

Debates in the Canadian House of Commons

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Abstract: Canada is a federal parliamentary democracy with a bicameral legislature at the national level. Members of the upper house, styled the Senate, are appointed by the prime minister, and members of the lower house, the House of Commons, are elected in single-member plurality electoral districts. In practice, the House of Commons is by far the more important of the two chambers. This chapter therefore investigates access to the floor in the Canadian House of Commons. We find that the age, gender, and experience of MPs has little independent effect on access to the floor. Consistent with the dominant role of parties in Canadian political life, we find that an MP's role within a party has by far the greatest impact on their access to the floor. Intriguingly, backbenchers in the government party have the least access of all.

Key words: Canada; Members of Parliament; House of Commons; Legislatures; Debates.

Introduction

This chapter focuses on the Canadian House of Commons. Although Canadian Parliament is comprised of two chambers---an unelected Senate and an elected House of Commons---we focus on the House of Commons because it is both the confidence chamber and the chamber where members of the cabinet traditionally hold their legislative seats. Compared to the Senate, the House of Commons plays by far the larger role in crafting legislation and policy, as the unelected Senate is expected by convention to defer to the will of the House. As a democratic institution, the House is meant to be, in the words of one scholar, “the people’s House of Commons” (Smith

2007). The House is comprised of 338 elected Members of Parliament (MPs) and is meant to provide Canadians with an opportunity to scrutinize and check the executive branch of government and to have their views represented in the legislative process. Yet for decades, critics have derided the growing irrelevance of the House of Commons as its members supposedly fall increasingly under the sway of party leaders and the executive branch, and consequently play much less of a role in representing their constituents' concerns in government.

The politics of legislative debate is one crucial area in which we can examine the degree to which these concerns are based in fact. One of the fundamental roles of Canadian MPs is to speak for the concerns of their constituents, yet this is said to be sharply curtailed by institutional and social determinants of legislative debate. In this chapter, we examine the House of Commons over a 31-year period (1988-2019) to determine how potential determinants such as gender, seniority, parliamentary roles, and inter- and intra-party politics shape access to speaking time.

Previous work on this topic has suggested that the Canadian House of Commons is relatively open to backbencher interventions in legislative debate, largely because formal rules theoretically provide robust access to speaking time for backbench and independent MPs (Proksch and Slapin 2015, p. 82). Our analysis challenges this view and suggests that parliamentary speeches in Canada are largely controlled by party leaders and whips through unofficial party speaking lists which in practice limit access to speaking time for most backbenchers. Our findings suggest that gender has little effect on legislative speaking time and the impact of seniority in the legislature is mixed. Instead, the distribution of formal roles in Parliament is the single most significant factor affecting legislative speech, with party leaders and cabinet members playing an outsized role. Government backbenchers and independent MPs—those who lack the institutional support of party leadership in accessing speaking time—are far less able to play a major part in legislative debate.

We begin this chapter with a discussion of the institutional setting of legislative debate and Canadian parliamentary politics more generally. From there, we discuss the key descriptive trends of legislative debate in the House of Commons before moving on to an analysis of the determinants of these trends. We conclude with a discussion of the normative and analytical implications of our results.

Institutional and party system background

Canada is a parliamentary democracy with a federal constitution. Although provincial legislatures are unicameral, the national legislature is bicameral. The Senate is the upper chamber of the Canadian Parliament and the House of Commons is the lower chamber. The 105 seats in the Senate are distributed to provinces in accordance with the principle of regional representation. Senators are appointed by the governor general on the advice of the prime minister, which effectively allows the prime minister to select senators. MPs in the House of Commons are elected in single-member plurality elections. Elections to the House of Commons are typically held every four years—and, since 2007, at fixed election dates—and the Constitution requires that elections be held at least once every five years. The 338 seats in the House of Commons are distributed across Canadian provinces in approximate accordance with the principle of representation by population. Although, in law, the Senate is nearly the legislative equal of the House of Commons, in practice the appointed Senate lacks the legitimacy of the elected House and is therefore a much less powerful chamber.

Despite the single member plurality electoral system, Canadian elections have consistently seen at least three major parties elected to Parliament since the 1921 election, in addition to a number of less prominent smaller parties. Table 1 summarizes the results of the federal elections

conducted from 1988 to 2019, the time period which our study covers. Of the three major parties, the Liberals and Conservatives have both formed the government and Official Opposition on multiple occasions. The third major party, the New Democratic Party (NDP), has never formed a government at the federal level, and has only once served as the Official Opposition (2011-2015). Historically, 70 percent of Canadian elections have resulted in a majority government, and, because majority governments last longer, Canada has been governed by a majority government for 85 percent of its history. There has only been one multi-party coalition government in Canada during World War I. The presence of multiple competitive parties in the context of a single member plurality electoral system also means that the party that wins a majority of the seats in the Canadian House of Commons typically does not win a majority of votes in the election. The 1984 election was the only election in the last half-century where a party received a majority of the popular vote.

Table 1 About Here

Of the smaller parties historically present in the House of Commons, most have represented regional interests, including populist parties from Western Canada and nationalist parties from Quebec. Indeed, as the electoral system privileges smaller parties with territorially concentrated support over smaller parties with broad diffuse support, the legislative representation of smaller regional parties is disproportionately large relative to their share of support in the electorate. This incentivizes new and smaller parties to organize along regional lines (Cairns 1968).

The Liberal party is the historically dominant Canadian political party. Its electoral base is predominantly urban, suburban, and eastern, with particular strongholds of support in the largest

province, Ontario, and the French-speaking province of Quebec. Ideologically, the Liberals are a centre to centre-left party. Conversely, the Conservative party is a centre-right party with bases of support in Western Canada. The NDP is a social democratic party of labour which has traditionally received its most significant support in urban centres and districts with large numbers of unionized workers (Cochrane 2015, ch. 8; Johnston 2017). Of the other parties currently represented in the House of Commons, the Bloc Québécois is a Quebec social democratic and nationalist party, while the Green Party is an environmentalist party. Canadian voters maintain comparatively low levels of partisan loyalty, which explains the high level of volatility in Canadian federal elections (Clarke et al. 2019). Despite voters' lack of attachment to a given party however, party branding has become an increasingly important way for parties to disseminate and control their message and appeal to voters, particularly in more recent elections (Marland 2016).

The high level of control which Canadian parties exercise over backbench MPs is a well-documented and often criticized phenomenon (Docherty 1997; Rathgeber 2014; Savoie 1999). The level of discipline is relatively higher than in other comparable Westminster-style parliaments (Godbout 2014), as party leaders have used a combination of career advancement incentives, party discipline, and socialization to ensure that MPs will adhere to the party position (Kam 2009, ch. 2). These three measures have been astoundingly effective: Godbout and Høyland (2017) show that there is near total cohesion among the parties' parliamentary voting records. The leadership of the party in power, which forms the executive, therefore exerts significant control over the legislature, particularly during periods of majority government (Savoie 1999).

Despite the significant level of party discipline and executive control over the legislature, meaningful personal vote-seeking incentives exist (Blidook 2012, pp. 81-82). While rules differ from party to party, and while party leaders reserve the right to veto or select party candidates, the

vast majority of party candidates for election are nominated through a vote of the local electoral district party membership. Similarly, elections carried out through the single member plurality electoral system, as in Canada, incentivize candidates to seek a personal vote that bolsters their chances of election. Kam (2009, pp. 24-26) shows that dissent from the party line is a persistent, if not ubiquitous, phenomenon among Canadian MPs, and that it is especially common when MPs feel that such dissent will improve their standing among their constituents. The opportunities created by the SMP electoral system lead us to concur with Proksch and Slapin (2015, p. 82), who classify the Canadian system as providing strong personal vote-seeking incentives.

In short, the Canadian House of Commons consistently hosts at least three major national parties alongside smaller numbers of MPs from regional parties. These MPs are subject to significant discipline in order to ensure their loyalty to the party line, but the SMP electoral system provides its own opportunities and incentives which at times lead MPs to ignore their party's wishes in hopes of securing their constituents' support in order to win reelection.

The institutional setting of legislative debate

In this section, we review the rules concerning legislative debate in Canada, with a particular focus on the degree to which these rules allow individual MPs to speak in the House of Commons without party approval. The rules of legislative debate in the Canadian House of Commons are governed by the Constitution, the *Parliament of Canada Act*, and the *Standing Orders*, a set of permanent written rules outlining parliamentary procedure. As the Constitution and *Parliament of Canada Act* provide no direct detail on the allocation of speaking time, the *Standing Orders*, supplemented with parliamentary precedent, outline the main regulations on parliamentary speech.

One of the fundamental tenets of parliamentary speech in Canada is that MPs are granted complete freedom of speech in order to “say what they feel needs to be said in the furtherance of the national interest and the aspirations of their constituents” (Bosc and Gagnon 2017, ch. 3). To this end, MPs are theoretically permitted to speak on almost every matter which comes before the House (Bosc and Gagnon 2017, ch. 13).

However, since the number of MPs who would like to speak far outmatches the available speaking time, the *Standing Orders* regulate access to the floor in the House of Commons. The majority of time is reserved for government business, with additional time set daily for private members' business. By law, the parliamentary calendar of an elected Parliament lasts a maximum of four years. It is usually divided in two or three sessions that begin with the reading of the Speech from the Throne by the monarch or its representative, the Governor General. This speech outlines the broad orientations of the government and will be followed by several days of debates. During this period, opposition party leaders can introduce their own amendments to the Address in Reply to the Speech from the Throne. For instance, they can introduce a motion of non-confidence, or any other topic they wish to discuss. Once these amendments are disposed of by the House, Parliament will enter into the normal daily program regulated by the Standing Orders. A typical day is organized as follows. For example, on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Fridays, a sitting begins at 10:00AM by the consideration of routine proceedings, which are mostly dedicated to administrative matters, such as the tabling of documents and the introduction of bills, petitions, or motions. The next period from 10:30 to 14:00 is exclusively reserved to government orders, such as debates over government bills, the budget, or other government matters. Note that twenty two sitting days of the calendar year are reserved to the opposition. During this period, the time set aside for government orders is given to opposition party leaders who can then choose the subject

of debates or introduce motions of no-confidence. The next item on the schedule is a fifteen-minute time slot when private members are allowed to make one minute statements to the House. These one-minute statements are generally allocated through lists drawn up by the party whips, a practice discussed in detail below. The most exciting feature follows after that with the question period, which lasts from 13:15 to 15:00. During this time, opposition leaders and backbenchers are allowed to ask questions to the prime ministers (on Wednesdays) or other ministers of the cabinet. Questions are not submitted in writing in advance, so this event is usually characterized by a lot of unscripted exchanges. There is then another period dedicated to government orders (15:00-17:30), followed by an hour to consider private members' business, either bills or motion (17:30-18:30), and finally the late show, or the adjournment debate, a period that gives members an opportunity to ask further questions to cabinet members before the House adjourns around 19:00 (14:30 on Fridays). Note that the House can always modify its schedule by special orders to extend its hours of operation.

Daily Order of Business:

Type of Debates	Daily program
Government Orders	300 minutes
Statement by Members	15 minutes
Oral Questions	45 minutes
Private Member's Business	60 minutes
Adjournment Debate	30 minutes

The Speaker of the House of Commons oversees the activity of the House. Although elected as a partisan MP, the Speaker is expected to perform his role and exercise his powers in a non-

partisan and impartial manner. One of the Speaker's primary tasks is to control the tenor of debate, as MPs frequently interrupt and respond to speeches with applause, cheers, comments, or jeers. This is particularly true during Oral Questions. The Speaker has the final say over the allocation of speaking time, which means, in theory, that MPs must simply stand and "catch the Speaker's eye" in order to be recognized to speak. This right was most recently reaffirmed in a 2013 ruling by Speaker Andrew Scheer. Scheer's ruling, coupled with the relatively loose regulations on the right to speak detailed in the *Standing Orders*, led Proksch and Slapin (2015, pp. 83-84) to conclude that the House of Commons is an open legislature where individual MPs can access speaking time without party approval.

However, our analysis suggests that the House of Commons is not as open to individual MPs as Proksch and Slapin conclude. While the *Standing Orders* contain no mechanism for parties to control speaking time in the House of Commons, in practice party lists exist and are the predominant method by which speaking time is allocated in the House of Commons (Scheer 2018, p. 166). First, at the beginning of every parliamentary session, an all-party agreement is negotiated among the recognized caucuses in the House of Commons to establish a speaking order during the different types of debates (i.e., government motions, private member's motions, question period, member statement, adjournment debates). Which party gets the first speaking slot and what order is followed thereafter is determined by how many seats they control in the House. This rotation order is then used by the Speaker to decide who gets to intervene during the debates. When it is a party's turn to speak, the Speaker follows a list to determine which member should be recognized. These party lists are developed behind closed doors by the party whips and delivered to the Speaker; who gets to speak is thus usually predetermined, while "bearing in mind the membership of the various recognized parties in the House, the right of reply, and the nature of the proceedings"

(Bosc and Gagnon 2017, ch. 13). The level of party control over the process is therefore both substantial and hidden from public scrutiny, as the process by which party whips allocate speaking slots is opaque.

Technically the Speaker is not bound to follow these advisory lists: indeed, speakers have repeatedly ruled over the last several decades that they retain the right to grant speaking time to whichever MP “catches their eye” (Bosc and Gagnon 2017, ch. 13). In fact, however, the allocation of speaking time through the party lists, which first began to be used in the 1970s, had already by the early 1980s become the rule (Scheer 2018, p 166). Conversely, the granting of speaking time to MPs who are not on the list has become the exception (Bosc and Gagnon 2017, ch. 11; Scheer 2018, pp. 163, 166). MPs are still required to stand up and catch the Speaker's eye if they wish to speak, even if they are on the list; however, this practice has largely become a formality, to the point that successive Speakers have had to remind MPs who were on the party lists that they cannot be recognized to speak unless they stand (Bosc and Gagnon 2017, ch. 13, footnote 7). It is even the case now that private member motions and statements are increasingly controlled by parties, who are taking advantage of these opportunities to further the party message, such that some MPs now use their individual speaking time to read speeches prepared for them by the office of the party leader (Blidook 2012, pp. 154-155).

The types of exchanges between members varies according to the daily program. During question period, for example, the interaction between parliamentarians is much more dynamic, as members are allowed to ask an initial question---followed by two supplementary questions---to ministers or assistant ministers (Bosc and Gagnon 2017, ch. 11). On the other hand, whenever a bill is first introduced in the House or during statements by members, only one person is recognized to speak at a time, and no debate is permitted. In most other circumstances when the House must

decide on a question, a motion needs to be formally introduced (and seconded) by a member; and such motions are usually debatable. Whenever one of these debates occur, the mover is allowed to make an introductory speech, and all other members are then permitted to ask questions or make relevant comments for a set period of time. The Speaker will recognize any members who wish to speak once, although movers can speak more than once. Whenever a member is addressing the House, no other member can interrupt their speech, unless a question of privilege or a point of order is raised. Depending on the rules, all members are allowed to speak between 10 and 20 minutes on any given motion, but certain provisions in the rules can force the House to dispose of a question after a specific amount of time (e.g., the previous question, closure, or time allocation).

The issue of floor access was most recently reviewed in 2013, when the Conservative government removed a backbench MP, Mark Warawa, from the party speaking list because he wished to speak on a motion related to abortion that ran contrary to the party's stated position. Warawa appealed to the Speaker on the grounds that his right to equal speaking time had been violated, while the Conservative Chief Whip in turn argued that speaking lists were an internal party matter that was of no concern to the Speaker. The Speaker upheld the rights of MPs to stand and “catch his eye,” and Warawa was subsequently able to speak on his motion (Scheer 2018, pp. 161-162). At the same time, the Speaker noted that the practice of allocating speaking time through party lists was “settled” practice that had served the House well and allowed the Speaker to regulate debate “in an orderly fashion” (Scheer 2018, p. 166). Thus, while this most recent precedent confirms that Canadian MPs retain the right to access speaking time without the approval of their party, it also reflects the extent to which party lists have become the standard method of allocating speaking time during the debates. As a result, we argue that the Canadian House of Commons

should be classified as a mixed system that significantly advantages party lists over backbench MPs. Our analysis of parliamentary speech below offers further support for this position.

What is the role of intra- and interparty politics in legislative debates?

In this section we examine the covariates of floor access in the Canadian House of Commons. To examine who speaks during the debates, we draw on data from the Linked Parliamentary Data Project (www.lipad.ca). The timeframe of our data covers the past six parliaments, beginning with the 36th Parliament in 1988 and ending with the 42nd in 2019. The rows in our data represent each sitting MP for each day the legislature was in session. This generates just over a million rows capturing the daily legislative participation of the 1211 Members to have served in this period. Table 2 reports descriptive statistics for key variables in our analysis. We have complete data for all variables except age, where year of birth is unavailable for 78 MPs (6%).

Table 2 About Here

On average, an MP in the House of Commons gives 0.6 speeches per day and says 168.7 words. The average MP is 51.9 years old and has served in the House for 6.4 years. Although women comprise just 21 percent of the House in the period of our study, and 26 percent of the House in the most recent parliament, they represent 50 percent of the cabinet since the 2015 election. The prime minister, Justin Trudeau, used a gender balanced cabinet to affirm his party's commitment to examine policy through a "gendered lens." We expect this initiative to generate a corresponding increase in floor access among female Liberal MPs.

Figure 1 summarizes the percentage of female MPs in each major party, as well as the percentage of these party's speeches and words that were uttered by women. The Conservative party in Figure 1 also encapsulates the two constituent parties—the Reform/Alliance and Progressive Conservative parties—which merged to create the Conservative party in 2003. The composition of party families in Canada is straightforward. The Conservative party is a conservative party, the Liberal party is a liberal party, the New Democratic Party (NDP) is a social democratic party, the Bloc Quebecois is a regionalist party, and the Green party is a green party. These categorizations are not contested by the parties or by experts.

Figure 1 About Here

The representation of women in the House increased among all major parties over the period of our study but does not approach 50 percent in any of the major parties or in parliament as a whole. Women comprised 13.7 percent of the House during the period 1988-1993 and 26.3 percent from 2015-2019. The Conservative party has the smallest proportion of female MPs at 15 percent over the entire period and 17.1 percent in 42nd Parliament. The NDP has the largest share at 31.7 percent over the entire period and 41.5 percent most recently. The Liberal party is in between the Conservatives and NDP, with 22.8 percent overall and 27.7 percent most recently. Given the seat counts of the parties in the most recent parliament, it is worth noting that 57 percent of the women in the House are Liberal, with about 20 percent belonging to each of the Conservative and New Democratic parties.

In terms of floor access and speech time, the female share within the Conservative party mirror their proportion of the party's caucus. From 1988-2019, about 14 percent of Conservative

speeches and words were spoken by women. Over the period of our study, floor access by female Liberal MPs is generally in line with their share of their party, but there is a slight discrepancy insofar as women comprised 23 percent of the Liberal caucus but delivered 20 percent of the party's speeches and words. The social democratic NDP was the closest major party to achieving gender parity, with about a third of their words and speeches being delivered by women.

In general, the evidence aligns with the conventional wisdom in Canada that women are underrepresented in the House of Commons and that left-leaning parties have higher shares of female representation than do conservative parties. We were surprised to find that Liberal women had an even lower share of floor interventions than their numbers would have indicated, given that each female Liberal MP was twice as likely as their male counterparts to be promoted to cabinet in the most recent parliament.

Seniority

A high rate of turnover is a distinguishing feature of the Canadian House of Commons (Docherty 1997, pp. 51-52; Kerby and Blidook 2011). The causes of turnover are multifaceted. Many MPs blame it on disaffection with the strong control exerted by parties and leaders. The consequence of this high turnover, in turn, is greater amateurism, which is thought to increase still further the influence of parties and leaders, as rank-and-file MPs lack the experience and confidence to push back against more established members (Docherty 1997, ch. 2). In the period of our study, 41 percent of the MPs were new in any given parliament, but that number ranged from a low of 14.5 percent in the 36th Parliament (1997-2000) to highs of 60 and 65 percent in the 42nd (2015-2019) and 35th Parliament (1993-1997), respectively. Most MPs begin their careers in the period of our analysis, and nearly all of those serve at least a four-year term.

How does a member's experience affect their floor access? Although seniority is not a criterion, either formally or informally, for recognition by the Speaker (Bosc and Gagnon 2017, ch. 13), there are reasons to expect that experience has some connection to higher profile roles within parties, including cabinets and shadow cabinets, which in turn generates more speaking opportunities for those MPs. We therefore expect less experienced members to speak less, on average, than more experienced members.

Figure 2 summarizes the level of floor access for parliamentarians with different levels of experience. The results are summarized separately for men and women. For each MP, experience is calculated as the total number of previous days within all terms served by that MP. If an MP served 1100 days in the 1970s and then returned to politics during the period of our study, their experience would be equal to those 1100 days plus whatever number of days they had served to that point in their most recent term. In Figure 2, we summarize experience in years.

Figure 2 About Here

The evidence in Figure 2 indicates that experience is weakly associated with access to the floor, at least at the earliest stages of a career. Notice that for both women and men the number of speeches per day increases from about 0.5 speeches per day for those with very little experience to about 0.6 speeches per day for those with at least four years of experience. This is not a substantially significant difference at the individual-level, but it is a statistically reliable property of the data, as we see in the next section. This result is also unsurprising. MPs take some time to get up to speed in the House, and higher profile roles are awarded, on average, to MPs with at least some experience. If anything, the data does seem to confirm a levelling off effect in terms of floor

access: past a certain point, the length of legislative careers do not seem to improve MPs' odds of speaking more in the House.

In sum, the evidence presented in this analysis confirms that legislative career length slightly increases the likelihood of making legislative speeches. But this effect is stronger over the first few years of a member's career, while they are more likely to be socialized to parliamentary practices.

Multivariate Analysis:

Table 3 summarizes the results of estimating floor access as a function of MP and party characteristics. Table 3.A summarizes models predicting daily number of speeches, and the models in 3.B predict the average daily numbers of words for each MP-role-party combination. We use negative binomial regression to predict counts of speeches, and we use OLS to predict counts of words.¹ Both models use a stepwise strategy building outward from individual-level to party-level characteristics. Thus, Model 1 predicts floor access on the basis of age and gender, while Model 5 includes experience, legislative role, caucus size, and party family. For Model 5, we also plot the marginal effects in Figures 3.A and 3.B.

Table 3.A and 3.B About Here

¹ Unlike most other chapters in this book, we do not include a term for time because our observations are speaker-day dyads rather than, for example, speaker-session dyads. In predicting the number of words spoken, we find the same results when we predict the daily number of words spoken by each MP. For consistency with other chapters, we present here the average daily number of words spoken by each MP in different roles and parties. We condition the MP averages on roles and parties because both are subject to change in different ways for different MPs.

Figure 3.A and 3.B About Here

Notice in both tables that we find virtually no difference in the floor access of men and women, even if women tend on average to utter slightly fewer words when controlling for parliamentary positions. At baseline, however, there are no statistically significant differences between genders.

We find a small but persistent and non-linear effect for age. Among younger MPs, each additional year of age slightly increases the daily number of speeches they deliver, but the more pronounced effect is the one running in the opposite direction among older MPs. Here, each additional year of age decreases their level of access to the floor. Notice from Model 2 that the effect of age persists even when controlling for experience. As it turns out, experience also matters, but only slightly, and only when the measure of experience is logged. As we saw in Figure 2, experience increases somewhat the level of floor access among new MPs, but the effects levels off quickly so that experience has no additional effect for MPs after their first three years.

As we expected, the most significant predictor of floor access is parliamentary role. These are introduced in Model 3. The reference category is government backbencher. Some of these results are not surprising. For example, we find that levels of floor access are greatest among frontbench MPs in the government, opposition, and other parties. Perhaps more surprising, however, is the finding that all parliamentary role categories—except independents—have more floor access than government backbenchers. In other words, government backbenchers make both fewer and shorter speeches, when compared to other party members in the House. One possible explanation is that the leadership of stronger and more successful parties has to concede less

speaking time in order to maintain the loyalty of other members than does the leadership of smaller and weaker parties, who are not as able to offer as many forms of patronage or as much electoral security.

Finally, we find evidence in Model 5 of differences between parties, but the size of these effects is not as significant as for parliamentary roles. The Liberal party is the reference category. Notice from the coefficient for the Conservative party that Canada's two main parties—the Liberals and Conservatives—are nearly indistinguishable in terms of floor access. MPs in the social democratic NDP have only slightly more access than do Liberals and Conservatives. The largest coefficient is for the Green party, but the Green party is extremely small, as we discussed earlier. When it is represented at all, it is comprised of only one MP for most of the period in our analysis. Overall, then, we conclude that the family of an MP's political party contributes little to explaining their speaking time in the Canadian house.

Both plots in Figure 3 confirm the relationships described above by reporting the marginal effects of the full specification of Model 5 from Table 3A-3B. Once again, we find that gender and age play a very small role in explaining floor access and speech length in the Canadian House of Commons. We also confirm that government backbenchers intervene the least during the debate: compared to ordinary members government and opposition frontbenchers make on average one more speech per day when the House is in session.

Country Specific Section

The analysis above and these new data permit empirical scrutiny of some of the most oft-discussed claims in Canadian political science about the trajectory of speaking time—and, indeed, of life in the House of Commons. While we find little evidence in recent parliaments of gender

differences in access to the floor among male and female MPs, we do find some evidence that experience matters, and we find considerable evidence that parliamentary role matters. We also find that the inequity of floor access appears to increase between the front and back benches of political parties as those parties get closer to power. As a result, backbench MPs in the government party have the least access to the floor. This merits further investigation.

The central role of parties is apparent in our findings. In the years following Canada's Confederation in 1867, the House of Commons agenda was largely influenced by private members, who had ample opportunities to intervene during the debates, to introduce their own bills, motions, or amendments. However, over time, these opportunities were greatly limited as government business grew in importance. The time set aside for members to discuss their own motions or bills was gradually curtailed over the last century, following the introduction of more restrictive parliamentary procedures, such as time allocation and closure (Godbout 2020). The rights of backbenchers to speak during the parliamentary debates was also severely restricted, so that today ordinary members have only a limited number of opportunities to directly influence the legislative agenda (Bosc and Gagnon 2017, ch. 10).

Given the control over speaking time established by political parties, we expect a member's access to the floor to correspond with their position within political parties. This will be especially true for members of the cabinet, who should be given more access to the floor. The prime minister is the apex of the system and is the only member of the House with a dedicated bureaucratic agency devoted exclusively to managing his political affairs (Savoie 1999, Aucoin 1986). The prime minister appoints a cabinet, typically comprised of between 25 and 35 ministers, who each serve as the political head of a bureaucratic department. Appointments to cabinet are lucrative and prestigious, and the relatively high ratio of cabinet ministers to MPs in the House of Commons is

thought to be one of the factors contributing to the dominant position of the prime minister within the Canadian system. In effect, the real possibility of one day receiving a cabinet appointment incentivizes MPs to curry favour with the party leader (Kam 2009, ch. 2). In making cabinet appointments, the prime minister has wide discretion, but is generally understood to be constrained by the imperative of ensuring that region, language, and ethnic groups are represented (White 2005). As we discussed in the previous section, Prime Minister Trudeau appointed the first ever gender balanced cabinet in 2015. The prime minister also appoints parliamentary secretaries (or assistant ministers) who are not members of cabinet, but who assist ministers in specific portfolios. Parliamentary secretaries often field questions on a minister's behalf from other members in the House of Commons. In the *Standing Orders*, allocations of speaking time for cabinet ministers also extend to "parliamentary secretaries acting on behalf of a Minister."

The Official Opposition in Canada is the main party tasked with holding the government to account in the House of Commons. The Official Opposition has almost always been the second largest party in the House, though, more generally, it is the largest party not in government. The structure of the Official Opposition mirrors that of the government. The leader of the opposition opposes the prime minister, and an unofficial "shadow cabinet" of opposition critics challenges each cabinet minister. The *Standing Orders* reflect this adversarial structure in allocating concurrent provisions for the speaking time of the prime minister and the leader of the opposition, and again concurrently for ministers (or secretaries) introducing government orders and for the opposition MPs responding to those orders. The leader of the opposition has a number of privileges that other MPs do not have, but lacks the disciplining mechanisms, such as the appointment power and a dedicated central agency, available to the prime minister.

There are no special provisions in the *Standing Orders* for the leaders of other parties, except to exclude them from serving as Speaker of the House, and in passing mention to whether they support or oppose any government motion regarding time allocation to a given debate. Only parties with more than 12 MPs are recognized officially and entitled to financial support from parliament. Nonetheless, the speaker generally accepts the status of any parties into which members organize themselves. The speaker normally allocates speaking time to parties based on their proportion of seats in the House, which the parties then allocate internally. Independent members are called after the recognized parties have exhausted their speaking time, and therefore independents have very limited speaking opportunities.

Members today can speak on the floor of the House to address the content of a motion being considered (e.g., a bill, an amendment, a procedural motion), and these motions can either originate from the government (i.e., government member business) or from private members (i.e., private member business). As we saw, the debates are mostly dominated by government orders, but opposition party leaders also control the agenda in around two dozen “supply days” of the annual budgetary cycle. During these allotted days, opposition motions have precedent over government business, and almost any question can be chosen for debate by the opposition party leaders. Members can also speak when no motion is being explicitly considered, such as during Member Statements or Question Period. Backbench MPs from the government and opposition can be recognized to speak on a government motion, or they can propose their own motion during the private member business hour, the fifteen minutes Member Statement period, the Question period, or the Adjournment debates at the end of the daily sitting. It follows that ministers or assistant ministers will have more opportunities to speak during the debates, since most of the daily program concerns government orders. Of course, party members should expect to get more opportunities to

speak, when compared to independents. The same can be said about the frontbench of the other opposition parties. Although the Speaker usually decides who may speak according to a list of interventions provided by party whips, including for private member business, the Speaker may on rare occasions reserve the right to allow MPs who are not on the lists to speak if they "catch the Speaker's eye." Usually, the sponsor of a motion gets to speak first, even if only to move the motion which begins debate. During Question Period, the leader of the opposition also gets to intervene first, followed by other party leaders, ministers, and shadow cabinet members.

Conclusions

Legislative debate in the Canadian House of Commons is to a large extent the purview of party leaders and frontbenchers. While it is unsurprising that frontbenchers and party leaders would play a significant role during the debates, the degree to which backbenchers and independents are marginalized is noteworthy. Based on these findings, we argue that while there are in theory significant opportunities for individual MPs to access legislative speaking time without party approval, in practice daily debate in the House of Commons is controlled by the party leadership through the party lists. Backbench and independent MPs' opportunities to break free of this control exist but are rare. Access to the floor in the Canadian House of Commons is in theory open to backbench and independent MPs, as Proksch and Slapin (2015, pp. 83-84) note. In practice, however, parties control floor access to an overwhelming extent.

Among the potential factors impacting speaking time, we found that gender did not play a significant role. Conversely, the length of parliamentary tenure appeared to have a concave effect, with MPs speaking more once they have been in the House of Commons for a few years. Although this effect tempered and in some cases even reversed for MPs who have been in the House for

multiple terms, the relatively low number of MPs who stayed on for such a length of time limits our ability to make major claims about the effect of serving multiple terms on the likelihood of intervening in legislative debate.

Notably, government backbenchers are among the groups which are least likely to speak in the House. We see at least two potential explanations for this finding, both of which could be pursued in future research: first, if speaking time is one of several resources party leaders can allocate to backbenchers to keep them loyal and content, the government has more parliamentary resources to distribute to its backbenchers (including positions on parliamentary committees, travelling delegations, etc.) and thus less need to ensure that backbenchers can access limited speaking opportunities. Secondly, since much of the opposition's work is to question the actions of the government, it follows that frontbenchers would take up the great bulk of the government's speaking time as they defend and explain their departments' actions. Nevertheless, the marginalization of government backbenchers, who speak less than any other group of MPs aside from independents, is an important finding and one which deserves further exploration.

That being said, given the significant control which Canadian parties exercise over legislative debate, we would expect that they are able to ensure that loyal MPs are given more opportunities to intervene during the debates than MPs who are likely to dissent from the party line. Future studies could explore the degree to which this is the case, especially since it would provide a further test of how open the House of Commons truly is to interventions from all MPs, rather than just those approved by the party whips.

Our analysis provides insight into the process of legislative debate in Canada. Despite attempts by past Speakers to ensure that all MPs can speak in the House, we find that access to the floor of the House is largely controlled by parties, and that positions within parties provide the

most significant explanation for the allocation of speaking time. In speech, therefore, as in most other aspects of parliamentary life, we find that Canadian parties play an outsized role in shaping the scope and character of democratic representation in Parliament.

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Tables and Figures

Table 1: Canadian Federal Election Results (Seats by Party), 1988-2019

Party	Elections									
	1988	1993	1997	2000	2004	2006	2008	2011	2015	2019
Liberal	83	177	155	172	135	103	77	34	184	157
New Democratic Party	43	9	21	13	19	29	37	103	44	24
Conservative	-	-	-	-	99	124	143	166	99	121
Progressive Conservative*	169	2	20	12	-	-	-	-	-	-
Reform/ Alliance*	0	52	60	66	-	-	-	-	-	-
Bloc Québécois	N/A	54	44	38	54	51	49	4	10	32
Other/ Independent	0	1	1	0	1	1	2	1	1	4

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for Key Variables

	Mean/Pct	Std. Dev	Min	Max
<u>Outcomes</u>				
Speeches (per Day)	0.6	1.57	0	116
Words (per Day)	168.7	568.62	0	49898
<u>MP Characteristics</u>				
Gender (Female)	20.7%	--	0	1
Age (Years)	51.8	9.7	20	81.9
Experience (Years)	5.9	5.6	0	39
<u>Role</u>				
Government Backbench	34.8%	--	0	1
Other Party Frontbench	16.9%	--	0	1
Opposition Backbench	12.1%	--	0	1
Opposition Frontbench	9.7%	--	0	1
Cabinet	8.9%	--	0	1
Parliamentary Secretary	8.9%	--	0	1
Other Party Backbench	8.0%	--	0	1
Independent	0.8%	--	0	1
<u>Party Size</u>				
Seats	113.7	54.02	1	183
<u>Party Family</u>				
Liberal	39.4%	--	0	1
Conservative	37.5%	--	0	1
Social Democratic	12.7%	--	0	1
Regional	9.5%	--	0	1
OtherNone	0.8%	--	0	1
Green	0.1%	--	0	1

Source: Linked Parliament Data Project (www.lipad.ca)

Table 3.A: Predicting Number of Daily Parliamentary Speeches

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4		Model 5						
	coef.	z	coef.	z	coef.	z	coef.	z	coef.	z					
<u>Gender</u>															
Female	.026	(0.45)	.052	(0.93)	-.040	(-0.90)	-.036	(-0.79)	-.072	(-1.77)					
Age	.028	(1.71)	.024	(1.50)	*	.015	(1.05)	.035	(1.93)	.035	(2.03)	*			
Age^2	-.001	(-2.02)	*	-.001	(-2.01)	**	-.001	(-1.44)	*	-.001	(-2.35)	*			
<u>Seniority</u>															
Days in Office (Log)			.093	(4.40)	***	0.038	(2.32)	*	0.041	(2.48)	*	.044	(2.74)	**	
<u>Role</u>															
Government Backbencher					--	--			--	--					
Government Frontbencher					1.372	(18.24)	***	1.364	(18.07)	***	1.364	(18.09)	***		
Opposition Frontbencher					1.093	(20.02)	***	.985	(11.51)	***	.976	(11.83)	***		
Opposition Backbencher					0.749	(14.71)	***	.656	(8.47)	***	.607	(8.59)	***		
Other Party Frontbencher					1.010	(19.11)	***	.845	(7.61)	***	.829	(7.65)	***		
Other Party Backbencher					.802	(13.58)	***	.651	(5.39)	***	.664	(6.17)	***		
Parliamentary Secretary					.681	(12.11)	***	.673	(12.06)	***	.673	(12.22)	***		
Independent					-.206	(-1.09)		-.418	(-1.82)		.701	(2.69)	**		
<u>Caucus</u>															
Party Size								-.001	(-1.44)		-.001	(-1.46)			
<u>Party Family</u>															
Liberal										--	--				
Conservative										.039	(0.62)				
Social Democratic										0.262	(3.85)	***			
Regional										-.228	(-2.57)	*			
Green										1.405	(7.22)	***			
Other										-1.071	(-6.02)	***			
_cons	-1.05	(-2.63)	***	-1.565	(-4.04)	***	-1.736	(-4.91)	***	-1.513	(-375)	***	-1.580	(-450)	***
N	1000199			1000199			1000199			1000199			1000199		
Groups	1134			1134			1134			1134			1134		
AIC	1939162			1937762			1901024			1900932			1897864		

Z scores in parentheses
 * p<0.05. ** p<0.01. *** p<0.001

Notes: Negative Binomial Regression with clustered standard errors

Source: Linked Parliamentary Data Project (www.lipad.ca)

Table 3.B: Predicting Number of Daily Words Spoken in Parliament

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4		
	coef.	t	coef.	t	coef.	t	coef.	t	
<u>Gender</u>									
Female	-6.500	(-0.70)	-17.371	(-2.32) *	-17.354	(-2.31) *	-20.855	(-3.03)	
Age	2.113	(0.79)	2.742	(1.57) **	2.691	(1.13)	2.668	(1.18)	
Age^2	-.038	(-1.50)	-.040	(-2.25) ***	-.0394664	(-1.74) *	-.039	(-1.80)	
<u>Role</u>									
Government Backbencher			--	--	--	--	--	--	
Government Frontbencher			86.766	(8.81) ***	86.067	(8.86) ***	86.081	(8.89)	
Opposition Frontbencher			176.214	(19.18) ***	143.833	(9.49) ***	137.868	(9.08)	
Opposition Backbencher			103.360	(12.16) ***	73.867	(5.30) ***	60.879	(4.45)	
Other Party Frontbencher			184.868	(18.49) ***	137.582	(7.46) ***	128.689	(6.85)	
Other Party Backbencher			118.514	(11.78) ***	75.563	(3.74) ***	73.479	(3.82)	
Parliamentary Secretary			89.462	(13.12) ***	88.774	(13.34) ***	88.652	(13.30)	
Independent			-23.671	(-1.53)	-85.736	(-2.93) **	118.099	(4.74)	
<u>Caucus</u>									
Party Size					-.397	(-2.44) *	-.458	(-2.77)	
<u>Party Family</u>									
Liberal							--	--	
Conservative							6.224	(0.72)	
Social Democratic							47.141	(3.16)	
Regional							-48.220	(-2.72)	
Green							351.573	(3.13)	
Other							-210.749	(-11.16)	
_cons	168.430	(2.47) *	56.148	(0.26)	121.284	(1.80)	128.380	(2.01)	
N	1000232		1000232		1000232		1000232		
Groups	1134		1134		1134		1134		
R-squared	.015		.017		.263		.295		

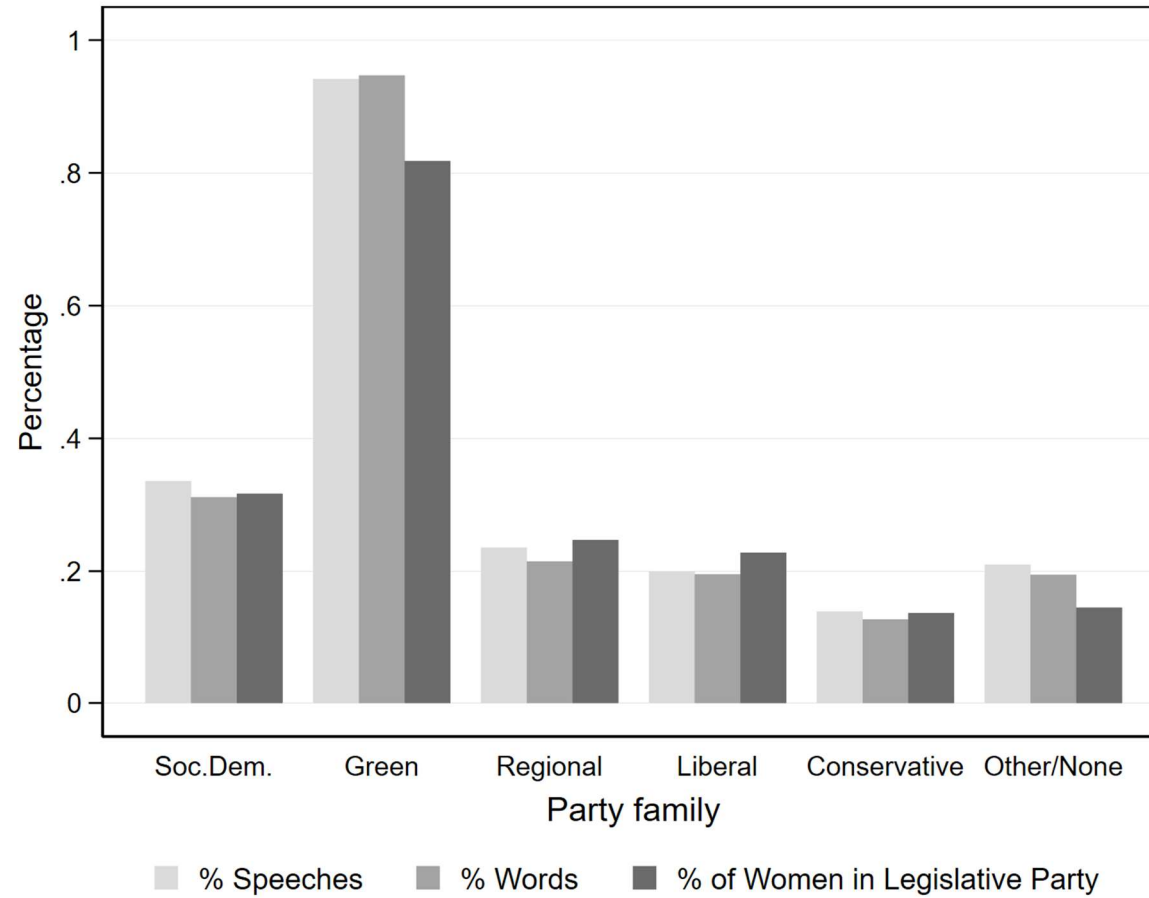
t scores in parentheses

* p<0.05. ** p<0.01. *** p<0.001

Notes: OLS Regression with clustered standard errors

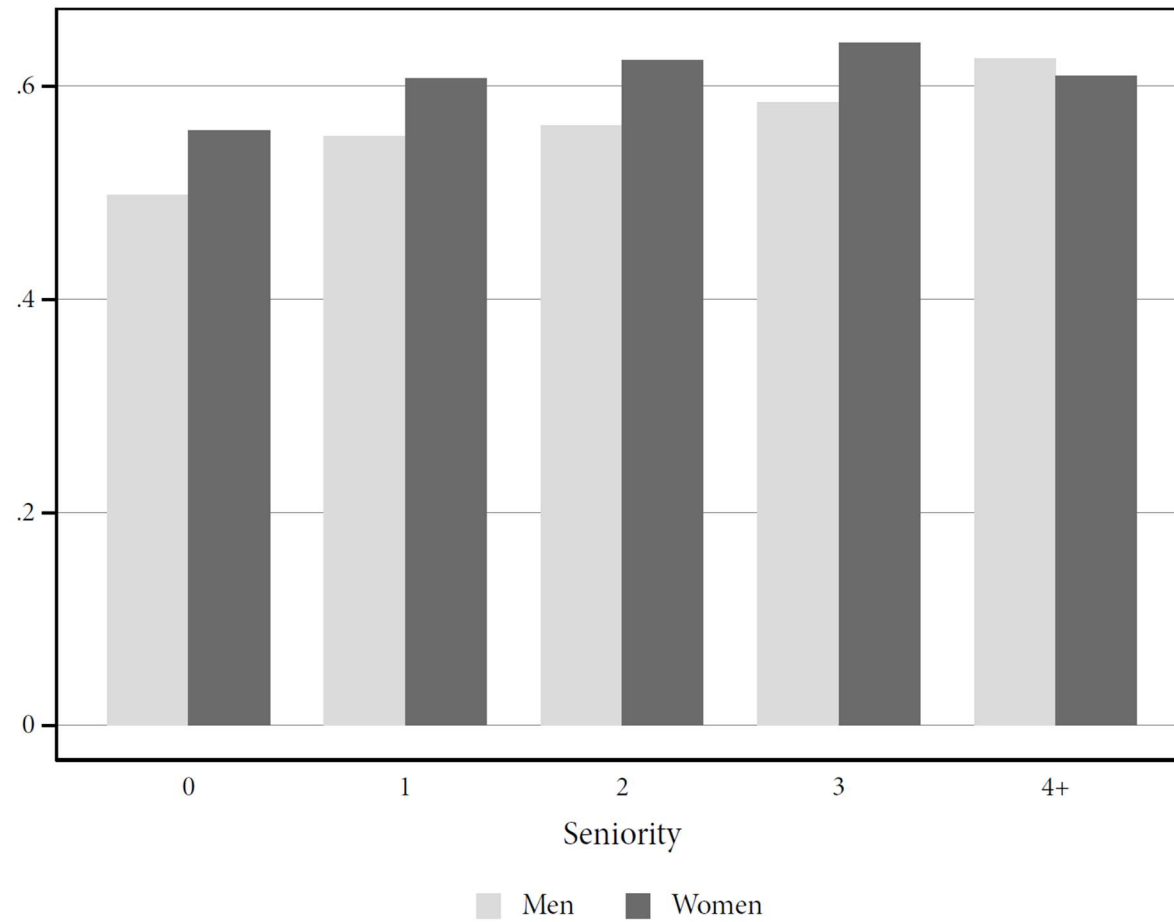
Source: Linked Parliamentary Data Project (www.lipad.ca)

Figure 1: Gender and Political Representation in the Canadian House of Commons, 1988-2019



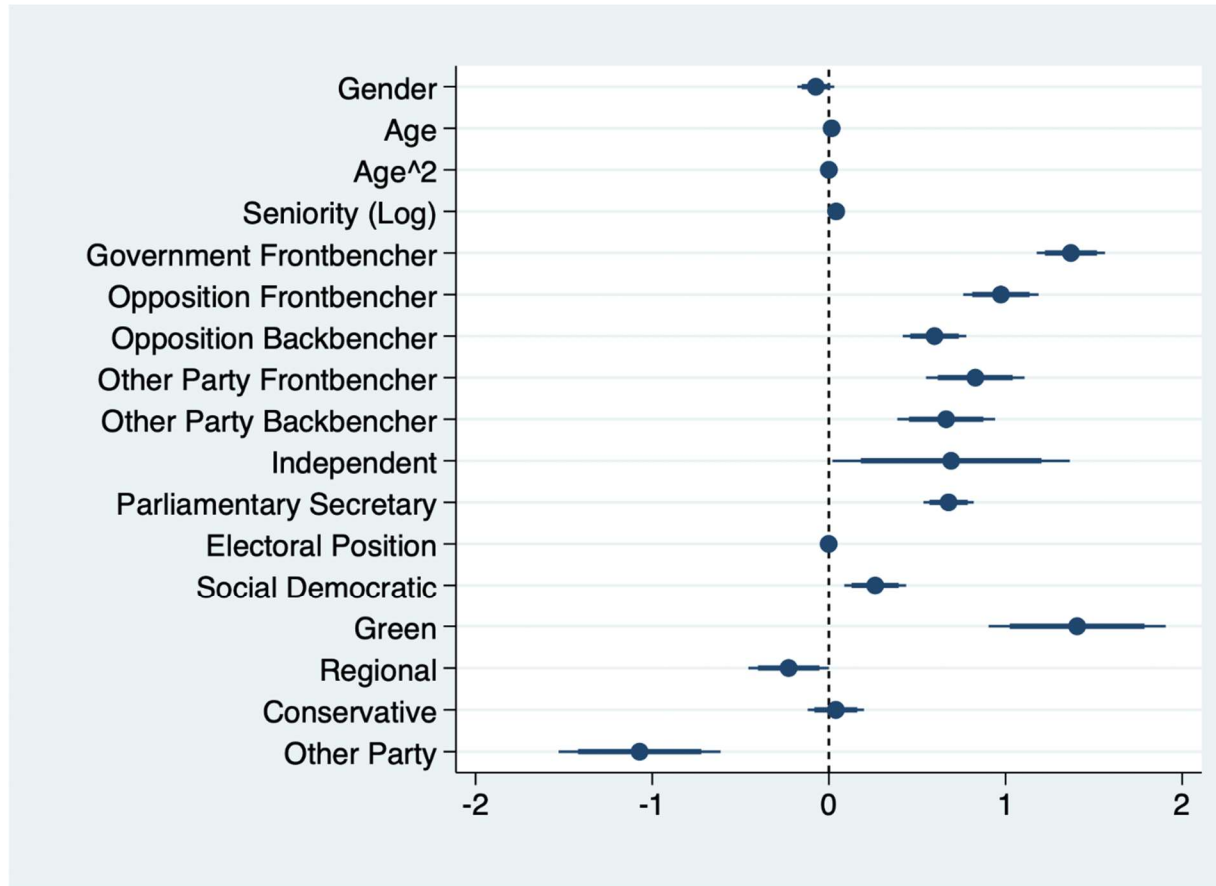
Source: Linked Parliamentary Data Project (www.lipad.ca)

Figure 2: Number of Daily Speeches in the Canadian House of Commons as a Function of Gender and Seniority, 1988-2019



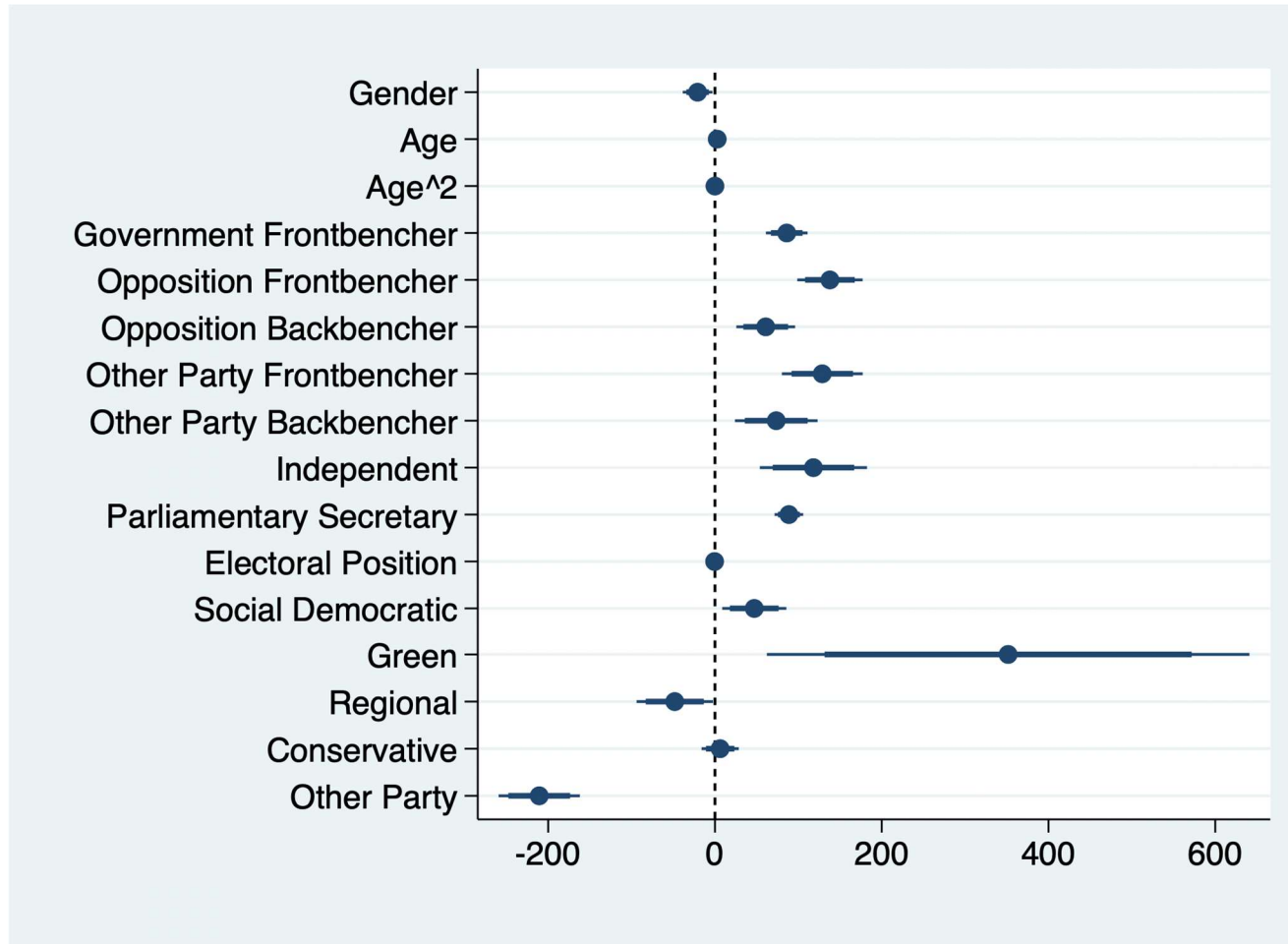
Source: Linked Parliamentary Data Project (www.lipad.ca)

Figure 3.A: Marginal Effects from Full Model Predicting Daily Number of Speeches



Source: Linked Parliamentary Data Project (www.lipad.ca)

Figure 3.B: Marginal Effects from Full Model Predicting Average Daily Number of Words Spoken



Source: Linked Parliamentary Data Project (www.lipad.ca)