with their party because they *want* to’ (ibid, p. 69).

Norton’s findings do much to demolish the rational choice approach. If voting cohesion in the House of Lords is not principally linked to discipline, the same may be true in other legislative settings. Indeed, if members have sufficient innate motivation to vote cohesively, discipline may not be as necessary as academics, or indeed party whips, believe. This could have profound implications for parliamentary organisation. But Norton’s findings also leave a conundrum: if cohesion is not generated by discipline, what is it caused by? His suggestion is that it may be as a result of prior socialisation, and what he refers to as ‘tribal loyalty’ or ‘an emotional or intellectual commitment’ to a party (ibid, p. 70). This returns us to the fuzziness of ‘sociological approaches’, which political scientists had wanted to leave behind.

3. Can Psychology Help?

In order to help bridge this gap it seems useful to turn to psychology. Concepts such as cohesion (albeit, as already indicated, defined rather differently) and conformity are central to the discipline of social psychology. This discipline has advanced greatly since Wahlke et al (1962) proposed their sociological approach to parliamentary behaviour. During this time legislative studies scholars have turned to rational choice approaches centred on the individual, while social psychologists have developed more sophisticated theories of group behaviour. This is now a well developed field, including in political psychology (e.g. Hogg 1992; Huddy 2003; Brown 2000) - although little of this work to date has been applied to political elites. The theories proposed can directly challenge a rational choice approach, as it is widely accepted in social psychology that ‘although groups are comprised of individuals, understanding group behaviour cannot be attained from an understanding of individual behaviour’ (Cottam et al 2004: 63). As Huddy suggests ‘effects of self-interest need to be disentangled from those of group interests, which could be more powerful’ (2003: 518). It therefore seems fruitful to explore whether theories from social psychology can help explain parliamentary party cohesion (in Ozbudun’s terms), and the challenging results that Norton has found.

It would be both outside the scope of this paper, and certainly beyond the expertise of its author, to provide a detailed account of the development of theories of group behaviour in social psychology. But even well-known early findings confirmed that conformity to group behaviour was about more than punishment and reward. The classic experiments by Asch (1951) and Sherif (1961) showed that people can conform to group norms, and quickly develop a sense of loyalty to ‘ingroup’ and hostility to ‘outgroup’, even in so-called ‘minimal groups’ not based on any shared history or distinguishing characteristics. Such findings already provide a clue that members in parliamentary party groups may have a natural inclination to conform/cohere even when there is no disciplinary pressure.

These authors, like their contemporaries in legislative studies, had not yet developed theories of *why* there is conformity to norms in group settings. These questions have more recently

been explored by other scholars, notably proponents of social identity theory (Tajfel 1981; Tajfel and Turner 1979). This theory claims that there are two elements to a person's self-concept: personal identity and social identity. Our social identity is defined by the groups to which we belong, and we maintain it by intergroup comparison in order to distinguish ourselves from others. Our membership of groups is therefore key to our sense of who we are. Proponents of social identity theory suggest that we strive to maintain both positive personal identity and positive social identity, with the latter meaning that we are inclined to view our group positively in comparison with others. Social identity may therefore be an important factor driving intergroup conflict. In addition, if we have a psychological need to view our group positively this suggests that we may not be able to maintain objectivity about the decisions that it takes. Other ideas from psychology, such as that of cognitive dissonance (Festinger 1957), indicate that we may align our beliefs to the group's decisions when necessary, rather than admitting that the group is wrong. In complex situations we also use heuristics (shortcuts or signals) to make decisions about how to act (Kahreman, Slovic and Tversky 1982). Membership of a group that is important to us may therefore result in taking cues from others in the group (particularly in leadership positions) about how we should behave.

All of this looks highly relevant to explaining parliamentary behaviour. Membership of a party group is one of the most visible characteristics of most parliamentarians. Members stand for election (or in the case of the House of Lords, are appointed) in the name of a party and are widely associated with their party, both inside and outside parliament. Party membership is therefore likely to be important to their sense of identity. To some extent, in parliaments with strong committee systems, something similar may apply to any committees on which a member sits. Decisions about voting may therefore not be 'rational', either in the 'rational choice' sense or the more conventional sense of the term. That is, they may not be reasoned at the individual level, but determined by social identity and/or the closeness a member feels to their group. These are some of the ideas that this research seeks to explore.

4. Methods and Sources

In order to build directly upon Norton's findings, this paper concentrates on party cohesion in the 'discipline free' environment of the House of Lords.³ Its findings are based on a postal questionnaire survey circulated to peers in spring 2007, as part of a larger project on the chamber and its work.⁴ There are over 700 members of the House of Lords (a number which is subject to constant minor fluctuations, due to deaths and new appointments). We received responses from 381 members, representing more than 50% of the House.⁵ The respondents were broadly representative, in terms of party, length of service, and peerage type. Many of the questions on the survey related to the powers of the chamber, and how it has changed since a reform which removed most hereditary peers from membership in 1999. However these were interspersed with a number of questions about party cohesion. The questions on social identity were derived from recent studies by psychologists, as detailed below.

In addition to questionnaire data we could potentially have used members' voting records. The project within which the work was carried out has collated complete records of members' voting since 1999. However our data, consistent with Norton, shows that observable cohesion is extremely high. Examination of the impact of members' attitudes on their voting behaviour would therefore be fairly pointless, given the lack of variance in the dependent variable. Where members do not vote loyally they are far more likely to express themselves through abstention rather than actively voting against the party whip. This abstention is, however,

virtually impossible to measure objectively. Members are not required to attend the chamber on a regular basis, and many are either elderly or have other occupations outside parliament. There are therefore many reasons, aside from abstention, why a member may be absent from a vote (Norton 2003). For this reason we remain dependent on members’ self reporting on their propensity to follow, ignore or defy the party whip. Our findings, however, suggest that members were fairly honest in their responses.

5. Basic Results on Cohesion in the House of Lords

Our first basic data on party cohesion from the survey is shown in Table 2. This confirms in several respects Norton’s earlier findings. We asked members whether they personally voted against the party line very often, often, not very often or not at all. In all parties only a tiny number of members (below 10%) said that they did this very or fairly often. The response was quite different, however, on members’ propensity to abstain when they disagreed with their parties. Almost a quarter of members admitted to doing this very or fairly often. On this second question there was a clear difference between the parties, with Liberal Democrat members far less likely to say they went against the party line.

Table 2: House of Lords members’ reported voting behaviour (% saying they take an action ‘very often’/’often’)

	Labour	Conservative	Lib Dem	Total
You personally voting against your party line	5	8	2	6
You personally choosing to abstain because you disagree with your party line	26	27	5	22
You personally voting with your group, even when you disagree with the party line	50	15	23	30

N = 243-250 (Lab 97-98, Con 101-107, Lib Dem 44-45) Figures show percentage saying ‘often’ or ‘very often’ on a four point Likert scale. The precise question was: ‘In terms of voting in the Lords, how often would you say each of these occur?’

We also asked members about another aspect of party cohesion - that is, whether they voted *with* their parties even when they disagreed with the party line. Although it is well known that such behaviour goes on in parliaments, we did not expect that members would readily admit to it. However, as Table 2 shows, we were quite spectacularly wrong. In fact almost a third of members admit to voting against their own beliefs very or fairly often. This behaviour is particularly marked in the governing party, Labour, where half of members admitted to such behaviour. This demonstrates a high level of cohesive behaviour, despite members’ differing views from their parties on policy. The level of ‘insincere’ but loyal voting was also relatively high in the Liberal Democrats.

This data provides a picture of a chamber where party voting cohesion is well established, particularly in the Labour and Liberal Democrat parties. Liberal Democrat members’ claims that they rarely vote against the party line or abstain when they disagree with the party’s position are borne out by voting data which shows that observable voting cohesion in the group is very high, and turnout in voting is also high in comparison to the other parties.⁶ In the Labour Party, like the Lib Dems, there are few members who vote against the party line, although our data shows that rather more abstain. But more surprisingly a large number of Labour members admit to voting with the party even when they disagree with it.

Having established that voting cohesion is high, and in particular that voting against the whip is unusual, the questions shown in Table 3 begin to explore why members behave in this way. The first two lines reflect standard concerns as articulated by rational choice approaches which assume that cohesion is connected to discipline. As the table shows only 4% of members expressed concern that if they voted against the party the whips would take action against them, and only 3% were concerned that rebellious voting would damage their future prospects.⁷ This strongly confirms Norton’s analysis that cohesion in the Lords cannot be explained by party discipline. The other two questions illustrated in Table 3 begin to probe alternative explanations. In contrast to the earlier questions, a substantial majority of members (73%) expressed concern that voting against the whip would be damaging to their party group. A smaller number of members, but nonetheless far more than were concerned about the threats of discipline (44% in total), expressed concern that disloyal voting would ‘upset’ other members of their party group. These results show early indications that members’ sense of closeness and affection for their group may help explain their voting behaviour.

Table 3: Members’ concerns if voting against the whip (%)

	Very concerned	Fairly concerned	Not very concerned	Not at all concerned
That the whips would take action against me	1	3	34	63
That this would damage my own future prospects	1	2	16	81
That I would upset other members of the group	6	37	44	12
That this would be damaging to my party group	27	47	22	4

N = 248-249. The precise question was: ‘To what extent would you be concerned about the following factors if you voted against your party group?’

Finally we asked members for their views on whether voting dissent is justified when peers (not necessarily themselves) disagree with party policy. The responses are shown in Table 4. There was significant divergence between the parties on the question of whether it was justified for peers to vote against their frontbench line, with 90% of Conservative members agreeing that voting against the party could be justified, compared to 60% of Labour members and 70% of Liberal Democrats. This again illustrates the greater emphasis on voting cohesion in the latter two parties, though a majority in all parties nonetheless felt disloyal voting could be justified. There was far less variance on the question of whether abstention was justified if peers disagreed with the party line. Here more than nine out of 10 peers in all party groups felt that a failure to support the party line could be justified.⁸

Table 4: Members’ views on disloyal voting behaviour (% answering ‘agree/agree strongly’)

	Labour	Conservative	Lib Dem	Total
It is justified for party peers to vote against their frontbench if they disagree with policy	60	90	70	73
It is justified for party peers to choose to abstain if they disagree with frontbench policy	90	96	98	95

N = 256 (Lab 101, Con 110, Lib Dem 45). Figures show percentage saying ‘agree’ or ‘agree strongly’ on a five point Likert scale. The precise question was: ‘Do you agree or disagree with the following statements about party peers?’

6. Testing Alternative Explanations of Cohesion

Given the above results, it seems important to investigate whether there are other factors determining members' cohesive attitudes and behaviour. Our interest here is not principally in testing individual differences between members - particularly given that there are limited differences in observable behaviour. A search for the personality traits associated with the 'rebellious peer' would be likely to prove futile, given that few peers actually rebel. But a test of factors associated with cohesive attitudes, and non-observable behaviour where we are dependent on self-reporting, may nonetheless prove worthwhile. We are looking, essentially, for traits which are shared to a greater or lesser extent by *all* peers, and may therefore explain the almost uniformly cohesive behaviour observed in the ('discipline-free') House of Lords. The clearest way to do this is to explore whether certain other attitudes are associated with a propensity to party loyalty.

Our survey included a bank of eight questions about members' relationships with their party groups, which are listed in Figure 1. Broadly these sought to capture group cohesion in the sense understood by psychologists, as manifested by 'feelings of belongingness or attraction to the group' (Lieberman et al 1973, quoted in Stokes 1983, p.163). The questions (in fact each presented as statements, with which respondents could agree or disagree) drew upon empirical studies by social psychologists, and particularly those seeking to apply social identity theory. There is no single established framework of questions which can easily be lifted, however, in part because theorists admit that 'there remains a great deal of conceptual and operational inconsistency across studies' in this area (Jackson and Smith 1999, p. 120). In addition certain questions used in other settings (and sometimes for 'ascribed' rather than 'acquired' groups) are simply not appropriate to ask to members of the House of Lords.

Figure 1: Questions on members' relationship with their party group

- A. I feel involved in decisions in my party/group
- B. There is a strong feeling of unity in my party/group
- C. Membership of the group is important to achieving my objectives in the Lords
- D. I owe a lot to my party/group
- E. There are many people I like as individuals in the group
- F. I often socialise with members of my party/group
- G. I care about the esteem in which I am held by the group
- H. Membership of the group is a key part of who I am

Responses invited to all statements on a five-point Likert scale from 'strongly agree' (coded 1) to 'strongly disagree' (coded 5).

The eight questions fall into four natural groups. Questions A and B seek to capture the extent to which members feel there is a sense of shared decision-making and purpose in their group. If members feel that they have been consulted on the collective positions to be taken by the group they may believe that they have a duty to follow the party line, even when they disagree. This 'collective responsibility' is common in political decision-making. These questions also mimic those asked by social psychologists seeking to assess attraction within groups (e.g. Evans and Jarvis 1986: 'in spite of individual differences, a feeling of unity exists in my group') and group affect (e.g. Stokes 1983: 'do you feel you are included in the group's activities?'). Questions C and D relate to another reason why members may adopt cohesive behaviour: that of the instrumental usefulness of the group to them. This aspect comes the closest to being a 'rational choice' explanation for cohesion, though it goes beyond responses to punishment and reward meted out by the whips. If members feel that they gain personally

by membership of the group they may be more likely to be loyal to it. This taps ideas from psychology of instrumentalism, interdependency and common fate (Huddy 2003; Jackson and Smith 1999; Stokes 1983). Former examples include ‘the group has helped me meet [my] personal goals’ (Stokes 1983). Questions E and F, in contrast, seek explanations in the social ties which may bind members of a group together. These link to ideas from psychology again of intra-group attraction, and of identification with members of the group as distinct from with the group collectively (Karasawa 1991). Examples include ‘there are many people I like as individuals in the group’ and ‘I wish I had more time for socialising with other group members’ (Stokes 1983). Finally, questions G and H directly tap notions of social identity. For example ‘groups I belong to are an important reflection of who I am’ (Luhtanen and Crocker 1992). These also link to the notions of deindividuation or depersonalisation which, put crudely, suggest that members are unable to separate their own identity from that of the group (Hogg 1992; Jackson and Smith 1999).

These questions clearly seek to capture attitudes which are likely to be interrelated. An initial correlation matrix based on the responses finds several coefficients at above 0.5, and most at above 0.3. Bartlett’s test of sphericity is significant at $p < .001$. The next appropriate step is therefore to conduct a factor analysis in order to identify underlying factors. The results of a principal components analysis to extract four factors, using Oblimin rotation (given the clearly interrelated nature of the underlying factors) are shown in Table 5.⁹ This confirms that each pair of questions identified above loads heavily on one factor. We may call the factors instrumentalism (questions C and D), involvement (questions A and B), sociability (questions E and F) and social identity (questions G and H).

Table 5: Principal components analysis with four factors (Oblimin rotation)

	Factor			
	1	2	3	4
Membership of the group is important to achieving my objectives in the Lords	.884			
I owe a lot to my party/group	.734			
There is a strong feeling of unity in my party/group		-.927		
I feel involved in decisions in my party/group		-.777		
There are many people I like as individuals in the group			.864	
I often socialise with members of my party/group			.765	
I care about the esteem in which I am held by the group				.973
Membership of the group is a key part of who I am				.659

Note: Only factor loadings greater than 0.3 are shown.

The final stage of the analysis is a multivariate regression to investigate relationships between these factors and the relevant dependent variables. The results of this are shown in Table 6. This includes the four factors alongside five control variables. Two of these reflect the political parties in the chamber, as different parties have already been demonstrated to have rather different attitudes to cohesion. Also essential is controlling for whether a peer is a

frontbencher (minister or shadow minister) or a backbencher in the chamber. Frontbenchers are expected to follow the party line at all times, and will be forced to resign if they vote against their party. We also include two other variables which may be relevant to voting behaviour: whether the member was formerly a member of the House of Commons (which is relatively common), as conventions cohesion are rather different there, and whether they are male or female as some suggest gender is related to attitudes to party cohesion (e.g. Cowley and Childs 2002).

Relationships are shown with three dependent variables, each of which was discussed in the previous section. As voting against the party line is extremely unusual members' self-reporting of this behaviour includes little variance. We include instead attitudes to whether voting against the line is justified. In terms of abstaining there was little variance in attitudes, but significant variance in self-reporting. We therefore include confessed propensity to abstain as the second dependent variable. Finally we include confessed propensity to vote with the party even on occasions when a member disagrees.

Table 6: OLS regression using four factors

	Justified to vote against the party line	Personally abstaining when disagree	Personally voting with party when disagree
	B	β	β
Frontbencher (1 = yes)	.16**	.18*	-.02
Former MP (1 = yes)	.00	.05	.07
Sex (1 = female)	.10	.07	.05
Party 1 (1 = Labour)	.33***	-.01	-.34***
Party 2 (1 = Lib Dem)	.07	.02	-.03
Factor 1 ('instrumental value')	-.04	-.11	.06
Factor 2 ('involvement')	.12*	.15*	.01
Factor 3 ('sociability')	.14*	-.03	-.06
Factor 4 ('social identity')	-.02	.06	.16*
R Square	.179	.113	.155

*p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001

The results show some expected relationships. Frontbenchers are significantly less likely to believe it is justified to vote against the party line, and significantly less likely to abstain when they disagree with policy. They are no less likely, however, to vote with the party even when they disagree. As the crosstabs suggested, Labour members are also significantly less likely to think that disloyal voting is justified, and are significantly more likely than members of other parties to vote with the party line when they disagree with it. Liberal Democrats, however, show no distinctive behaviour when compared to other groups, and neither do female peers or former MPs.

The key results clearly relate to the factors. As the table shows, the instrumental value that members place on their party groups has little impact on their attitudes to cohesion. In contrast, members who score higher on 'involvement' are significantly less likely to think it is justified to vote against the party line, or to abstain when they disagree with policy. This suggests that a sense of 'collective responsibility' may be important in driving voting cohesion. The factor we have called 'sociability' also proves to be significant in determining members' attitudes to disloyal voting behaviour. Peers who like other members of their

groups, and socialise with them, are significantly less likely to think that it is justified to vote against the party line.

On both disloyal voting and abstention the factor we have called ‘social identity’ shows no effect. However this factor suddenly becomes significant when peers are asked about their propensity to vote with the party even when they disagree with the party line. Those peers who are most likely to care about the esteem in which they are held by their groups, and say that membership of their group is a key part of their identity, are significantly less likely to admit to voting with the party even when they disagree with it. This is a counterintuitive result. Several explanations suggest themselves. It could be that those members whose identity depends on belonging to the group are less likely to disagree with it. This could be because those members who are in greatest agreement with the party bind themselves most closely to it psychologically, or alternatively that those whose identity depends on the party are less likely, even privately, to articulate the fact that they disagree with it. Equally, it might be that those members whose identity depends most on the party are less honest about their voting behaviour, as this in itself would be seen as disloyal. This result deserves further reflection, and further study.

In summary these early results suggest that psychological factors related to ‘belongingness’ or ‘groupishness’ may be an important contributor to party voting cohesion in parliaments. As indicated at the start of this section, our primary purpose was not to investigate individual differences but to identify factors that may commonly underline cohesive behaviour amongst all or most parliamentarians. As the table shows, the models explain relatively little variance in each of the dependent variables. This is in part because there was widespread agreement on several of the independent variables. For example 93% of party peers strongly agreed or agreed that there was a feeling of unity in their group, 81% said membership of the group was important to achieving their objectives, and 81% often socialised with members of their group.¹⁰ The point, as already emphasised, was not to identify the factors dividing peers who are loyal to their parties from peers who are not, but to find factors underlying loyal behaviour amongst all party peers. These results may offer the beginning of such an explanation.

7. Conclusions

The starting point for this paper was the clear gap between political science theories of what drives party voting cohesion and findings from the House of Lords that cohesion is high even where these factors are absent. Norton’s (2003) study raised serious questions about the usefulness of the rational choice approach, and suggested that a ‘sociological’ approach may be more appropriate. The sociological approach in legislative studies has, however, been discredited for lacking a clear scientific basis and predictive power. This paper has shown that theories from social psychology have potential to explain legislative voting behaviour in ways other than that focused on the rational, calculating, individual. Social psychology may well provide us, therefore, with a testable theory which does have predictive power, based on group, rather than individual, behaviour. These are early results which have been tested in only one legislative setting, but they certainly suggest that further study would be worthwhile. Such methods could be useful not only for the study of party groups but also politicians’ behaviour in parliamentary committees, and in other settings beyond the legislature. Politics is, almost by definition, a group process. The inclusion of reasoning from social psychology has great potential for ending the poverty of understanding that seeks to reduce it to a competitive game amongst selfish individuals. A marriage of social psychology and

legislative studies could profoundly improve our understanding of the political process, and also have important real-world implications for the design of our parliamentary institutions.

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¹ I would like to thank Jennifer Sheehy-Skeffington for early research assistance with this work. She provided help with literature reviews and many valuable ideas, but cannot be held in any way responsible for shortcomings in the final product.

² For a test of whether cohesion reflects members' ideological preferences, which concludes that the link is weak, see Kam (2001). See also the data later in this paper. In terms of Norton's judgement it is worth noting that he is not only an academic, but also a member of the House of Lords.

³ It is possible to see Norton's claims about the lack of disciplinary sanctions in the House of Lords as slightly exaggerated. See for example the comments of Lord Lipsey in Public Administration Committee (2002: Ev 29). Nonetheless, our results show that the conventional reasons given for cohesion are dismissed by members of the House of Lords, and in any case the tests of underlying psychological motivations would have relevance in any parliamentary chamber, even where discipline applied.

⁴ This work was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) under grant RES-000-23-0597.

⁵ The numbers used in the later part of this paper are significantly smaller than this, as we restrict our analysis to members of political party groups, while the House of Lords includes approximately 200 members who do not take a party whip.

⁶ For a discussion of turnout see Russell and Sciara (2007).

⁷ There was very little difference between members of different political parties on any of the questions shown in Table 3. Hence summary data is provided for all party members in the chamber.

⁸ There was also little difference between the party groups in terms of the proportion of responding 'agree strongly' to this question. This varied from 24% (Labour) to 33% (Conservative).

⁹ Although a Scree test suggested that there may only be three factors, the inclusion of a fourth factor gave a far simpler and more easily interpretable solution. A correlation matrix of the four factors validated the choice of an oblique rotation method, as most inter-factor correlation coefficients exceeded 0.3.

¹⁰ Equivalent figures for the other variables were 'feel involved in decisions': 66%, 'owe a lot to my group': 74%, 'many people I like': 98%, 'care about the esteem': 63%, 'key part of who I am': 55%. There was, of course, further variance between those who responded 'agree' and those who responded 'strongly agree' in each case, which is included in the analysis.