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Complex Politics: A Quantitative Semantic and Topological Analysis of UK House of Commons Debates*

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Abstract: This study is a first, exploratory attempt to use quantitative semantics techniques and topological analysis to analyze systemic patterns arising in a complex political system. In particular, we use a rich data set covering all speeches and debates in the UK House of Commons between 1975 and 2014. By the use of dynamic topic modeling (DTM) and topological data analysis (TDA) we show that both members and parties feature specific roles within the system, consistent over time, and extract global patterns indicating levels of political cohesion. Our results provide a wide array of novel hypotheses about the complex dynamics of political systems, with valuable policy applications.

*This paper has been designed during the 2015 Santa Fe Institute Complex Systems Summer School. Data pre-processing and post-processing had been performed by Stefano Gurciullo and Michael Smallegan. Dynamic Topic Modeling has been done by Sebastian Poledna, while Alice Patania dealt with Topological Data Analysis. Daniel Hedblom interpreted DTM results, Federico Battiston processed them to obtain insights for individual political agents. Model selection was done by Mara Pereda Garcia and Bahattin Tolga Oztan. The manuscript has been written by Stefano Gurciullo, Michael Smallegan, Mara Pereda Garcia, Daniel Hedblom, Federico Battiston, Bahattin Tolga Oztan. Alexander Herzog, Peter John, Slava Mikhaylov are responsible for the data extraction and the preliminary design of the paper. Coordination and team tasks have been managed by Stefano Gurciullo. We thank Nilton Cardoso for his support during the preliminary implementation of the research project. Our gratitude goes also towards the organizers, faculty and participants of the Summer School, who provided an inspirational context and valuable feedback for our project. Correspondence regarding the paper can be sent to stefano.gurciullo.11@ucl.ac.uk.

1 Introduction

Complexity science has grown to become an important paradigm within social science. Seminal work, ranging from Axelrod’s studies of the emergence of cooperation [1] to Arthur’s conceptualization of the economy as a complex system [2], has had a significant impact in sociology and economics. Applications of complex systems methodologies in these two fields have made it possible to analyze interesting real world phenomena such as status-seeking in online communities [3] and financial shock contagion and impact [4] in a way which would have been impossible with traditional tools.

Compared to such advances, political science and public policy studies appear to have been less exposed to complexity science. While theoretical studies depicting political systems as complex system do exist [5], empirical investigations are still few and far between. The reason is straightforward: lack of data has prevented researchers from uncovering the complex dynamics behind political affairs. The trend is, however, changing thanks to novel data sets and advances in the processing of unstructured information.

This study is a first, exploratory attempt to contribute to this line of work. We investigate systemic patterns arising in the UK House of Commons by applying quantitative semantics techniques and topological analysis on its debates between 1975 and 2014. We discover that both members and parties feature specific roles within the system, consistent over time and providing room for novel hypotheses about the complex dynamics of political systems.

Four more sections follow these paragraphs. First, we contextualize our research on the grounds of past scholarly attempts of defining political institutions and policy as complex systems. Second, we introduce the Hansard political speeches dataset, presenting its key summary statistics and features. The section is followed by an explanation of the methods used to extract patterns from the data, namely Dynamic Topic Modelling (DTM) and Topological Data Analysis (TDA). Section 5 shows and interprets the results of this work, with an elaboration of potential hypotheses explaining them. We conclude by summarizing our findings and providing routes for future work.

2 Background: Complexity and Political Science

The *structuralist* perspective is a well established paradigm in political theory. It views politics as a system of interacting agents aimed at the distribution of power and the management of some aspects of public social life [6, 7]. Since its beginning, the structuralist school has experienced several declinations [8, 9], yet it has not met formally complex systems studies until recently. Jervis [10] and Rhee [11] are among the first to assume that political life behaves as a self-organizing system pressured by macro-evolutionary forces. According to these scholars, political institutions change both their nature and surroundings to strive, influenced by the aggregate dynamics and interests of the actors who form them and the stakeholders of their decision-making process.

The view is indeed interesting and worth exploring, yet current endeavors have only fueled a narrative for general recommendations for the policy maker; little progress has been made in terms of quantitative analysis and rigorous testing of hypotheses. The main reason for this is that it is hard to empirically identify policy effects in the presence of non-linear feedback phenomena [12]. Instead, the practitioner is advised not to rely on a single strategy but to diversify their policy actions [13, 14].

Of more interest to this paper are the attempts to account for policy dynamics with the punctuated equilibrium hypothesis. Works by Baumgartner and Jones [15] and Workman et al. [16] suggest that policy actors are surrounded by an enormous amount of signals that is relevant for their decision-making processes. Yet, such actors are affected by cognitive constraints that render them boundedly rational [17], leading them to perform their decision-making by ignoring most of the signals and concentrate only on a few. The result is a ‘policy punctuated’ type of dynamics: the attention of policy makers would be strictly focused on a few issues, with minimal attention to others [5]. Sudden changes followed by systemic positive feedback (the so-called ‘bandwagon effects’ [18, 19]) would cause shifts of priorities in policy agendas. The cause of such mutations may originate from any of the external signals that actors are subject to: economic trends, opinion polls, new governmental appointments.

The frameworks mentioned are valuable in understanding policy dynamics from a complex systems narrative, however, few are the efforts to empirically validate them, being limited mainly to qualitative investigations [20]. Differently from other social sciences, the study of public policy eschewed the possibility to gather the right kind of data to quantitatively understand these phenomena.

In this paper we propose an approach to explore policy dynamics - thus allowing the testing of hypotheses on its nature and patterns - based on the processing of information coming from unstructured textual data. We focus on a specific political institution, the House of Commons of the United Kingdom.

On a first inspection, the House of Commons may appear as a very structured, hierarchical institution. Top-down organization in the form of agenda setting and debate management would make its legislative power quite orderly. In line with the literature cited, we challenge this view by stating that an orderly hierarchical structure coexists with a complex dynamics of political interests, that eventually are crystallized in the form of policy actions through bills. Each member of the House possesses a unique set of interests and preferred political issues, which are dispersed through information dissemination and assimilation. We identify and measure those by analyzing their very speeches and debates, contained in a novel data set presented in the next section.

3 The data

Our data is composed of the minutes of all debates occurred at the UK House of Commons between the years 1974-2014. These are extracted from a larger dataset that features speeches dating back from 1935. As outlined in Escher [21], all the information has been extracted from a transparency

website known as TheyWorkForYou.com, which provides access to UK parliamentary records and other Member of Parliament (MP) information. The information has been downloaded in XML format and processed in Python, where all parts of speech but names and adjectives have been removed. Overall, the dataset contains over 3.7 million individual speeches. In order to allow a dynamic modeling of the data, we divide the observations by parliamentary sessions, which commence with the initial speech of the Queen to the House and ranging about 12 calendar months. We obtain a total of 37 sessions, with an average of about 4800 contributions per session. The number of parliamentary speakers revolves around 630 at each time unit.

To have a sense of the nature of the speeches, Table 1 shows their median length (measured in number of words), as well as the 10th and 90th percentiles. It can be observed that their length distributions start being skewed more to the right during the 2001-2002 session, accompanied by an increase in the median. The novel pattern indicates a phase shift in the parliamentary activities, perhaps first caused by the concern for post-9/11 terrorism activities, then to economic and social issues affecting the country during the periods pre- and post-financial and debt crisis.

We assume that parliamentary speeches are manifestations of the political interests of the speakers. This implies that by extracting and analyzing their semantic information - i.e. knowing what and how much a speaker talks about a determined policy topic in relation to others - we are able to attain insights on their roles and attitudes within the House of Commons decision-making system. Our goal is reached with the application of dynamic topic modeling and topological data analysis on the dataset, as illustrated in the following section.

Session ID	Year	Number of Speakers	Number of speeches	Median length of speeches	10th percentile	90th percentile
4701	1974-1975	623	57299	152	24	330
4702	1975-1976	627	59699	149	22	321
4703	1976-1977	618	49036	155	23	326
4704	1977-1978	626	55888	154	22	323
4705	1978-1979	583	24338	162	25	331
4802	1980-1981	617	46559	157	21	331
4803	1981-1982	624	51475	154	22	331
4804	1982-1983	608	34148	153	20	332
4901	1983-1984	644	67329	152	20	335
4902	1984-1985	640	57241	155	19	342
4903	1985-1986	639	57578	158	20	345
4904	1986-1987	628	34633	153	17	349
5001	1987-1988	642	71333	157	17	349
5002	1988-1989	647	57016	160	17	360
5003	1989-1990	648	53349	163	17	358
5004	1990-1991	642	50259	166	19	361
5005	1991-1992	614	22313	157	17	355
5101	1992-1993	645	70305	169	19	356
5102	1993-1994	644	45979	160	17	338
5103	1994-1995	642	45202	165	18	345
5104	1995-1996	629	43544	168	18	353
5105	1996-1997	609	24329	169	18	358
5201	1997-1998	652	74796	169	18	358
5202	1998-1999	644	47767	172	17	369
5203	1999-2000	644	54965	166	17	362
5204	2000-2001	621	25692	176	17	379
5301	2001-2002	645	55227	273	28	1572
5302	2002-2003	645	52591	256	30	1330
5303	2003-2004	636	47947	259	34	1400
5304	2004-2005	611	20549	262	31	1379.4
5401	2005-2006	634	64507	254	35	1269
5402	2006-2007	628	40142	264	39	1356.9
5403	2007-2008	630	50175	254	30	1234.6
5404	2008-2009	622	39883	253	35	1322
5405	2009-2010	596	21452	239	36	1230
5502	2012-2013	639	53975	222	44	1104.6
5503	2013-2014	634	46467	225	46	1165
Average		630	47973	187	24	631

Table 1: UK House of Commons Debates - Summary statistics.

4 Methods

4.1 Dynamic Topic Modeling

The political interests of House of Commons speakers are latent variables which, we assume, manifest themselves in the debates. Traditional approaches in the social sciences would attempt to unearth them through methods such as word counts and tag clouds [22,23]. These would not yield valuable insights for our goal, as they are not able to provide a clear-cut, definite range of semantic sets - policy topics - that change over time. For this reason, we adopt an unsupervised machine learning approach known as Dynamic Topic Modeling (DTM).

Topic models are a family of generative probabilistic models aimed at classifying co-occurring words in text corpora into specific groups or distributions [24,25]. DTM, more specifically, captures the evolution of topics in a sequentially organized corpus of documents. Given a T number of topics pre-defined by the user, DTM assigns the probability that a words appears in any of them by the use of a state space model, which incorporates assumptions about the shape of the topics distributions. For a detailed mathematical account of the model and the respective algorithm, see [26].

Empirical applications of topic models have shown that the inferred topic distributions often feature semantically valuable content [27]. In a previous work, the application of Latent Dirichlet Allocation, a specific kind of topic model, on House of Commons speeches has demonstrated that the resulting topics conform very closely with policy categories as produced by human-based content analysis [28]. We depart from this finding and extend it to identify policy topics and how their composition and nature mutate over time. The work flow is as follows:

1. The corpus of speeches is split into 37 time slices, corresponding to the parliamentary sessions. For each session, all speeches made by the same MP are aggregated into a single document.
2. A vocabulary and a term-document matrix are produced out of the corpus, and fed to the DTM script. The number of topics T is 15. Appendix A explains the cross-validation approach followed to determine it.
3. DTM results are used to evaluate a dynamic probability vector for each MP at each time slice. In other words, for each session that a speaker takes part to, the probability that his speeches are classified to any of the 15 topics is calculated.
4. House of Commons speakers' probability vectors are analyzed to identify patterns and roles across individuals and parties.

The corpus pre- and post-processing is performed in Python. The DTM model is run on a C script.

4.2 Topological Data Analysis

Topological Data Analysis (TDA) is a relatively new area of research first introduced in 2002 by Gunnar Carlsson [29]. The basic assumption of TDA is that any kind of data can be seen as a sampling of a manifold, which can be studied using topological tools that are sensitive to both large and small scale patterns. In this study we decided to use a partial clustering method based on the Mapper algorithm first introduced in [30] and later commercialized by the company Ayasdi whose main product has the Mapper algorithm at its core. This algorithm has been used before to study voting behaviors of the U.S. House of Representatives in [31].

The basic idea of the Mapper algorithm is to perform clustering across different scales, and then track how these clusters change as the scale varies. To do so a distance and a filtering function are defined on the data. The procedure of Mapper is very simple. At first, an open covering of the data set X is constructed according to the filtering function $f : X \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$. The image $f(X)$ is divided into intervals I_k of the same range ρ , such that each interval overlaps with the consequent one. Afterwards the distance function is used to cluster the subsets of data in $X_k = f^{-1}(I_k)$, and each cluster is represented in the constructed network by a single point. Edges in the network represent clusters in consequent bins that have points in common.

To capture the temporal dynamics of the speakers, we used the Mapper algorithm with time as a filter function to construct a network representing the main features of the dataset. The choice of a discrete filter forced us to slightly adjust the algorithm: instead of intervals $I_k = \{t_k\}$ we used single time steps. Notice that given the particular nature of our data, the absence of an overlap in the defined intervals did not imply that the subsets X_k had no points in common, since each politician can be identified in more than one session depending on the term he was elected in. The choice of the distance function is motivated by the kind of analysis one wants to perform. In the current study we chose the euclidean distance to identify politicians talking about the same topics for a similar time period. The last step for the topological data analysis is to define the clustering method. As clustering method we used the Affinity Propagation algorithm introduced in [32] by Frey and Dueck, since it does not require the number of clusters to be determined or estimated before running the algorithm.

The Mapper Algorithm was coded in Python and the sklearn module was used to implement the Affinity Propagation algorithm.

5 Results

5.1 Topic Distributions

We now turn to the results from the DTM analysis and the topic distributions. Table 2 presents the results from the DTM analysis by topic and session (years 1974-75). The top panel contains the first session and the bottom panel contains the last session covered by our data set (years 2013-14). Each column represents one specific topic and lists the 15 top words on for each topic in order of descending importance, i.e. the probability of appearing in the topic distribution. For example, the first topic in the first session, labeled “International Trade” contains words such as “state”, “trade”, and “oil”. The topics in each column are the most significant topics debated in the UK parliament during the period we study, and will form an integral component in classifying members of the parliament in the section below.

A few things are important to point out regarding the construction of the table. First, the set of topics stays fixed over time. The DTM estimation selects the top words for each topic and for each session. (See the Appendix for a discussion on how to optimally choose the number of topics) Second, there is no formal method behind the assignment of labels to topics. Instead, we have simply tried to exercise good judgment and have labeled the topics accordingly.

Given the selection procedure for topics, the table should mainly be thought of as illustrative of the change in word patterns across topics. Moreover, we need to be careful with not inferring too much from the word distributions alone; the main point of the identified topics will be to classify speakers and construct networks. Keeping this mind, we now proceed to examine some of the changes between the first and the last session. In the “infrastructures” topic, it is clear that we see a shift from words related to colonies and airline logistics, to a focus on airports and airlines. For “regional affairs” we see a shift from quite general words to an apparent focus on words related to Europe and, in particular, to the European Union. One can also observe that among the top words in the “entertainment and media” in the first session, we have “author”, “local”, and “land.” In the last session, the very same topic contains “pub,” “sport,” “dog,” and “beer.”

How do the relative importance of different topics evolve over time? Exogenous factors in the economy and society strongly affect which topics speakers spend time on in speeches and debates. At the same time, there is a dynamic interaction of various topics over time and across speakers which causes fluctuations in each topic’s relative importance. We will now examine the dynamics of a number of topics which significantly increased or decreased in importance during the period studied. (Note that the remaining topics did not exhibit a clear trend in either direction.) Figure 1 shows three topics (from top to bottom): education, regional affairs, and welfare. For education (top figure), we see a fluctuating, but steady increase in importance. The topic “regional affairs” (middle panel), on the other

hand, increases during the period studied, but exhibits a drop in importance during the late 90s and early 2000s. In contrast, the topic “welfare” (bottom figure) increases substantially during the these years, but remained relatively constant during the 80s and 90s.

Figure 2 shows the three topics with a significant trend of decreasing importance over time. The “health care” topic (top figure) decreased substantially in importance during the 80s and early 90s, but remained fairly constant (at a very low level) during the latter part of the period. For the “primary sector” topic, we see a constant decline over the whole period. Finally, “entertainment and media” exhibits a sudden decline in importance during the late 80s.

International Trade	Education	Healthcare	Procedures	Miscellaneous	Economy	Infrastructures	Welfare	Regional Affairs	Military	Foreign Affairs	Entertainment and Media	Transports	Devolution	Primary sector
industri	school	health	hous	holder	tax	rhodesia	peopl	area	ireland	countri	author	transport	wale	agricultur
state	educ	hospit	point	plot	rate	africa	state	citi	northern	question	local	road	welsh	food
price	author	servic	matter	cleethorp	chancellor	aircraft	employ	inner	state	matter	hous	rail	agenc	price
secretari	teacher	doctor	amend	aye	inflat	british	secretari	merseysid	secretari	communiti	land	railway	develop	farmer
british	local	patient	time	allot	cent	african	servic	liverpool	defenc	hous	council	british	referendum	market
compani	children	bed	order	yemen	incom	ship	awar	scotland	forc	foreign	build	fare	state	fisheri
polic	parent	medic	committe	yemeni	increas	airport	unemploy	town	peopl	polic	rate	traffic	secretari	fish
matter	comprehens	nation	debat	noe	expenditur	port	mani	urban	awar	view	properti	vehicl	devolut	produc
trade	colleg	consult	way	plymyard	public	aviat	industri	birmingham	hous	discuss	rent	london	local	milk
question	student	profess	question	beg	budget	airlin	area	midland	secur	think	london	servic	water	communiti
oil	scienc	nurs	secretari	abil	capit	airway	benefit	region	order	european	water	counti	author	common
countri	depart	nhs	peopl	abl	taxat	air	problem	rate	statement	meet	area	bus	counti	pound
import	univers	region	state	abolit	money	gime	number	scottish	polic	statement	grant	rural	area	farm
hous	system	author	speaker	abrog	excheq	rhodesian	scheme	council	mani	minist	expenditur	car	england	mile
time	grant	care	mani	absolut	polic	concord	social	partnership	prison	import	tenant	commut	cardiff	beef
International Trade	Education	Healthcare	Procedures	Miscellaneous	Economy	Infrastructures	Welfare	Regional Affairs	Military	Foreign Affairs	Entertainment and Media	Transports	Devolution	Primary sector
busi	peopl	child	hous	yemen	economi	heathrow	peopl	bank	forc	countri	pub	rail	wale	farmer
peopl	work	children	peopl	plot	tax	aviat	local	tax	defenc	european	sport	transport	welsh	anim
compani	pension	adopt	time	holder	chancellor	air	care	financi	peopl	foreign	industri	line	badger	food
energi	tax	famili	point	cleethorp	growth	flight	servic	rate	time	intern	bbc	road	devolut	diseas
new	benefit	medicin	committe	allot	budget	runway	health	busi	countri	e	dog	london	rural	fisheri
local	job	social	case	aye	deficit	passeng	school	avoid	war	peopl	art	servic	cull	fish
import	employ	prescript	amend	yemeni	spend	aircraft	children	treasuri	state	union	cultur	railway	cardiff	farm
mani	credit	practition	iss	noe	econom	expans	constit	hmrc	secretari	support	game	airport	england	insur
industri	support	transplant	way	plymyard	countri	island	mani	bonus	hous	import	beer	local	vaccin	agricultur
time	univers	mental	secretari	beg	rate	nois	support	regul	mani	british	club	passeng	languag	fishermen
invest	wage	pharmacist	public	abil	public	airlin	nhs	taxpay	militari	right	olymp	train	constit	rural
way	time	care	debat	abl	cut	gatwick	educ	incom	scotland	nation	shop	hs	tb	mesothelioma
hous	pay	asthma	mani	abolit	labour	termin	young	account	armi	uk	museum	network	cymr	dairi
iss	incom	patient	new	abrog	debt	baa	council	corpor	scottish	secretari	peopl	coast	assembl	welfar
countri	get	doctor	polic	absolut	job	ship	author	credit	support	world	alcohol	station	swansea	asbesto

Table 2: Top 15 words for each topic. Top panel displays first session, bottom panel displays last session.

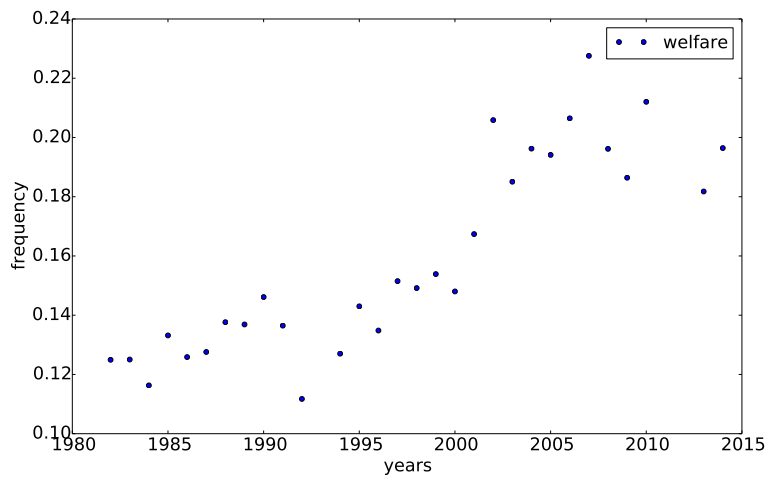
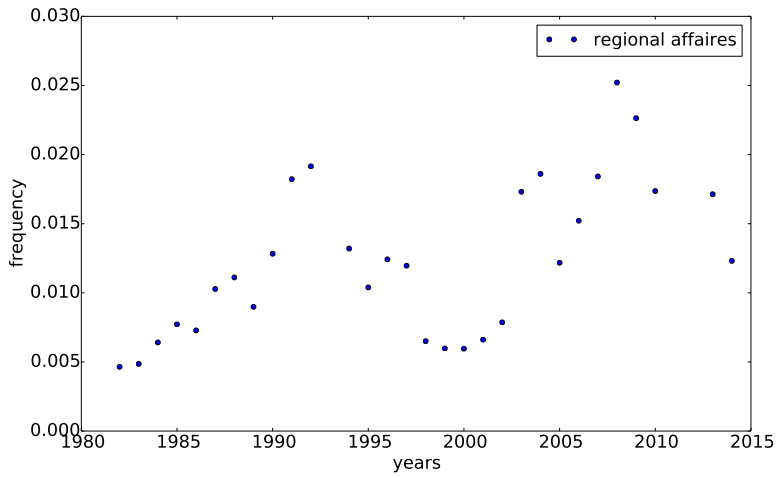
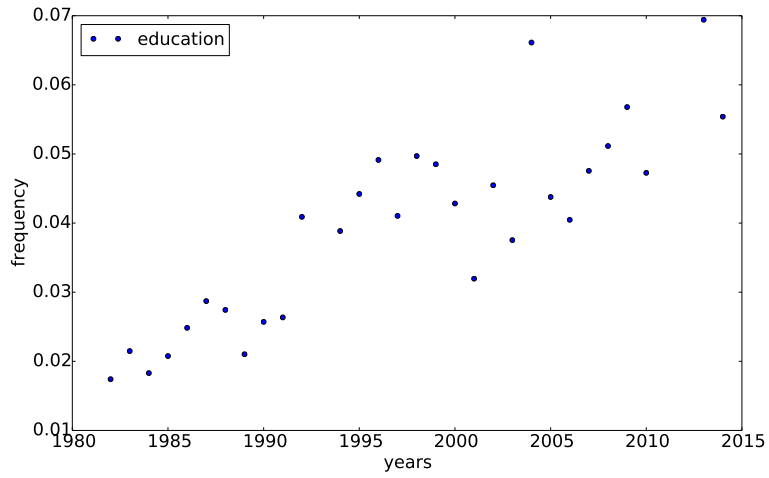


Figure 1: Topics with increasing degree of importance over time. Frequency refers to fraction of speeches in which the topic is discussed

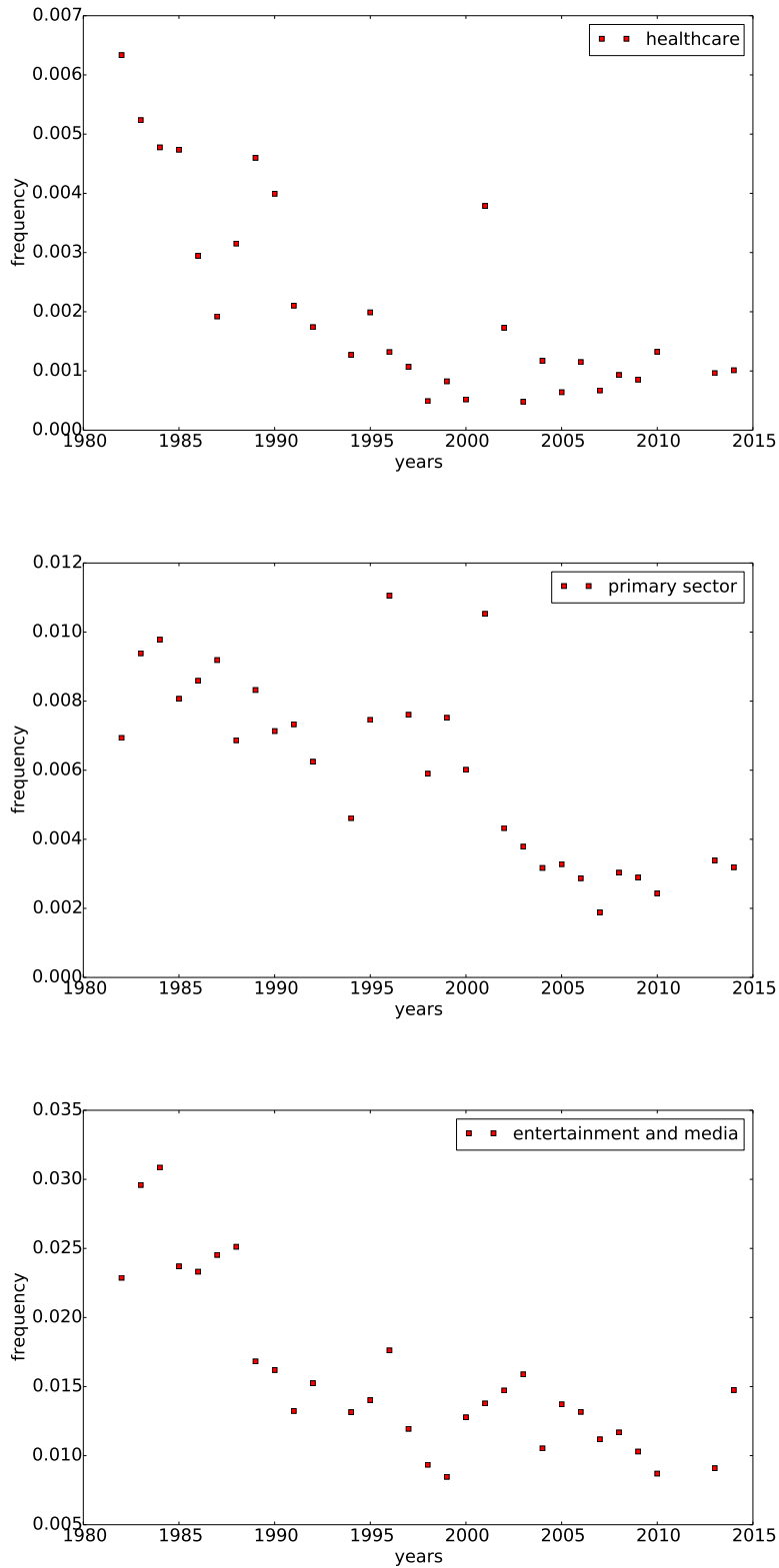


Figure 2: Topics with decreasing degree of importance over time. Frequency refers to fraction of speeches in which the topic is discussed

5.2 Mapping The Speaker Activity

In this section we focus on how to distinguish and effectively visualize the activity of the different speakers, in other words how to map each speaker’s role in the complex system that the UK parliament constitutes. The first piece of information about each speaker’s relative importance is given by the *length* of the speeches they give to the Parliament. We quantify such information in terms of the total number of words w_i spoken by individual $i = 1, \dots, N$. As we will show in the following, the distribution of the speakers’ verbosity appears to be strongly heterogeneous.

Needless to say, not only the length of each speech, but the *content* matters in determining the speaker’s importance. In the previous section, DTM allowed us to identify the most significant T topics debated in the UK parliament, and the contribution of each speaker to the different subjects over time. Hence, for each session it is possible to describe the activity of each speaker i in terms of an activity vector

$$\mathbf{p}_i = (p_i^{[1]}, \dots, k_i^{[T]}), \quad (1)$$

where $\alpha = 1, \dots, T$ indicates the different topics and $p_i^{[\alpha]}$ indicates the fraction of time that the speaker i spends talking about topic α . Such values can be inferred by looking at the words used by the different speakers in their speeches and matching them to the topics to which they are considered to be strictly related. $p_i^{[\alpha]}$ can also be interpreted as the probability that, if we listen to a random speech of deputy i , she will be tackling topic α . From the analysis of such vectors, we can identify different activity patterns. Stemming from this, it is for instance possible to obtain the similarity between the activity patterns of two speakers i and j by computing the Spearman correlation coefficient $\rho(\mathbf{p}_i, \mathbf{p}_j)$ [33] or by mean of theoretic information measures, such as the Normalized Mutual Information $NMI(\mathbf{p}_i, \mathbf{p}_j)$ [34]. Such activity features can also be used to cluster, classify and visualize the speakers, as discussed in other sections of this manuscript. In general, a low (high) value of $p_i^{[\alpha]}$ indicates a low (high) engagement of the speaker i with topic α . However, to correctly take into account the speaker’s contribution to a given topic, factors as the global importance of a given topic should be taken into account. If a topic is in general not strongly debated into the Parliament, a limited number of speeches concerning it should be sufficient to identify a speaker as a significant contributor. The significance of a topic α for a speaker i can be easily determined by computing the Revealed Comparative Advantage (RCA) [35]:

$$RCA_i^{[\alpha]} = \frac{\frac{p_i^{[\alpha]}}{\sum_{\alpha} p_i^{[\alpha]}}}{\frac{\sum_i p_i^{[\alpha]}}{\sum_{\alpha, i} p_i^{[\alpha]}}}. \quad (2)$$

If $RCA_i^{[\alpha]} > 1$, i.e. $\frac{p_i^{[\alpha]}}{\sum_{\alpha} p_i^{[\alpha]}} > \frac{\sum_i p_i^{[\alpha]}}{\sum_{\alpha, i} p_i^{[\alpha]}}$, the fraction of time devoted by i to topic α is greater than the average time devoted to the same topic by all speakers, and as a consequence topic α is a significant

topic for speaker i . We notice that, given $p_i^{[\alpha]} < p_i^{[\beta]}$, it is in general possible that α is a significant topic for speaker i while β is not, in spite of being, since RCA correctly discounts the individual activity with the overall importance of a topic.

Starting from the individual activity vectors, the parliament activity vector $\mathbf{P}_i = (P_i^{[1]}, \dots, P_i^{[T]})$ can be easily obtained as the average of the speakers' activity weighted for their verbosity, i.e. $P_i^{[\alpha]} = \frac{\sum_i w_i p_i^{[\alpha]}}{\sum_i w_i}$. Analogously, activity vectors per parties can be obtained by performing the same operation and limiting the sum to the speakers belonging to a given group. Consequently, it is also possible to obtain RCA indexes per party across the different topics. An example is shown in Fig. 3 for session 5404.

In general, a topic-by-topic exploration of the activity patterns of the speakers provides very detailed insights about the speakers' profile. As a drawback, given the large number T of the considered topics, it is often difficult to visualize and evaluate it at a glance. An interesting information on the activity of each speaker is their capability to participate to the political debate in different topics. Such information can be synthetically evaluated by introducing the activity entropy s_i

$$s_i = - \sum_{\alpha} p_i^{[\alpha]} \ln p_i^{[\alpha]}. \quad (3)$$

By definition $s_i \geq 0$, with $s_i = 0$ only when the activity of a speaker is completely focused on a single topic, i.e. $p_i^{[\alpha]} = 0 \forall \alpha = 1, \dots, N$ but one. Greater values of s_i indicates engagement in a variety of topics and are typical of generalist speakers which are able to deal with different political subjects. Conversely, low values point out to specialists, individuals who were able to construct their political careers thanks to their knowledge of specific areas, specialised skills and thematic persistence in their political speeches.

We are now ready to map the speakers' activity in the UK parliament by assigning each speaker their coordinates (s_i, w_i) and representing them as dots in the plane Entropy-Verbosity. Results for the speakers in session 5404 are shown in Fig. 4 As shown, the two variables appear to be not correlated and provide two orthogonal insights towards the activity of the different individuals. Indeed, for a fixed level of w_i speakers are found with very heterogenous values of s_i and viceversa. For convenience, we divide the speakers in different categories according to their coordinates. In particular we have

- *specialized* speakers for $s_i < 1$;
- *mixed* speakers for $1 \leq s_i < 2$;
- *generalist* speakers for $s_i \geq 2$;

At the same time we differentiate between

- *verbose* speakers for $w_i < 8 * 10^3$;

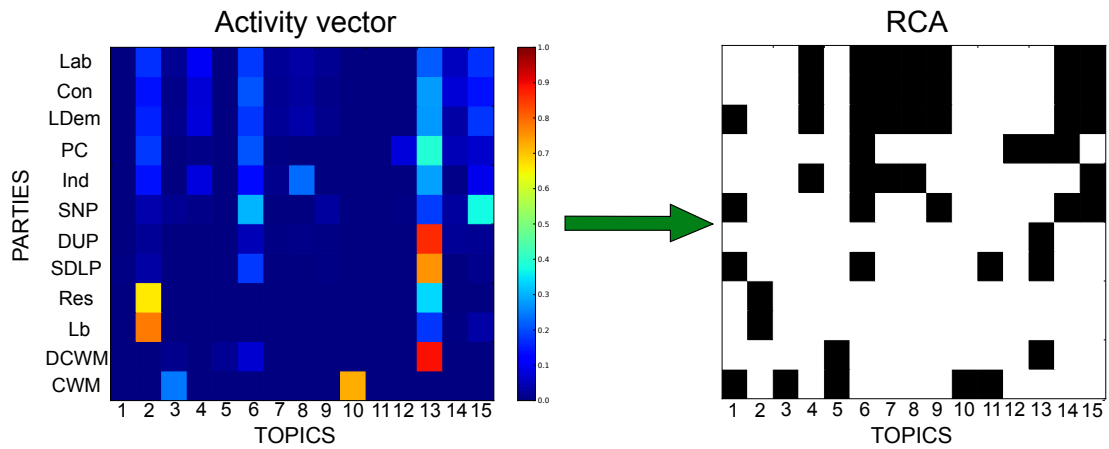


Figure 3: In this figure we show the RCA indexes across the different topics at the party level for session 5404 (black squares indicate $RCA = 1$, white squares indicate $RCA = 0$). On the left, a heatmap display the fraction of time that each party assigns to a given topic. To understand if a party is a significant contributor to a topic, however, it is necessary to compare such times with the average one assigned to the same topic by all parties. In such a way it is possible to unveil, for instance, how both Labour and Conservatives are significant contributor for topics 7,8,9, in spite of such topics not being among the most debated ones in the parliament.

- *succint* speakers for $w_i \geq 8 * 10^3$;

Altogether, we are able to distinguish six different regions of political activity. For future developments, it would be interesting to evaluate the evolution of the activity over time for the different speakers and associate their position in such map with their electoral results and political membership.

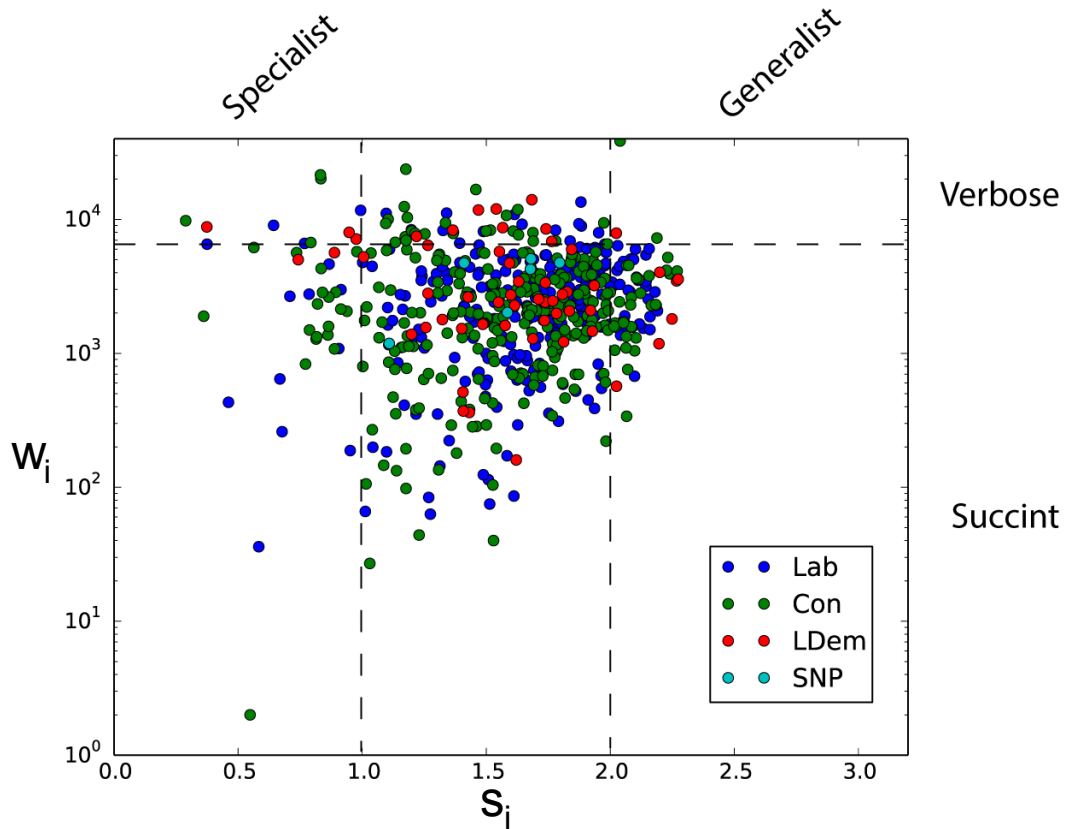


Figure 4: In such figure we show the scatter plot of the verbosity w_i against the activity entropy s_i for the different speakers for four different parties. For all of them, the two variables do not appear to be correlated, indicating that the information they provide is complementary. Indeed, for a fixed level of w_i speakers are found with very heterogeneous values of s_i and viceversa. According to the different values of (s_i, w_i) it is possible to characterize the speakers' activity according to six different regions, taking into account if they are succinct or verbose and if they are specialized or generalist in the topics they tackle.

5.3 Topological Data Analysis

This section presents the results of the TDA applied to the results from the DTM analysis. Figure 5 presents the network constructed using the Mapper algorithm. Each node in the network represents a subset of politicians clustered according to Affinity Propagation algorithm. The network is colored so as to identify the different sessions to which each node belongs. An edge in the graph connects nodes that have politicians in common, which is why every node is only linked to nodes belonging to the previous or the subsequent session.

The first thing one should notice is that the number of clusters in the network varies significantly over time. This is due to the clustering algorithm. To better study the results, we identified the political era which each session belongs to. Fewer clusters were detected during periods of political stability mainly in the years in which Margaret Thatcher (1979-1990), and Tony Blair (1997-2007) held office.

Another analysis we focused on was the evolution of similar clusters over time. As Figure 6 shows, clusters defined by a high frequency on a singular topic (Healthcare in the example showed in Figure 6). Nodes belonging to subsequent years are connected, which means that there are politicians that tend to specialize on the same topic. In the example illustrated in Figure 6, at least 10% of politicians in connected nodes don't change their behavior over time, with picks of 64% in session 5303 (2005). Being more or less inclined to change ones behavior does not seem to correlate with time. In future work we hope to verify if this variation in behavior might be influenced by external historical factors.

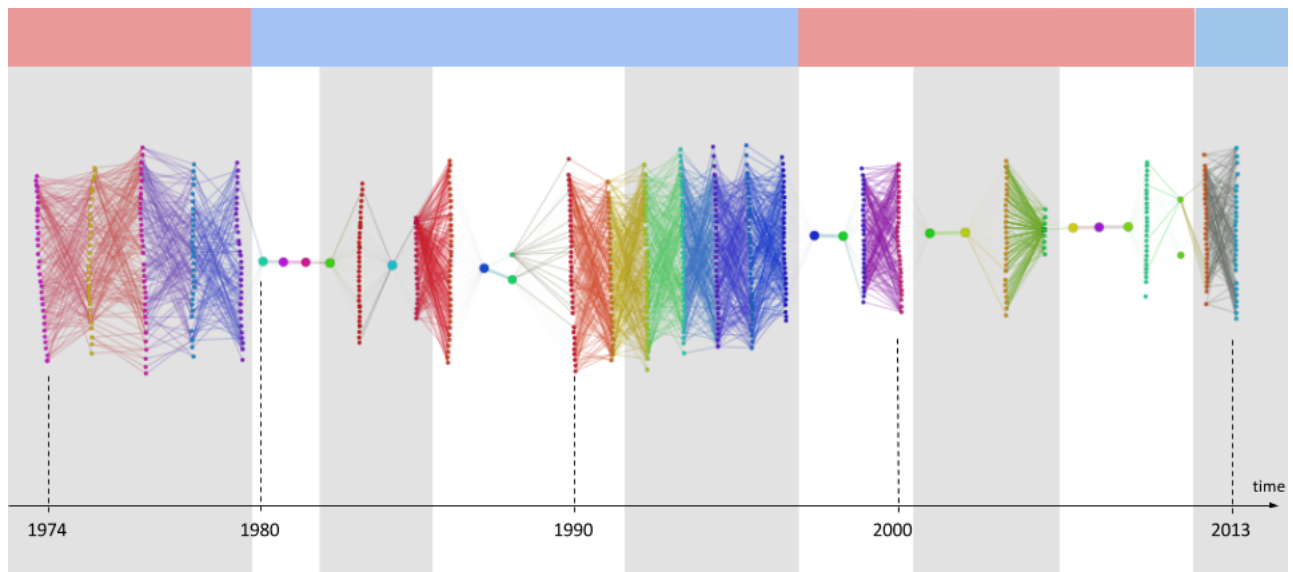


Figure 5: In this graph each node is a different subset of politicians, and edges connect nodes that have politicians in common. The color of each node represents a different session. Sessions are identified by the year of their beginning (eg. session 4701 corresponding to year 1974-1975 is identified by 1974). The vertical bands distinguish between different parliament terms, the horizontal bands on the top indicate which party ruled during those years (Labour (Red), Conservative (Blue)). The number of clusters in the network varies significantly over time. For example it can be seen that fewer clusters were detected during periods of political stability during which Margaret Thatcher (1979-1990), and Tony Blair (1997-2007) held office.

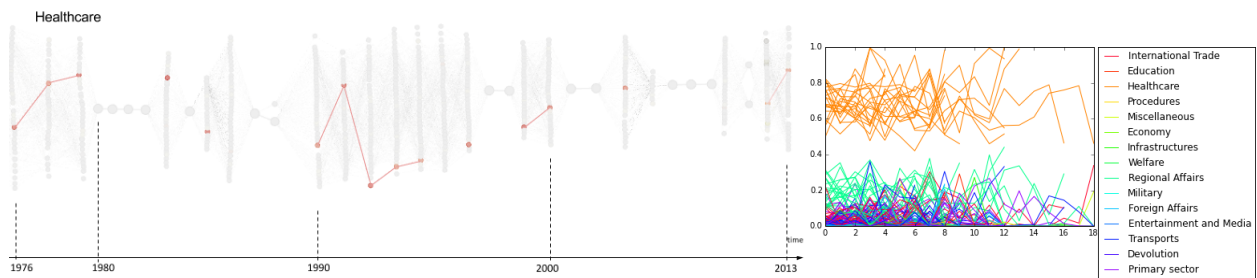


Figure 6: In this figure, only nodes with a median value for the topic ‘Healthcare’ greater or equal than 0.70 are selected. Nodes belonging to subsequent years are connected, which means that there are politicians that tend to specialize on the same topic over subsequent years. In the graph it is depicted the distribution of topics in each node selected in the network on the left. On the x-axis the politicians belonging to a node are represented, and on the y-axis the percentage of time talked on a certain topic over the session the node belongs to. It is clear from this graph, that the clusters are well defined and each of them contains politicians with a preference for talking about ‘Healthcare.’

6 Concluding remarks and future work

This paper has been an exploratory effort with the intention to pave the way towards a data driven understanding of politics and political institutions. We have proposed the use of dynamic topic modeling and topological analytical techniques to capture policy issues and their dynamics through unstructured political texts. We applied the methods on data referring to the UK House of Commons, uncovering two main results. First, we demonstrated the possibility of classifying Members of the Parliament according to their speeches’ semantic content and verbosity. Second, we identified global patterns of political activity that suggest period of relative political cohesion or homogeneity. The findings generate a number of captivating research questions and hypotheses, such as:

- Can we systemically identify policy leaders and their effects on overall policy discussion and implementation process?
- Can we construct a robust framework that measures political structural stability by observing unstructured data?

In addition, our work lends itself to potentially useful policy applications. Results suggest that it feasible to track the performance and progress of individual MPs and parties with respect to specific policy issues, thus building the base for a data science framework to check the transparency and accountability of political agents. Other applications include the evaluation of novel indices of political stability and cohesion.

In future work we plan to extend our study by incorporating sentiment analysis. While a political agent’s stance on a particular bill becomes a matter of public record – crystallized in the stark binary ‘yea’ or ‘nae’ vote, data driven methods to profile their evolution to that position and their general disposition toward an entire policy topic are currently lacking [36]. Despite this, to further our aim of empirically investigating policy debate dynamics, we must account for some form of political opinion rather than relying solely on a speaker’s topical content. Sentiment analysis of the traditional flavor will provide some information on political stance. We suspect that sentiment analysis on a per topic basis may even discriminate between parties taking opposite views on an topic – although preliminary work using the Stanford Sentiment Treebank [37] shows that overall sentiment in the House of Commons has a strong negative skew. We will analyze the sentiment results on a per-speaker, per-topic basis using the TDA method defined above, allowing us to answer questions regarding both individual and party level dynamics through the space of political positions.

We also intend to investigate whether the topical and sentiment information extracted from unstructured data is a predictor of political success. More specifically, we will use Random Forests to

study whether this kind of information predicts re-election of an individual, and perform an analysis of relative importance of these factors. Lastly, we will repeat topological data analysis analysis taking into consideration party membership of each politician, in order to track the evolution of the inner structure of the parties over time.

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A Appendix: Model Selection: How to decide on the number of topics?

Model selection, i.e. deciding the best values for the parameters of a model, is the key step to ensure the optimal performance of a model in balancing the two most important sources of error, bias and variance, resulting from the tradeoff between generalization capacity and flexibility of the model [38]. One of the most common and powerful approaches to deal with this is cross-validation. When the data set does not contain a large number of instances, k-fold cross-validation is preferable in order to reduce the variability of the results. This approach involves creating a training and a validation set for each round, randomly dividing the set of observations into k groups approximately equal sized, called folds, and use one for validation and the remain k-1 for training [39].

when using dynamic topic modeling, one of the important model parameters that needs to be fixed beforehand is the number of topics. To assess the performance of each trained model during the k-fold cross-validation scheme, a metric of goodness of the fit must be selected. In regression problems, MSE is the preferable metric. For DTM, there is no consensus or approach in the literature. Selecting this parameter value with a k-cross validation scheme is extremely computational expensive, that the usual way to approach this is to select the number of topics based on experience.

We have approached the problem differently. We have divided the observation data set in 37 time slices (each corresponding to a session) and selected 12 of them equally spaced in time. For each of the 12 slices, we have trained a LDA (Latent Dirichlet Allocation) model and then selected the optimal number of topics by the majority rule. We mimicked the essence of Random Forests [40], with the difference that we had LDA model instead of a Tree, and a training set selected ad-hoc instead of a bootstrapping sample. For the LDA, there are two industry-standard metrics generally used to assess the number of topics, Maximum Likelihood and perplexity. We used the log likelihood function to select the number of topics that yields the maximum likelihood of the model.

For each of the time slice considered, we did 5-fold cross-validation to assess the performance of 10,15,20,25 and 30 topics and chose the number of topics that maximized the log likelihood. We used the package "topicmodels for R [41], and the functions LDA() with Gibbs sampling and logLik().

For 7 out of the 12 data sets, the log likelihood was maximized when the number of topics was 15, and the mean of the number of topics for the 12 data sets was 13.75; consequently we chose 15 as the optimal number of topics.

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