

# Electoral Reform and Parliamentary Debates

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## **Abstract**

Electoral rules matter for politics inside legislatures. In this paper, we investigate how parliamentary debates are affected by a change of the electoral system. More specifically, we investigate an electoral reform from a two-round plurality voting single member district system to a multimember proportional system, altered the composition of topics under discussion. We collected the complete record of minutes from the parliament 20 years before and after the reform. Using a structural topic model that group similar debates together into topics, we are able to investigate the causal effect of the electoral reform on the prevalence of topics debated in the parliament. We find that topics that gave individual MPs credit claiming opportunities were reduced as a result of the reform, while topics that distinguished between parties figured more prominently in the debates.

# Introduction

[P]olitical institutions affect legislative behavior because of the incentives they create for party leaders and backbenchers with regard to partisan dissent (Proksch and Slapin, 2015, 25).

Since the seminal work of Cox (1987) on the development of cohesive legislative parties in England, where he emphasize the increasing value of the party as an informational cue for the electorate, political scientist have investigated how variation in the institutional setting matters for legislative politics. Oftentimes, it is a series of minor institutional changes inside the legislature, in combination with a clearer party label that generate cohesive and effective parliamentary groups (Godbout and Høyland, forthcoming). Other times, electoral reforms that clearly strengthen the role of parties can be sufficient to drastically increase voting unity within the legislative parties (Sircar and Høyland, 2010). However, roll-call votes may tell a partial story of legislative behaviour. The possibility for outside observers, and party leaders, to observe how legislators cast their vote matter for how their vote is cast (Hug, 2010). Moreover, as roll call votes has to be requested by parliamentary actors, it is unlikely that the vote characteristics of the roll call votes will resemble a random sample from the whole population of votes (Carrubba et al., 2006). This may be particular worrisome when attempting to evaluate the effect of a reform that may also have affected the agenda-setting incentives of the parliamentary party leadership, such as an electoral reform which strengthen the power of the party leadership in the electoral arena. It is common to distinguish between candidate- and party- centric electoral systems. In the latter the party leadership has a major say in the electoral prospect of candidates through their role in the placement of candidates on lists or in safe seats. In the former, individual candidates may be able to influence their electoral prospects independently of the party leadership (Hix, 2004; Carey, 2007). Hence, an electoral reform from a can-

didate centered system to a party centered system may have caused changes in the agenda as well as the ability for party leadership to sanction MPs voting behavior. Focusing on only the latter, without accounting for the former may lead to spurious results. Recently, there has been an increased focus on how such electoral incentives matter for parliamentary debates. For example, Spirling (forthcoming) shows that party leaders adopted a less complex language as party label became more important with the extension for franchise. Perhaps closest to our argument, Proksch and Slapin (2015) develops a theoretical argument of how different electoral rules shape who gets to speak in parliamentary debates, and the extent to which dissenting views from the party line is offered. In this paper, we extend their tests in order to address how an electoral reform from a candidate to a party centered system may change the kind of topics discussed. We have two predictions. As the electoral reform from two-round single member districts to multimember proportional systems strengthened the hand of the party leadership, the scope for MP level credit claiming were reduced as distributive constituency specific topics became less prominent in parliamentary debates. In contrast, topics that enabled parties to distinguish themselves from other parties will become more prominent.

The paper is structured as follows. We start by outlining our theoretical expectations based on the recent work on parliamentary speeches across different institutional settings, conducted by Proksch and Slapin (2015). We then proceed by painting some broad stroked historical lines of the period we cover, with extra focus on the electoral reform of 1919, before we describe how the data was gathered. Furthermore, we provide a brief explanation of the structural topic model that is utilized in the analysis. Lastly, we present the results from the analysis. Our findings suggest that the transition from candidate to party based electoral system changed the parliamentary debates in the Norwegian Parliament from an individualistic credit claiming to party-centered presentation of alternative policies.

# Theory

In parliamentary democracies, political power is delegated from the electorate to politicians from different political parties. These politicians are, then, supposed to represent the preferences of the voters they were elected by. Who represents, based on how many votes, however, differs between electoral systems: in our case, between a candidate based majoritarian system and a closed-list proportional representation system.<sup>1</sup> Not only do electoral systems determine who gets to represent, it arguably also has effects on how representatives work within the legislature. As mentioned, on the one hand, electoral system is found to affect voting behavior among MPs. On the other hand, how parliamentary debates are affected by electoral system traits has been given far less attention.

Parallel to strides in technological development and availability of text as data, analyses of parliamentary debates have become increasingly viable in this field of research. Recently, Proksch and Slapin (2015) have shown that British MPs in the majoritarian UK electoral system more often dissent from the party line than MPs in the open-list PR German system do. Indeed, supplementary analyses show similar results for New Zealand before and after the electoral reform of 1996 (Proksch and Slapin, 2015, 163-173). As our main interest is to explore how the electoral reform reshapes parliamentary debates, these findings are highly relevant; if the degree of MP dissent changes across institutional arrangements we should expect to also see major changes in topic content and structure before and after the reform.

Hence, our approach can be based on the theoretical framework of Proksch and Slapin (2015). First, this means that, parliamentary speeches are assumed to be prioritized because parties and MPs' have an interest in presenting their policy positions to an external audience – the voters – and not necessarily at winning rival politicians over (Proksch and Slapin, 2015, 19-20). Second, politicians are assumed

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<sup>1</sup>Norway post-reform, in practice, has a closed-list PR system, where parties on sub-national levels select the candidates. There are ways to alternate the lists, but over half the voters must alternate the lists in the same way for this to be valid – which has never happened

to have within party differences in policy preferences, and at how big differences dissent is displayed publicly through parliamentary speech, a function of institutional rules and procedures. Finally, and most importantly, majoritarian systems should provide stronger incentives for personal vote seeking behavior than PR systems (Proksch and Slapin, 2015), because voters in majoritarian systems to a larger degree vote on candidates that protect constituency interests, whereas PR systems tend to give parties more power in the candidate selection process. Consequently, MPs in majoritarian systems are expected to be given more freedom by their party leaders both in content and access to parliamentary speeches, because parties benefit more from constituency focused members in these systems. If constituency based dissent can be acted on through speech, which is lower level dissent than voting dissent (Proksch and Slapin, 2015, 26), party leaders are more likely to allow dissenting MPs floor access. In party based systems, such as the PR system, however, the payoffs are expected to be lower in giving plenary time to MPs that want to raise constituency concerns.

In line with the theories sketched out above, our aim to establish whether parliamentary debates change form and content across the exogenous shock of electoral reform, should be affected by the same mechanisms. On the one hand, the pre-reform period should be characterized by parliamentary debates where a fair share of speeches take a constituency based approach – where topics take credit claiming forms. On the other hand, post-reform parliamentary speeches should, as a consequence of parliamentary reform, take a more general form, where constituency specific concerns are raised less frequently, and party policy positions articulated more generally.

## Background

The period covered by this paper was a period of big political change for Norway; internationally through neutrality in World War I, the first wave of globalization, rise of Nazism, and eventually occupation in World War II; and domestically through independence from Sweden in 1905, growth of the labor movement, universal suffrage in 1903, and electoral reform from majoritarian to proportional representation passed in 1919, but first utilized in the 1921 election.

Some early political developments within our period are important to keep in mind. First, the referendum in mid August 1905 that concluded the secession from Sweden. Second, the decision and referendum in November the same year that made Prince Carl of Denmark the worlds first elected monarch (Bjørklund, 2005, 67-69), and Norway a constitutional monarchy. Third, and parallel to the struggle of independence, was the gradual consolidation of parliamentarism that also was finalized in 1905: from Johan Sverdrup's first cabinet in 1884, through the split of the Liberal Party, and several minority governments, to establishment of a grand coalition lead by Christian Michelsen in 1905, Norwegian parliamentarism evolved and the King lost most of his political powers (Rasch, 2004, 36-38). Fourth, the gradual enfranchisement of the Norwegian population, trough universal suffrage for men in 1897, cumulating in the 1913 universal suffrage for women (Danielsen, 1964, 47) expanded the Norwegian electorate substantially. Finally, the growth of the labor movement influenced the Norwegian political landscape. Even though the Labor Party's first MPs was elected as late as 1903, the labor movement had grown in both size and influence from the 1870s (Nerbøvik, 1999, 219).

With regard to international events, World War I had a major impact on Norwegian economy, both for the state and individuals. Norway struggled to maintain neutrality throughout WWI, but was squeezed between German demand for fish import and British demands to not trade with Germany (Furre, 2000, 24). WWI

made Norway experience some tough years, commonly referred to as *dyrtid* (expensive times), with rising prices on merchandise and empty shelves in shops across the country, eventually leading to rationing from 1918. The next decade was characterized by a struggle to reduce the nation debt, and improve the national currency (Furre, 2000, 28). Consequently, tax and toll rates rose formidably in the 1920s, in attempts to limit the debt burden.

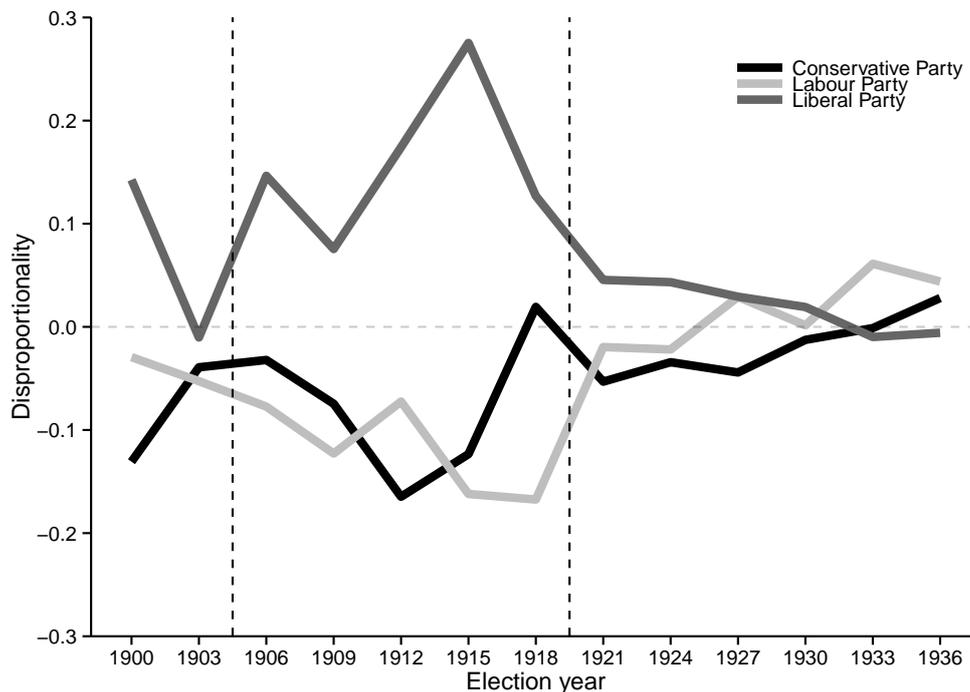


Figure 1: Disproportionality election by election 1900-1936

In sum, factors that could have changing effects the content and form of debates in parliamentary debates are plentiful. However, our main interest and argument in this paper is the effect of the electoral reform passed in 1919 – changing the election system from plurality vote in single member districts to proportional representation (Haffner, 1949, 69) – on parliamentary debate. The debate over the viability of proportional representation itself was not uncontested, and discussions over electoral reform started over 40 years earlier, when the election system was characterized by indirect plurality vote in multimember districts. Here, the Conser-

vative party was severely underrepresented, especially in the districts (Danielsen, 1964, 10). The Liberal Party, clearly benefiting from the election system, ironically had a *conservative* attitude towards change. Indeed, PM Johan Sverdrup stated, during an election reform debate in the lower chamber of parliament in 1887, that changing to proportional representation "will have dire consequences" and that *status quo* should be upheld (Ot. 1887, 346-349). Hence, because the Liberal Party was overrepresented, the election system was not changed – until 1905, when the combination of expanded enfranchisement and "danger" of the growing Labor Party was about to threaten the parliamentary basis of both the Conservative and Liberal Party (Danielsen, 1964, 19-26). Consequently, the introduction of plurality vote in single member districts – districts broken up in smaller pieces than previously – was argued to be a step towards proportional representation (St. prp. 76/1903/04). Figure 1 shows the Conservative, Liberal and Labor Party's difference between proportion of votes and proportion of seats, where 0 is full proportionality, below 0 is underrepresentation, and over 0 is overrepresentation. The picture clearly confirms the overrepresentation of the Liberal party and underrepresentation of the Conservative Party and Labor Party before the electoral reform in 1919 (marked by the second dashed line). Figure 1 also shows that the implementation of single member districts did not lead to more proportionality – as intended – but rather the opposite.

## Data and Methods

Our analysis draws on a corpus of Norwegian parliamentary debates in the period between 1906 and 1940. That is, each corpus text contains the full debate of a parliamentary session in the Storting (plenary), the upper (Lagtinget), or lower chamber (Odelstinget). These debates are available as picture-quality pdfs from the Parliamentary archives. Originally these pdfs were generated by simply scanning

each page of the hard-copies of the debates. Hence, the quality of the pdfs vary somewhat as a function of how carefully each page was placed on the scanner as well as the quality of the page scanned. The quality is sufficiently high to be readable for the human eye as well as optical character recognition software. There are, however, some exceptions. For example, the volume covering the 1917-1918 session is of sub-optimal quality, which accordingly to an incomplete text corpus of this session.

To extract the text, we first downloaded all pdfs and converted each page into a picture. In this process, we experimented with various settings to enhance the clarity of the printed text. The settings that we ended up with works fine for most pages. But there are some pages where the results are less than optimal. Once all of the pages are identified, we will attempt to enhance the quality using settings that are more custom-made for the problems in these particular pages. If this fails, the final option will be to scan the problem pages ourselves and hope for better results.

Once the enhanced pictures were produced, we used optical character recognition software to extract the text. The software settings that we used worked reasonable well for the pictures of sufficient quality, but we will, in subsequent work, attempt to obtain a better result form the problem pages by customizing the settings to address the particular challenges with these pages. The output was then merged into one text file per session. We then used regular expressions to clean up the text and divide it up on a debate-by-debate basis. This was done by splitting the text whenever there was a text string indicating that something was passed unanimously, adopted against the votes of a particular number of representatives, or indication of a roll call being held. As the process of extracting the text is not (yet) perfect, we are not (yet) certain that all end-of-debates are identified correctly. Hence the results presented below are preliminary and subject to change.

The above process resulted in about 27 067 debates. For each of the debates,

we identify the chamber where it took place, the length of the debate in number of words, and in which session the debate took place.

As our argument is that the electoral reform changed the nature of the parliamentary negotiations as parties become stronger at the expense of individual representatives, we need a to identify the evolution in the topics under debate. For this task, structural topics models are particular well suited (Roberts et al., 2014). Topic models (Blei and Lafferty, 2009; Blei, 2012) classify segments of text, e.g. speeches or news-articles, probabilistic into a set of topics on the basis of the relevant word-frequency distribution. A topic is here defined as a distribution over a fixed vocabulary. For example, a tax topic will contain words related to taxation with a high probability. Each segment may be belong to several topics, making this a multi-membership model. The outcomes of a topic model are the association of words to topics and the expected proportion of the topic in the corpus of texts. The structural topic model allows for additional structure to be imposed on the, in a generalized linear model type of framework. Note that the quantities of key interest, the topic proportions are inherently unobservable, we only observe the word use and the covariates of the model.

In our case, we allow for the the proportion by which a topic occur in the text to vary by chamber, word length as well as whether it took place before or after the passing of the electoral reform (1918/1919 session). Roberts, Stewart and Nielsen (2015) develop the case for a causal interpretation of the technique as a course matching techniques operating in high dimensions, as debates are matched with other debates based on similarity in relative word frequencies. As the inference from the model is conditional on the number of topics selected, we let the model select the number of topics for us given the data and the coariates in the model. We end up with 79 topics, but initial robustness checks indicates that the substantive results are not sensitive to the exact number of topics. Note that the topics and the words associated with the different topics are infered from the word-use in the

debates, not fixed in advanced.

We prepared the corpus of debates for analysis in a standard manner. First, we removed all punctuation, numbers, and very common words. Second, we removed the names of all MPs and political parties, as well as procedural words that are indicative of contestation, e.g. vote and rollcall. Third, we turned everything into lower characters and kept only the stem of each word. These stems were subsequently converted into a document-term matrix where each unit is the word-frequencies of the words used in each debate. Finally, we removed all words that were not present in at least 2.5 percent of all debates and dropped all debates with fewer than 250 words.

This section has presented the data and the methods that we will rely on to evaluate to what extent the electoral reform induced a change in the parliamentary debates. We will evaluate this by comparing topic proportions before and after the electoral reform was implemented.

## Results

We proceed by presenting the result from our topic model, containing 72 topics. The first thing we note is that the length of the debates shortened in the period after the reform, as shown in Figure 2. The upper part of this figure shows how the the distribution of words used per debate got lower after the reform. We see that difference across the two periods are similar across the plenary (the Storting), the upper (Lagting), and the lower (Odelsting) chambers. While we can explain this in terms of party-leaders becoming less generous in their allocation of speaking time. However, it may also be the case that the number of issues before the parliament increased, so that the length of each debate simply had to be cut for efficiency reasons. In order to rule this possibility out, the lower part of the figure, plots how the number of issues under considerations evolved over time. However, the figure

shows that the number of debates per session were higher in the period before the reform than in the period after.

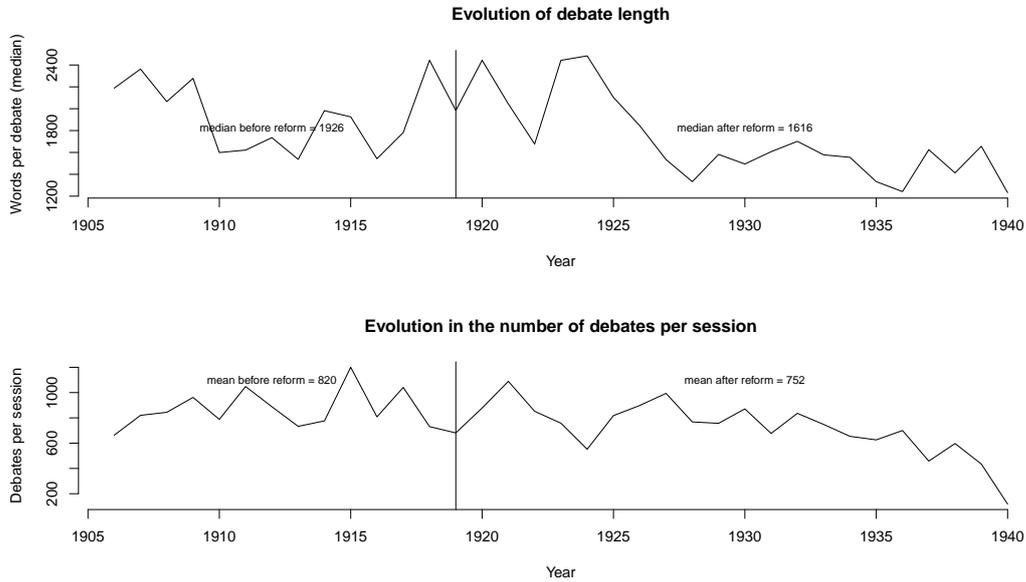


Figure 2: Evolution in length and number of debates by session.

Of course, these are just descriptive differences, but they are in line with our theoretical expectation of more restrictive practice in terms of floor access in general. Nevertheless, these descriptive patterns are not sufficient evidence of an electoral reform effect. If the issues to be considered during the two periods were very different for other reasons than the electoral reform, these results may be spurious. We would hence like to investigate topic specific differences across the two periods. For this, we rely on the results from the structural topic model, presented above.

We let the model estimate the number of topics, and let the prevalence of a topic, i.e. the proportion of debates classified as being a member of a particular topic vary with the length of the debate and the chamber. We let the reform matter for both the prevalence of the topic as well as its content. In other words, we let the words associated with the topic to differ between the two periods. This is key, as we expect that the topics will be debated in a different manner pre and post

reform. Importantly, we expect topics that enable individual MPs to distinguish themselves from other MPS from their own party to be lower after the reform, while topics that enables parties to distinguish themselves from other parties to become more prominent after the reform.

Roberts, Stewart and Nielsen (2015) develop the connections between coarse matching and the structural topic model, arguing for the possibility of a causal interpretation of the effect of treatment variables within the same topic, possibly after adjusting for other confounding variables. We are interested in estimating the causal effect of electoral reform on the prevalence and content of topics that either enable individual MPs to claim credit, or topics that enable the parties to distinguish themselves from the other parties.

We identified the eight most relevant topics within these two categories by reading a sample of the debates classified under the different topics. The identification is based on an evaluation of the semantic coherence of the topic, conducted by reading a sample of debates classified under the different topics. The topics identified as those that best enabled individual MPs to claim credit are presented in Figure 3. For each of the sub-plots, the y-axis indicates the expected topic proportion, before and after the reform, with a 95 percent confidence interval. The x-axis indicate the number of words used in the debates. The red lines show how the topic proportion vary over the number of words prior to the reform, while the black lines shows how it varied after the reform. If the lines overlap, it indicates no difference in the topic proportions before and after the electoral reform. The header words are the two words that best sets the topic apart from the other topics.

The top-left plot shows that discussion over property rights. A key issue here is the extent of regulatory burden to impose on local businesses, in particular in rural areas. In the top-right plot, the topic of discussion is individual level compensation from the state. For example, on September 8, 1909 Parliament discussed at length

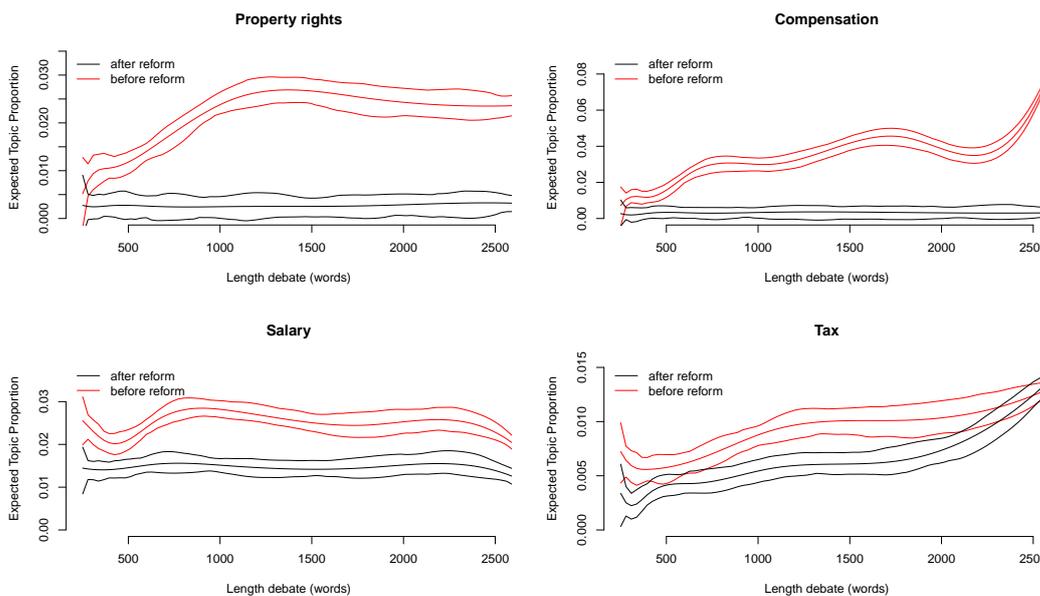


Figure 3: Topics that were more prominent prior to the reform.

whether a missionary man named Andersen should receive 1500 NOK in compensation for allegedly having served had his prison-sentence extended by 19 months in a sanatory, on the pretext of having his mental health examined.

In the bottom-left plot, relates to pension and salary issues. Debates over pensions were astonishing detailed prior to the electoral reform, as debates were held over relatively small sums for individual people at named institutions. In one such debate, where pensions for employees at the Lighthouse Authority, it is specified that maximum salary for for Keepers of category I and H should be 4500 NOK, and it is specified that this maximum salary also applies for the Keeper at the Ryvingen Lighthouse.<sup>2</sup>

The electoral reform was not the only major reform around the early 1920s; from 1920 to 1921, the top tax on income rate increased from 10 to 50%. The lower right panel of figure ?? shows a topic that can be identified as a tax topic. Can the tax reform be linked to the change in electoral reform? At face value, it is quite

<sup>2</sup>Ryving Lighthouse is located in the municipality of Mandal, in Vest-Agder county. It is the southernmost lighthouse in Norway. It was the first lighthouse in Norway to be powered by electricity.

astonishing that there was a very broad consensus on the tax increase in 1921. All the members present at the Storting April 22<sup>nd</sup> 1921 voted for the strong progressive taxation on individual incomes. According to our theory, it is plausible to argue that this progressive taxation was more controversial in some constituencies than others, and that party candidates were expected to suffer electorally if taxation of their voter base increased.

To get a grip on why this taxation jump occurred, we need to look back to one of the first major progressive taxation debates: on 22<sup>nd</sup> of June 1913, MP Buen of the Labor Party presented a proposition that called for a report from the cabinet on more progressive direct taxation on the higher incomes, aimed at reducing "toll taxes on peoples necessities of life" (Stortingstidende, 1913). The problem was that MP Konow of the Free Minded Liberals (Frisinnede Venstre) proclaimed that for him to support the proposition would be to "give a helping hand to the socialists [Labor], and I will not take part in that" (Stortingstidende, 1913). He also argued that the progressive tax would not only affect the people paying the tax, but the society as a whole: that workers would get less pay and lose their jobs if the tax was raised. This was not well received by the Labor party, arguing that Konow's weak argumentation was no more than a recognition that this was good policy. Also, members of the Liberal Party (Venstre) disavowed Konow's arguments, saying that they were positive to progressive taxation, but he proposition was eventually defeated.

However, Buen did not have to wait long before his calls for progressive taxation were taken more seriously. In the budget for 1914/1915, the Liberal Party cabinet gave concessions to his cause. From the debate on an extraordinary wealth and income taxation in the Storting on July 6<sup>th</sup> 1914, Minister of Finance Omholt made calls for "heavier tax burdens on the people, especially the bigger tax contributors", mainly to pay for increasing military costs (Stortingstidende, 1914, 2772). This was, of course, satisfactory for the Labor Party. The conservatives were not as

happy, making arguments through MP Ustvedt that "the proposition [...] shows how heavy this increase in direct taxation falls on business" (Stortingstidende, 1914, 2772). Promises that "this is the last time we pass this kind of extraordinary tax" were made by representative Rinde (Liberals). That was to be proven wrong later. The tax for the higher incomes in the 1914/1915 budget was not very high though, landing on a top rate of 11%. This was, however, double of the rate the previous year. The Labor Party was not satisfied with the low rates, but looked at the new rates as a victory (Aftenposten, 1916.07.19).

Hence, there is clear evidence that the Liberal Party was not hostile towards progressive taxation, though they did not vote for it before 1921. Constituency members' ability to hide behind the party label to a larger degree than before could have contributed to this. Nevertheless, the 1921 increase is not as big as it seems on the first glance for the richest individuals; WWI ended in late 1918, so the excess profits tax did not bring in its last *kroner* until 1920. Rising debts, a more powerful Labor Party, and the hole after abolishing of the excess profits tax, might not have given the politicians no choice but to raise the top income tax.

The proposition starting the debate explicitly stated that "in order to replace the excess profits tax, and cover the debt that was built up during the war, there is no other way than to increase the progressive taxation" (Proposition number 10, 1920). The committee of finance proposed an amended version of the proposition before the debate, where they agreed to the 50% top-tax, but made it clear that the flat taxation on firms and shareholders in the proposition was unacceptable.

From the debate, one can see that there is no discussion on the individual progressive taxation. What is discussed though, over two days and several hundred of pages, is whether there should also be a progressive taxation on firms and shareholders, rather than a flat tax, as was sketched in the proposition. In this debate, the Storting split into three groups: the cabinet parties (Conservatives and Free Minded Liberals), the Labor Party, and the Liberal Party between the two.

The Liberal Party, which was the biggest party on the Storting, opened the discussion with the speaker of the finance committee Aarstad. He argued that the cabinet put heavier tax burdens on the small firms than the bigger firms, and that this was not just. The conservative Minister of Finance, Hagerup Bull, replied to Aarstad:

”This debate is important, because the state of it is so difficult. These are heavy tax burdens we have to put on our people. We all agree that it must be done, and that we have to do it in a time when the ability to pay taxes are poor, when people are experiencing harsh times, and our firms are about to crash

(Stortingstidende, 1921)

He went on by arguing that a progressive taxation on firms and shareholders would suffocate the business industry in Norway, and that this would have dire consequences for the workers with lower wages and unemployment. C. O. Lund (Conservatives) followed up in the same line, but also tried to scare the liberals and attack the Labor Party by arguing that ”the communist view of the world is ruling to strongly in the Storting, and they are aiming to bring business down all together”. He also remarked that it was much more reasonable to tax firms heavier during the war, when the incomes were higher, but ”now, when the war is over and the times were harder, these incomes are gone” (Stortingstidende, 1921). Ellingsen of the Liberal Party was disgusted by the comparison between the liberals and communism, but also sorry that the tax burdens had to get so heavy during the difficult times. The Labor Party MP Hornsrud also admitted that the Labor Party was not perfectly satisfied with the tax, because the socialists ”would like the tax to be even more progressive, but we also have to make concessions in order to get things through” (Stortingstidende, 1921).

In the end, the Storting voted for the proposals of the committee. This meant that also tax on firms and shareholders was to be progressive, with the rate for

the biggest incomes being 30%. Most importantly here, the debate had changed substantially in character from the progressive taxation debates throughout the 1910s. Suddenly, politicians agreed that income taxation should be progressive. We argue that this largely can be attributed to the electoral reform, and better protection behind party labels.

We now move on to discuss topics that become more prominent in parliamentary debates after the reform. These were typical party-political issues, such as language, regional infrastructure and autonomy, duties and levels, social security as well debates over the economic system and left- right ideology more general. These topics are presented in Figure 4.

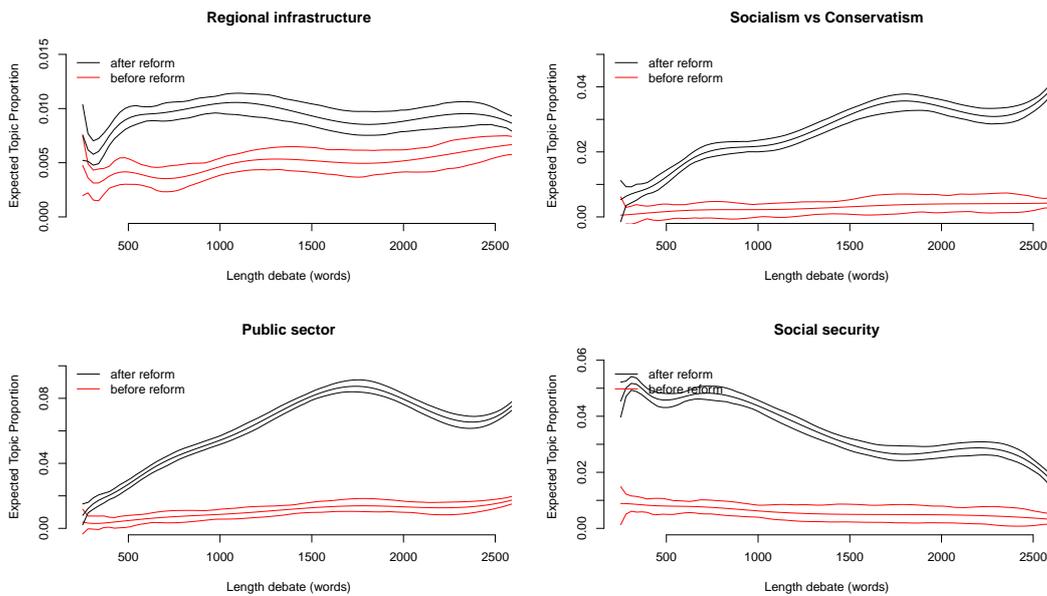


Figure 4: Topics that were more prominent after the reform.

On the top-left, there is a plot that compares the topic proportion devoted to regional infrastructure issues before and after the reform. We see this topic become twice as common after the reform. Prior to the reform, such issues were rarely discussed, occurring less half a percent of the time. This increased to about one percent. A typical example of such a debate took place 9 May 1929. The topic

of the debate was roads. Here, the freshman Olav Aslakson Versto (Labour Party, Telemark county), who came to serve consecutive terms in the parliament, pitched the cities against the country-side, claiming that the reason for the countryside becoming depopulated was the the poor road quality. Although he continues until clubbed by the President, he keeps the rhetoric at a general level, never bringing any constituency references into the speech.

In the top-right plot we find debates that are clearly ideological in nature. For example in 1934 (date to be added), Dybward Brochmann, a son of a bishop, and the founder the Society party, saw it opportune to launch a full-on assault on Ingvald Frre (Labour Party, Rogaland county) and the socialism in general. Similarly, in a debate on 27 February 1925, the future social policy, and trade minister minister Alfred Madsen (Labour Party, Akershus country) offered such a harsh critique of the bourgeois class and the conservatives, labelling them, and the President of the Parliament amongst them, as criminals, that the President had to stop him.

In the bottom-left plot, we find debates over working conditions and pay for various groups in the public sector. Finally, the bottom right plot shows how social security issued becomes more prominent on the agenda after the electoral reform.

While these topics are but a sample of how the parliamentary debate as a whole changed with the electoral reform, we see that the party-political aspect becomes more dominant after the reform at the expense of topics that allowed for a clear constituency link.

## **Conclusion**

In order to evaluate the effect of a reform that strengthen the party leadership, it is not sufficient to only investigate its impact on observed unity in votes and debates as such reforms may influence what gets on the debated and voted on inn the first place. In this paper, we have shown that the electoral reform of 1919 in Norway led

to substantive shift in the prevalence of topics under consideration. In particular, we found that topics that allowed MPs to present constituency concerns were reduced as a result of the reform. In contrast, topics that allowed for contestation between alternative political solutions and ideological world views rose in prominence on the agenda. As such, our results add to a growing body of literature that uncover the implications of electoral rules for legislative behavior.

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