

# British Journal of Political Science

<http://journals.cambridge.org/JPS>

Additional services for *British Journal of Political Science*:

Email alerts: [Click here](#)

Subscriptions: [Click here](#)

Commercial reprints: [Click here](#)

Terms of use : [Click here](#)



---

## Too Spineless to Rebel? New Labour's Women MPs

PHILIP COWLEY and SARAH CHILDS

British Journal of Political Science / Volume 33 / Issue 03 / July 2003, pp 345 - 365

DOI: 10.1017/S0007123403000164, Published online: 01 August 2003

**Link to this article:** [http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract\\_S0007123403000164](http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0007123403000164)

### How to cite this article:

PHILIP COWLEY and SARAH CHILDS (2003). Too Spineless to Rebel? New Labour's Women MPs. British Journal of Political Science, 33, pp 345-365 doi:10.1017/S0007123403000164

**Request Permissions :** [Click here](#)

## ***Too Spineless to Rebel? New Labour's Women MPs***

PHILIP COWLEY AND SARAH CHILDS\*

The 1997 British general election saw a record 120 women returned to the House of Commons, 101 of them Labour. Yet if the most striking feature of the 1997 intake into the House of Commons was the number of newly elected women, then the most striking feature of the backbench rebellions in that parliament was the lack of these women amongst the ranks of the rebels. They were less than half as likely to rebel against the party whip as the rest of the Parliamentary Labour Party; even those who did, did so around half as often. Attempts to explain this difference fall into two broad groups: (i) those that attempt to explain the difference away, as resulting from other characteristics of the women, and (ii) those that attempt to explain it – indeed, celebrate it – as evidence of a different, women's, style of political behaviour. Attempts at (i) are largely unconvincing: most of the supposed explanations for the difference do not stand up to empirical verification. Although difficult to prove, a belief in (ii) is dominant amongst the new women themselves.

The 1997 British general election saw the election of an unprecedented number of women members of parliament (MPs). Some 120 women were returned, 18 per cent of the Commons. Of these, 101 sat on the Labour benches (24 per cent of the governing party), sixty-five of whom were newly elected.<sup>1</sup> Yet if the most striking feature of the 1997 Labour intake was the presence of so many women, then the most striking feature of the backbench rebellions in that parliament appeared to be the lack of these women amongst the ranks of the rebels. The media, which criticized all Labour MPs for their cohesion, reserved special venom for the newly elected women.<sup>2</sup> As Anne Perkins wrote, the women suffered 'derision as centrally-programmed automatons ... being reviled for failing to rebel, condemned as careerists – in short, one great fuschia-suited failure'. She continued:

[I]t was their failure to fight collectively, in particular to unite against the lone parent benefit cuts that caused such rumpus in late 97, that earned them the reputation of betraying women who needed them for the sake of their own political futures. Most damaging, it was a view shared by more experienced women colleagues.<sup>3</sup>

One long-serving Labour woman MP found the new intake 'very depressing' – 'I don't know what they believe in' – and saw their behaviour as a 'betrayal' of all-women short listing (AWS), the system of sex quotas used by Labour in order to raise the number of women candidates selected in winnable seats.<sup>4</sup> A second thought that the new women MPs

\* School of Politics, University of Nottingham; and School of Health and Social Sciences, Middlesex University, respectively. This article draws upon data gathered as part of a project into MPs' voting funded by the Leverhulme Trust. Mark Stuart did most of the hard work, examining almost 1,300 division lists. The authors are also grateful to all the MPs who agreed to participate.

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Joni Lovenduski, 'Gender Politics: A Breakthrough for Women?', in Pippa Norris and Neil T. Gavin, eds, *Britain Votes 1997* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 200–11; or Byron Criddle, 'MPs and Candidates', in David Butler and Dennis Kavanagh, eds, *The British General Election of 1997* (London: Macmillan, 1997), pp. 186–209, at pp. 189–91.

<sup>2</sup> See, for just a few examples, Leader ('Are Blair's babes dumb?'), *Independent on Sunday*, 4 January 1998; Libby Purves, 'Blair's babes in the wood', *The Times*, 2 December 1997; and Austin Mitchell, 'Why I am sick of women MPs', *Independent on Sunday*, 18 January 1998.

<sup>3</sup> Anne Perkins, 'Women: so far, so what?', *Guardian*, 29 April 1999.

<sup>4</sup> Interview, 21 March 2000.

included 'a lot of clones'.<sup>5</sup> A third said that she did not know why the women had come to parliament.<sup>6</sup> One male Labour MP, Brian Sedgemore, famously compared them to the Stepford Wives, 'those female new Labour MPs who've had the chip inserted into their brain to keep them on-message and who collectively put down women and children in the vote on lone parent benefits'.<sup>7</sup> In a twist on the concept of a 'critical mass' (the idea that once the number of women in a parliament reached a certain point the institution will be changed), another male Labour MP described the newly elected women as an 'uncritical mass'.<sup>8</sup> The general assessment of the newly elected Labour women appeared to be that they were too spineless to rebel, and simply not up to the job; if they couldn't stand the heat, they should 'get out of the kitchen', a jibe to which one replied: 'New Labour, New Kitchen'.<sup>9</sup>

Yet many of the women MPs themselves – and many of their male colleagues – pointed to other, often less critical, explanations for the differential rates of cohesion. Several even doubted it was true that the newly elected women were less likely to rebel. They argued that the media only picked up on those occasions when this was true and ignored those when it was not, in an attempt to denigrate the women MPs ('there are some rebellions they haven't even spotted 'cause I think they are so locked into this Blair's babes thing [that] some of them can't even think straight if they tried now').<sup>10</sup> Others argued that even if there were fewer women in any rebellion that was merely because there were fewer women in general ('I'm not sure that's true statistically'; 'there are just as many nodding ... male dogs on government benches ... in fact, actually, percentage-wise more, because there are more of them than women').<sup>11</sup>

These claims, and the women's defence, matter in both a narrow British party politics and parliamentary sense (were the comments about the new Labour women accurate and/or fair?) and also in a broader, more comparative, sense. The expectation that women's political presence in legislatures will make a difference, with women's gender identity informing their political practice, has long been made by feminist theorists, political scientists and women politicians.<sup>12</sup> It is one (though only one) of the arguments used to support mechanisms to facilitate and encourage increased women's legislative recruitment. The expectation is that women representatives will share women's concerns and

<sup>5</sup> Interview, 4 July 2000.

<sup>6</sup> Interview, 28 March 2000.

<sup>7</sup> *The Times*, 7 February 1998, reporting a speech of Sedgemore's the previous day. The paper also reported Ann Widdecombe's claim that the comparison was an insult to the Stepford Wives.

<sup>8</sup> Interview, 11 December 1998. For the concept of critical mass, see, for example, Drude D. Dahlerup, 'From a Small to a Large Minority: Women in Scandinavian Politics', *Scandinavian Political Studies*, 11 (1988), 275–98; Donley T. Studlar and Ian McAllister, 'Does a Critical Mass Exist? A Comparative Analysis of Women's Legislative Representation Since 1950', *European Journal of Political Research*, 41 (2002), 233–53; or Sandra Grey, 'Does Size Matter? Critical Mass and New Zealand's Women MPs', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 55 (2001), 19–29.

<sup>9</sup> Interview, 12 July 2000.

<sup>10</sup> Interview, 12 July 2000.

<sup>11</sup> Interviews, 13 June 2000, 22 May 2000.

<sup>12</sup> Anne Phillips, *The Politics of Presence* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995). See also Debra L. Dodson, 'The Impact of Women in Congress: Re-thinking Ideas about Difference' (paper presented to the American Political Science Association Women and Politics Special Session, San Francisco, 2001); Beth Reingold, *Representing Women* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Jane Mansbridge, 'Should Blacks Represent Blacks and Women Represent Women? A Contingent "Yes"', *Journal of Politics*, 61 (1999), 628–57; and Jill Vickers, 'Toward a Feminist Understanding of Representation', in Jane Arscott and Linda Trimble, eds, *In the Presence of Women* (Toronto: Harcourt Brace, 1997), pp. 20–46.

perspectives, act decisively on these, and act in a different, feminized, style.<sup>13</sup> And previous empirical studies provide some supportive evidence that women politicians do indeed make a difference.<sup>14</sup>

Testing such theories in the British context has always been difficult, indeed almost impossible, because of the previously small number of women MPs. But with the increased number of women sitting on the Labour benches following the 1997 election – employing Rosabeth Moss Kanter’s classic typology, after 1997 they constituted a ‘tilted group’, capable of effecting change – their behaviour in the 1997 parliament is a timely case study, if not the first real opportunity, systematically to address the question of whether women MPs can make a difference.<sup>15</sup>

However, previous research also suggests that any such differences in behaviour will rarely manifest themselves at the stage of roll-call voting, but will instead be found at earlier stages in the legislative cycle – in agenda-setting and policy formation.<sup>16</sup> And so, if the new Labour women were found to be voting differently, as their critics claim, this would constitute an important qualification to the existing literature.

This article therefore attempts to answer two questions. First, were the newly elected women MPs in fact less rebellious than their colleagues? And secondly, if it was true, how can we explain it?

#### DATA

The article draws on three main sources. First, it utilizes the complete voting records of the 1997 parliament, around 1,300 divisions, as well as occasionally drawing on data from previous parliaments. The focus of the article is on those occasions when MPs voted against

<sup>13</sup> Joni Lovenduski, ‘Gender Politics: A Breakthrough for Women?’; and Catherine Bochel and Jacqui Briggs, ‘Do Women Make a Difference?’, *Politics*, 20 (2000), 63–8.

<sup>14</sup> For example, Sarah Childs, ‘Hitting the Target: Are Labour Women MPs “Acting for” Women?’, *Parliamentary Affairs*, 55 (2002), 143–53; Joni Lovenduski, ‘Women and Politics: Minority Representation or Critical Mass?’, in Pippa Norris, ed., *Britain Votes 2001* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 179–84; Sarah Childs, ‘In Their Own Words: New Labour Women MPs and the Substantive Representation of Women’, *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 3 (2001), 173–90; Pippa Norris, ‘Women Politicians: Transforming Westminster?’, in Joni Lovenduski and Pippa Norris, eds, *Women in Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 91–104; Lovenduski, ‘Gender Politics’; and Pippa Norris and Joni Lovenduski, *Political Recruitment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). For the United States, see Reingold, *Representing Women*; Sue Thomas and Clyde Wilcox, eds, *Women and Elective Office* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); Sue Thomas, *How Women Legislate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); Susan J. Carroll, *Women as Candidates in American Politics* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994); R. Darcy, Susan Welch and Janet Clark, *Women, Elections and Representation* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994). In respect of Northern Europe, see Lena Wangnerud, ‘Testing the Politics of Presence’, *Scandinavian Political Studies*, 23 (2000), 67–91; Lauri Karvonen and Per Selle, *Women in Nordic Politics* (Aldershot, Surrey: Dartmouth, 1995); Hege Skjeie, ‘Ending the Male Political Hegemony: The Norwegian Experience’, in Joni Lovenduski and Pippa Norris, eds, *Gender and Party Politics* (London: Sage, 1993), pp. 231–62; Gun Hedlund, ‘Women’s Interests in Local Politics’, in Kathleen B. Jones and Anna G. Jonasdottir, eds, *The Political Interests of Gender* (London: Sage, 1990), pp. 79–105.

<sup>15</sup> Rosabeth Moss Kanter, *Men and Women of the Corporation* (New York: Basic Books, 1977); Dahlerup, ‘From a Small to a Large Minority; Norris, ‘Women Politicians’.

<sup>16</sup> Dodson, ‘The Impact of Women in Congress’; Reingold, *Representing Women*; and Karin L. Tamerius, ‘Sex, Gender, and Leadership in the Representation of Women’, in Georgia Duerst-Lahti and Rita Mae Kelly, eds, *Gender Power, Leadership, and Governance* (Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 1995), pp. 93–112.

their own party whip or the apparently clear wishes (sometimes implicit) of their own front bench.<sup>17</sup>

The published records of divisions (that is, votes) yields a mass of what David Truman termed ‘hard data’ about the voting of MPs.<sup>18</sup> Yet the data are not perfect. Printing errors (such as the names of MPs being mixed up) are not frequent, but neither are they rare. Some errors are obvious (such as when a minister votes against his or her own government, for example), but others have had to be resolved by checking with the MPs concerned. A further drawback of divisions in the House of Commons is that, unlike in some legislative chambers (including the Scottish Parliament, for example), abstentions cannot be formally recorded.<sup>19</sup> The party managers (the whips) may formally sanction an absence from a vote, it may be accidental, or it may be deliberate. There is no information on the record that allows us to establish, at least not systematically, the causes of absences.<sup>20</sup> We cannot therefore necessarily read anything into non-voting. For the purposes of systematic analysis over time, therefore, we have to rely on the votes cast.

Because MPs who are in government in Britain cannot vote against their whips without first resigning their position, inclusion of government MPs in any statistical analysis has the potential to skew the results. So for the purposes of the following analysis the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) is split into three groups. First, there are those MPs – eighty-seven in number – who were in government for the entire period.<sup>21</sup> They have to be excluded from any analysis of rebellions. Then, secondly, there are those (191) MPs who were in government for some, but not all, of the period, either because they were promoted to, and/or ejected from, government during the course of the parliament.<sup>22</sup> And thirdly, there are those (151) MPs who were on the backbenches for the entire parliament. Any analysis of the characteristics of the PLP as a whole – looking at, say, how many women there were in the PLP – utilizes all three groups (that is, an  $N$  of 429). But, except where stated to the contrary, any analysis of the characteristics of rebels and loyalists is conducted with just the second and third groups; that is, it excludes those MPs who were in government for the entire period and uses all MPs who would have been able to vote against the government at some point in the parliament (so  $N = 342$ ). Lest it be thought that the results are being distorted by including those MPs who were on the backbenches for only some of the period, all the analysis was also re-run using just the 151 permanent backbenchers; all differences – and there are very few – are reported in notes.

The analysis also draws repeatedly on two surveys of British MPs. The first, the British

<sup>17</sup> Philip Norton, *Dissension in the House of Commons, 1974–1979* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980). Excluded – as in previous research – are votes on matters of private legislation, private members’ bills, matters internal to the House of Commons and other free votes. Included are those who act as ‘tellers’ – that is, who help count those voting – along with those who vote.

<sup>18</sup> D. Truman, *The Congressional Party: A Case Study* (New York: Wiley, 1959).

<sup>19</sup> Proposals in 1998 to allow the recording of abstentions met with a positive reaction from parliamentarians, although nothing has as yet happened. See the Sixth Report from the Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons, *Voting Methods*, HC 799 (London: The Stationery Office, 1998).

<sup>20</sup> Even if we could show, for example, that the new women were more likely to abstain rather than vote against the party line (something that some of them claim, but which has yet to be proven), a difference in behaviour would still remain.

<sup>21</sup> Here we take ‘in government’ to include those who were Parliamentary Private Secretaries (PPSs), since a PPS is bound by collective responsibility not to vote against the government.

<sup>22</sup> This figure may seem large, but it results from the extent to which (largely unnoticed) the composition of the lower echelons of the Blair government was substantially reshuffled during the four years between 1997 and 2001.

Representation Survey (BRS), was a national survey of prospective parliamentary candidates and MPs from all major parties standing in the 1997 British general election. The survey was conducted in mid-1996, and garnered a total of 999 positive responses (a response rate of 61 per cent). Of these, the dataset records 277 respondents as having been elected in May 1997, of whom 179 were Labour. When this article draws upon the BRS, it is these 179 that are analysed.<sup>23</sup> It also draws on a survey conducted by members of the Study of Parliament Group (SPG) into the socialization of British MPs. Questionnaires were sent in February 1999 to all newly elected MPs and to a sample of longer-serving MPs, producing an overall positive response rate of 44 per cent, of which 129 respondents were Labour MPs.<sup>24</sup>

And thirdly, the article draws on around ninety interviews conducted by one author (Cowley) between 1997 and 2001, as well as interviews with twenty-three of sixty-five newly elected Labour women MPs conducted in the summer of 2000 by the other author (Childs). Anonymity was guaranteed to all interviewees.

#### NEW LABOUR WOMEN AND THE PROPENSITY TO REBEL

In total, there were ninety-six separate rebellions by Labour MPs in the 1997 parliament, with nineteen issues (broadly defined) seeing individual rebellions consisting of at least ten MPs.<sup>25</sup> These nineteen rebellions are listed in Table 1, together with the total number of MPs to have voted against the government. The two right-hand columns of the table show the number of newly elected women who rebelled on each issue, together with that figure as a percentage of the total number of rebels.

This last figure varies from the seven issues that saw no newly elected women rebel to the revolt over the immigration appeals process on 20 November 2000, when 12 per cent of the rebels were newly elected women. Yet even at its peak, this percentage is below what might be expected. Newly elected women constituted 16 per cent of the PLP. Fewer than 16 per cent of the rebels in every rebellion were newly elected women.<sup>26</sup>

In total, taking all ninety-six revolts together, just eleven newly elected women Labour MPs voted against their party whip. That constitutes 17 per cent of the sixty-five newly elected Labour women and compares to a figure of 44 per cent for the rest of the PLP, a difference that is statistically significant.

Moreover, even when they did rebel, the newly elected women did not rebel frequently. Table 2 lists the eleven newly elected women who voted against their whips. The most rebellious were Ann Cryer and Betty Williams, both of whom voted against their whips on sixteen occasions. Whilst considerable when compared to other newly elected women, sixteen dissenting votes makes Cryer and Williams only the (joint) thirtieth most rebellious

<sup>23</sup> The BRS 1997 was directed by Pippa Norris in collaboration with Joni Lovenduski, Anthony Heath, Roger Jowell and John Curtice. The results reported in this article are marginally different from those derived from the full dataset since the process of merging the survey data with data on dissent helped uncover some small errors in the original data.

<sup>24</sup> The SPG survey was directed by Michael Rush and Philip Giddings.

<sup>25</sup> See Philip Cowley, *Revolts and Rebellions: Parliamentary Voting Under Blair* (London: Politico's, 2002), chaps. 2–5.

<sup>26</sup> The difference becomes even sharper when we consider that once we remove the MPs who were in government (disproportionately male) the new women constituted 19 per cent of MPs on the backbenches at any point in the parliament, and 17 per cent of the permanent backbenchers.

TABLE 1 *New Labour Women MPs' Participation in Large Labour Rebellions, 1997–2001*

Issue	Total number of rebels	New women rebels	As % of total number of rebels
Access to Justice Bill	21	0	0
Child Support, Pensions & Social Security Bill	41	2	5
Competition Bill	25	0	0
Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) Bill	37	2	5
Criminal Justice (Terrorism and Conspiracy) Bill	37	2	5
Defence White Paper	10	0	0
Draft Terrorism Bill	12	1	8
Football (Disorder) Bill	11	0	0
Freedom of Information Bill	41	3	7
House of Lords Bill	35	2	6
Immigration and Asylum Bill	17	0	0
Immigration appeals	17	2	12
Iraq	22	0	0
Kosovo	13	0	0
Social Security Bill	47	1	2
Teaching and Higher Education Bill	34	1	3
Terrorism Bill	14	1	7
Transport Bill	65	7	11
Welfare Reform and Pensions Bill	74	6	8

*Note:* In cases where there were multiple revolts on an issue, the total number to have rebelled may be larger than the largest single revolt on that issue.

Labour MPs. In total, the new women who voted against the party line did so on an average of six occasions. The comparable figure for the rest of the PLP is eleven.

This difference became noticed after the first major rebellion of the parliament, during the Social Security Bill in December 1997, when 47 Labour MPs voted against the reduction in lone parent benefit (along with a considerable number of deliberate abstentions).<sup>27</sup> Of the forty-seven rebels, just one (Ann Cryer) was a newly elected woman. Indeed, in the whole of the first session of the parliament just two of the newly elected women MPs (3 per cent) voted against their whips (the other being Christine Butler), compared to 27 per cent of the rest of the PLP.<sup>28</sup> Other Labour MPs were, then, *nine* times more likely to have rebelled than were the newly elected women. As the number of rebellions increased, the difference between the newly elected women and the rest of the PLP did narrow – from nine times after the first session, to a three-fold difference after the second – but the differences did not disappear over time. Similarly, as the parliament progressed, the percentage of new women in any rebellion increased – rising from a high

<sup>27</sup> Cowley, *Revolts and Rebellions*, pp. 24–9.

<sup>28</sup> Remember: this is the figure once we remove all MPs in government for the entire parliament. The raw figures – for the entire PLP – are 3 per cent and 21 per cent; the figures for those on the back benches throughout the parliament are 5 per cent and 35 per cent. These are a mere seven-fold difference, rather than a nine-fold difference.

TABLE 2 *The Eleven 'Rebellious'  
New Labour women  
MPs, 1997–2001*

Name	Number of dissenting votes
Ann Cryer	16
Betty Williams	16
Julie Morgan	14
Jenny Jones	6
Eileen Gordon	5
Christine McCafferty	4
Janet Dean	3
Christine Butler	2
Tess Kingham	2
Oona King	1
Geraldine Smith	1

of 5 per cent in the first session, to 8 per cent in the second, to 12 per cent in the third – but even this new high remained lower than the proportion in the PLP as a whole.

The newly elected women were, then, less than half as likely to rebel against the party whip as the rest of the PLP; and even those who did rebel did so around half as often. There was therefore a genuine difference in legislative behaviour between the newly elected women and the rest of the PLP, rather than one born of partial data or (deliberately?) crude arithmetic.

#### EXPLAINING AWAY THE DIFFERENCE

Broadly speaking, explanations for this differential cohesion consist of two different types. The first group of explanations argue that any apparent differences between the new women and the rest of the PLP are spurious, that any differences are in fact caused by the type of MPs under examination rather than being genuine differences between the new women and the rest of the PLP. And that once we control for other characteristics or factors then any apparent differences will disappear.

Rebellion was not, and is not, a random act. There is clear evidence linking rebellion to an MP's *ideology or beliefs*, the extent to which they may disagree with the government (with left-wing Labour MPs being more likely to rebel than right-wing ones). Rebellion is also related to MPs' *legislative roles*, the extent to which they see their role in parliament as including rebellion (with delegates being less likely to rebel than those who see themselves as trustees). Explanations that attempt to link parliamentary behaviour with *self-interest* are also successful, although the self-interest of the MP within parliament (where the young, the newly elected and the ambitious are all less likely to rebel) is more important than any external forces (the marginality of an MP's constituency, for example, appears to play little role, nor does the ideology of his or her constituency party). And lastly, *other characteristics of the MP* are also important: specific individual characteristics that explain the MP's ability to withstand, or succumb to, the pressures placed upon them (the



TABLE 3 *Propensity to Rebel, by Sex and Intake (Per Cent)*

	Women	Men
Elected before 1997	63	53
Elected in 1997	17	34

less educated, those with council experience and those who are in the Campaign Group all appear more likely to rebel).<sup>29</sup> If the women first elected in 1997 had more (or less) of these characteristics, then we should not be surprised if they were more (or less) rebellious.

By contrast, the second group of explanations do not deny that a difference existed, but explain it – if not celebrate it – by highlighting the way that women MPs behave, seeing this as evidence of a different, women’s, style of political behaviour.

But we start by examining attempts to explain the difference away, beginning with the three most obvious explanations: sex, newness and the role of AWS.

### *Three Obvious (but Unconvincing) Explanations*

*Sex.* The most obvious explanation of all was that the cohesion of the newly elected women MPs resulted from nothing more than the fact that they were women. Many Labour women MPs – along with many of their male colleagues – argued that the apparent differences in the behaviour of the newly elected women were effectively sex differences. Women, they argued, have a different political style to men – they ‘do’ politics differently – and this manifests itself in different political behaviour.<sup>30</sup>

But there are some obvious empirical problems with this argument. It is not the case that women MPs have been more cohesive than male MPs in previous parliaments. If anything, in previous parliaments women MPs were more rebellious than their male counterparts. In every parliament between 1979 and 1997, women MPs were (slightly) more likely to have rebelled than male MPs.<sup>31</sup> And as Table 3 shows, the longer-serving Labour women in the 1997 parliament were in fact *more* rebellious than their longer-serving male colleagues. Some 63 per cent of the longer-serving women rebelled compared to just 17 per cent of those elected in 1997.<sup>32</sup> And just as in previous parliaments, the more established women MPs – admittedly a small group – were actually more likely to vote against the party line than the men (although the difference was not statistically significant).<sup>33</sup> So it was not that women MPs in general were any more cohesive than the men; rather, it was just that the newly elected women were significantly less likely to have rebelled than other Labour MPs.

<sup>29</sup> This summarises Cowley, *Revolts and Rebellions*, chap. 6.

<sup>30</sup> Sarah Childs, ‘The New Labour Women MPs in the 1997 British Parliament: Issues of Recruitment and Representation’, *Women’s History Review*, 9 (2000), 55–73; *The Week in Westminster*, Radio 4, 22 October 1998.

<sup>31</sup> See Philip Cowley, ‘The Absence of War? New Labour in Parliament’, *British Elections and Parties Review*, 9 (1999), 154–70.

<sup>32</sup> The rebellious longer-serving women MPs include Dr Lynne Jones (who rebelled on thirty-eight occasions), Gwyneth Dunwoody (twenty-seven), Diane Abbott (twenty-six), Alice Mahon (twenty-five), Audrey Wise (twenty-five) and Ann Clwyd (twenty-four).

<sup>33</sup> When we excluded all MPs who were in government at any time, it became significant.

This suggests that biological sex can be rejected as an explanation for the differential rate of cohesion. Any explanation must look at the newly elected women MPs in particular rather than at women *qua* women. This may be an occasion when the distinction between sex and gender is important, a point to which we return below.

*New intake.* Table 3 also allows us quickly to reject the other obvious explanation for the difference: that the new women are behaving differently simply because they are new MPs. This explanation trips over almost identical empirical hurdles to the argument (made above) about biological sex. If it were valid, then we would expect the new male MPs to be similarly less likely to rebel.

Whilst it was true that new MPs were less likely to have rebelled than other MPs (although once we control for all other variables, any differences ceased to be significant), there was still a clear difference between the newly elected women and their male peers. As Table 3 shows, some 17 per cent of the newly elected women had rebelled, compared to 34 per cent of the new men. So once we control for the cohort of entry the difference narrows somewhat, but it does not go away. The new women were still half as likely to have rebelled as the new men, a statistically significant difference in behaviour.<sup>34</sup>

*All-women short lists.* One of the reasons – perhaps *the* reason – for the high number of Labour women elected in 1997 was the use by the Labour party of AWS.<sup>35</sup> It has been argued by some that this process brought into parliament MPs who, because they had not been subject to the full rigours of an open competition, were somehow not up to the job.<sup>36</sup> For example Ann Widdecombe, a senior Conservative MP, complained of the ‘docility and absence of ability’ displayed by many of the new women MPs. She linked this directly to the use of AWS, arguing that:

Serious politicians arrive in the House already battle-hardened ... Blair’s Babes have arrived with starry eyes and a pager, shielded by positive discrimination from any real competition. They nod in unison behind the front bench ... Some of the dear little souls have even whinged that Madam Speaker is too hard on them and indeed has caused more than one to burst into tears. Can anyone imagine Bessie Braddock, Barbara Castle or Margaret Thatcher dissolving at a ticking off from the Speaker?<sup>37</sup>

There is, however, an obvious empirical problem with this argument: there was no difference in behaviour between those women selected on AWS and those selected on ‘open’ shortlists. Of those selected on open lists, five (17 per cent) broke ranks; the figure for those selected on AWS is six (also 17 per cent). Moreover, the three most rebellious of the new women – Ann Cryer, Betty Williams and Julie Morgan – were all selected on AWS.

Whatever the advantages or disadvantages of AWS, then, there is little evidence that

<sup>34</sup> If we examine just the permanent backbenchers, we find that the difference reduces slightly – to 45 per cent of the new men and 26 per cent of the new women – but it remains both sizeable and statistically significant.

<sup>35</sup> Maria Eagle and Joni Lovenduski, *High Time or High Tide for Labour Women* (London: Fabian Society, 1998).

<sup>36</sup> Indeed, one of the authors (Cowley) was (mis)quoted saying something similar when early findings from this research were first published (*Observer*, 20 September 1998).

<sup>37</sup> *Sunday Times*, 4 October 1998. Elsewhere, Widdecombe argued that AWS had ‘led to a very substandard intake of women MPs – they are not up to it’ (*The Times*, 7 February 1998). One male Labour MP also saw AWS as a cause of the high levels of cohesion, if for slightly different reasons. AWS was, he argued, ‘without question, a device to get ultra-loyalists in place ... an easier route in for ultra-loyalists’ (interview, 6 February 2001).

it brought into parliament less rebellious MPs. With a few exceptions, the newly elected women MPs were not rebelling, no matter how they were selected.

*Other (Also Largely Unconvincing) Explanations*

As well as these three obvious (if ultimately unconvincing) explanations for the differences, many of the new Labour women attempted to explain away the differences in their behaviour by reference to other socio-economic or political characteristics. For example, one argued that the reason they were not rebelling was *ideological*: it 'may be because we happen to agree with the policies and understand the policies'.<sup>38</sup> (It was for this reason that one male Labour MP described the new women MPs as 'true believers'.)<sup>39</sup> Others explained it with reference to their *ambition*, and the belief that ambitious politicians have to vote with the government.<sup>40</sup> As one said: 'younger women who want to make a career out of this ... know ... [that] in the long term they will not make their voice heard at the level which is needed unless they do incorporate'.<sup>41</sup> She added that she thought they had 'been quite sensible really'.<sup>42</sup> Another put it in terms of their *age*:

Some of the men who were selected to fight safe seats are people who are in their late 50s who, you know, hold some pretty traditional views, and ... [it's those] men who tend to vote against the government, whereas the newly elected women in many cases are, you know, going to be here for a much longer period of time.<sup>43</sup>

Several others thought the differences resulted from the differing *electoral situations* of the women MPs ('it may be because we are in more marginal seats'; 'most of us come from key seats, they are marginal seats and to be frank we are not stupid').<sup>44</sup> As another put it: 'I think if you compared the men in target marginal seats who are newly elected with the women in target marginal seats who are newly elected I think you'd find a ... real similarity in their voting experiences'.<sup>45</sup> Another MP thought the difference lay in the *previous political history* of the MPs. 'It would be interesting to see how many of us came from local council backgrounds because my view is that if you have been on a local Labour group in a council your loyalty to the party whip is instilled'.<sup>46</sup>

There are two potential empirical problems with many of these suggestions and with other attempts to explain away the differences between the new women and other MPs. The first is that not all of these variables exert a strong or necessarily significant effect on the propensity to rebel; and, even if they do, they may do so in a different direction to that

<sup>38</sup> Interview, 13 June 2000.

<sup>39</sup> Interview, 21 March 2000.

<sup>40</sup> Previous studies tended to debunk this belief (see, for example, J. Richard Piper, 'British Backbench Rebellion and Government Appointments, 1945–87', *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, 16 (1991), 219–38; Norton, *Dissension in the House of Commons, 1974–1979*, p. 465; or Anthony King, 'The Chief Whip's Clothes', in D. Leonard and V. Herman, eds, *The Backbencher and Parliament* (London: Macmillan, 1972), pp. 80–6), but the Blair government did tend to exclude those who had voted against it in the division lobbies. See Cowley, *Revolts and Rebellions*, p. 108.

<sup>41</sup> Interview, 22 June 2000.

<sup>42</sup> Two other women MPs were explicit in recognizing the costs associated with rebelling. Reflecting on her rebelliousness, one woman MP admitted that it 'does disadvantage you ... [it] does stand against you, probably' (interview, 21 June 2000; also: interview, 20 June 2000).

<sup>43</sup> Interview, 21 June 2000.

<sup>44</sup> Interviews, 13 June 2000, 10 May 2000.

<sup>45</sup> Interview, 21 June 2000.

<sup>46</sup> Interview, 15 May 2000.

TABLE 4 *New Labour MPs Political Attitudes (Mean Scores), by Sex*

	New women	New men	Difference
Left/Right	3.97	3.65	+ 0.32
Employment/Prices	2.23	2.97	- 0.74
Taxes/Spending	4.19	3.98	+ 0.21
Nationalize/Privatize	5.26	4.97	+ 0.29
Integrate with EU/Remain independent	3.87	3.97	- 0.10
Women equal to men/Should stay at Home	1.00	1.23	- 0.23

*Note:* The difference is the percentage of new women minus the percentage of new men. The significance of the difference was tested by ANOVA at  $p = 0.05$  and  $p = 0.01$ , but none of the items reached the required level of significance.

suggested by the MPs.<sup>47</sup> For example, the effect of marginality on an MP's propensity to rebel is extremely limited once we control for the MPs' intake cohort. And, *pace* the MP quoted above, experience on a local council does not help to instil loyalty to the party whip. Quite the reverse: experience on a local council appears to make MPs more likely to rebel.<sup>48</sup>

The second potential problem is that for these factors to explain the differential behaviour we also need to show that the newly elected women have more (or less) of this factor than other MPs. For example, if the age of the women MPs is a valid explanation, it is not enough for an MP's age to influence their behaviour (as it does), we also need to show that the newly elected women are younger than some comparison group. Since we showed (above) that the differences between the new men and new women are less dramatic (though still clear) than between the new women and the rest of the PLP, in what follows we compare the new women with the new men. Using the categories outlined above, we start by examining the MPs' ideology or beliefs.

*Ideology and beliefs.* One of the key issues in studies of legislative voting is the extent to which legislative cohesion is artificial (the result of disciplinary pressures) or natural (resulting from agreement).<sup>49</sup> For if MPs agree, why should they rebel? It could be, for example, that the new women were noticeably more 'Blairite' than their colleagues. If they were, then it should not be surprising that they did not rebel.

As part of the 1997 BRS, MPs were asked a series of questions about their ideological positions, including some basic scalar questions designed to tap their underlying political values. The scales measure their left-right self-placement, as well as the trade-offs between inflation and unemployment, taxation and public spending, nationalization and privatization, integration within the EU, and the issue of sex equality. Table 4 shows the responses to these questions in the BRS, split between the new women and the new men.<sup>50</sup>

As Table 4 shows, there were few noticeable differences between the newly elected women and their male colleagues. On three of the scales, the women were more to the right (although not by much). On the other three, they were more to the left (although again not by much).<sup>51</sup> But none of these differences was of a scale sufficient to be statistically

<sup>47</sup> Cowley, *Revolts and Rebellions*, chap. 6.

<sup>48</sup> Cowley, *Revolts and Rebellions*, pp. 113-14, 118.

<sup>49</sup> See, for example, Keith Krehbiel, 'Where's the Party?', *British Journal of Political Science*, 23 (1993), 235-66; or Keith Krehbiel, 'Paradoxes of Parties in Congress', *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, 14 (1999), 31-64.

<sup>50</sup> A low score indicates a left-wing, or pro-European, response.

<sup>51</sup> Every new Labour woman who responded to the survey scored 1 on the question about the role of women in society, the most 'pro-women' response possible.

significant. The only difference that approached statistical significance was the question on the government's economic priorities (jobs/prices), where the new women were slightly more to the left than their male peers.<sup>52</sup>

Similarly, if we look at their scores on the standard socialist/*laissez faire* scale, or the libertarian/authoritarian scale, we find few significant differences.<sup>53</sup> On the two overall scale scores there are no significant differences between the new men and the new women.<sup>54</sup> Of the twelve questions that make up the scales, there were differences on just two, both on the libertarian/authoritarian scale. The new women were somewhat less tolerant of homosexuality than the new men and (more broadly) less tolerant of those with unconventional life styles (with in both cases the difference being statistically significant).<sup>55</sup> But the liberal/authoritarian scale was a very poor predictor of voting behaviour. On the variables that better explained voting during the parliament – such as the tax/spend scale or the socialist/*laissez-faire* scale – there are no noticeable differences between the new women and their male colleagues.

There is thus little evidence that the new women constituted a Blairite praetorian guard within the PLP. It is difficult to argue that the new Labour women constitute an ideologically distinct grouping within the PLP, let alone 'true believers' for Blairism.

*Roles.* The idea that MPs' roles influence behaviour is a long-standing one, best exemplified in Donald Searing's magisterial work on parliament in the 1970s, *Westminster's World*.<sup>56</sup> How MPs behave can be influenced by how they see their role in parliament. MPs who see their role as being to represent their party are less likely to have voted against it than those who believe that they are in parliament to represent their constituents or to voice their own opinions.<sup>57</sup> Here we find more mixed evidence. Table 5 shows the responses to the questions about party discipline contained in the BRS.

If anything, the new women claim to be *more* willing to vote against the party line than the new men (although the differences are not statistically significant). The SPG survey, on the other hand, produced slightly different results. While there was almost no difference in the proportion of new men and new women who thought that representing the party was their most important task (16 per cent of women, compared to 14 per cent of men), there was a slightly larger difference in the proportions who said that they relied on the party

<sup>52</sup>  $p = 0.076$ .

<sup>53</sup> Anthony Heath, Geoffrey Evans and Jean Martin, 'The Measurement of Core Beliefs and Values: The Development of Balanced Socialist/Laissez-faire and Libertarian/Authoritarian scales', *British Journal of Political Science*, 24 (1994), 115–31.

<sup>54</sup> The new men averaged 12.7 on the socialism scale, compared to 12.6 for the new women. The scores on the libertarian/authoritarian scale were 13.2 and 14.2 respectively.

<sup>55</sup> More precisely, in both cases, the new women were overwhelmingly tolerant, but they were *less* tolerant than were the men. The difference lay in the degree of tolerance. For example, when asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement that 'Homosexual relations are always wrong', 3 per cent of new women agreed strongly and 3 per cent agreed (no new men agreed at all), 7 per cent of new women neither agreed nor disagreed (compared with 3 per cent of new men), 26 per cent of new women disagreed (24 per cent of new men), and 61 per cent of new women disagreed strongly (73 per cent of new men), and 61 per cent of new women disagreed strongly (73 per cent of new men). The question on 'unconventional lifestyles' yielded similar differences.

<sup>56</sup> Donald D. Searing, *Westminster's World* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1994). See also the special issue of the *Journal of Legislative Studies* on 'Members of Parliament in Western Europe: Roles and Behaviour', 3 (1997). No one can hope to replicate Searing's study, with its 521 interviews, constituting 83 per cent of the Commons. Since it took him twenty years to publish his findings, that might not be a bad thing.

<sup>57</sup> Cowley, *Revolts and Rebellions*, pp. 106–7.

TABLE 5 Views on Party Discipline, by Sex

	New women	New men	Difference
MPs should vote with their party, regardless of their conscience	14	20	- 6
MPs should vote with their party, regardless of the national interest	7	9	- 2

*Note:* The figures show the proportion who agree, or agree strongly, with each of the statements. The difference is the percentage of new women minus the percentage of new men.

whips when voting. A majority of the new women (57 per cent) said that they relied on the party whips 'nearly always' when voting, compared to 46 per cent of the new men.

*Self-interest.* So far we have looked at what could be termed creditable (or in parliamentary terms, honourable) reasons for the cohesion of MPs. If MPs agree with the party, or see their role at Westminster as to be a delegate of the party, then why should they rebel? But the most commonly discussed reasons for MPs sticking to the party line are usually less creditable or honourable: that MPs are somehow pressurized into voting with their party, and that they capitulate in order to further their own interests. In addition to newness (examined above), here we investigate four surrogate variables for self-interest: self-declared ambition, age, marginality and the influence of MPs' local party.

MPs who harbour little or no ambition for ministerial office, and who therefore have less to fear from the removal of patronage, are more likely to vote against the party line.<sup>58</sup> However, the BRS revealed almost no difference between the future ambitions of the new women and those of the new men. Some 61 per cent of the new women wanted to be a government minister in ten years' time, compared to 64 per cent of the new men, a difference that was not statistically significant. Differing levels of ambition in themselves do not, therefore, appear to be behind the differing levels of cohesion.

Age is also an excellent indicator of an MP's propensity to rebel. This relationship is strikingly clear from Table 6, which shows the ages (when elected) of the eleven rebellious new Labour women, along with the number of times they rebelled.

All but three of the eleven rebels are older than the average age of women of the 1997 intake (43) – and these three are near the bottom of the league table of rebels (having cast just four dissenting votes between them). Of the top six rebels, all but one is aged 50 or more (with the one who is not, Jenny Jones, aged 49 when elected).

Yet although this is interesting as an explanation for rebellion, it appears to do little to explain the differential rates of rebellion between new women and the new men because there is no evidence that the new women are especially young. The average age of a woman MP elected for the first time in 1997 was 43.2 years, almost identical to the average for a new male MP (43.5).<sup>59</sup> So, although age is important when explaining the propensity to rebel in general, it does not appear to be a plausible explanation of why the new women are not rebelling when compared to the new men.

MPs also face two important forces external to the Commons: their local constituency

<sup>58</sup> Cowley, *Revolts and Rebellions*, pp. 109–10.

<sup>59</sup> The median age of both new men and new women was 43. The new men and the new women also contain almost identical proportions of MPs aged over 50 (21.5 per cent and 21.0 per cent respectively).

TABLE 6 *'Rebellious' New Labour Women MPs and Age*

Name	Number of dissenting votes	Age when elected
Ann Cryer	16	57
Betty Williams	16	52
Julie Morgan	14	52
Jenny Jones	6	49
Eileen Gordon	5	50
Christine McCafferty	4	51
Janet Dean	3	48
Christine Butler	2	53
Tess Kingham	2	33
Oona King	1	29
Geraldine Smith	1	35

party (which has the power to deselect them) and their electorate (which enjoys the ultimate power to eject them from parliament altogether). In practice, neither appears to influence behaviour within the Commons.

Despite some academic folklore – and the desire of the Labour leadership – there is little evidence that local parties exerted much influence on an MP's propensity to rebel.<sup>60</sup> Moreover, there are no differences between the new men and the new women when it comes to the attitudes of their constituency parties. Using the left/right scale from the BRS, the new men had constituency parties that were, on average, 0.2 points to the left of them on the ideological scale. The new women also average a difference of 0.2, also on the left.

Equally unconvincing are those attempts to explain cohesion as resulting from marginality, cited above by several of the new women. For one thing, the marginality of MPs has very little impact on propensity to rebel, once we control for the intake cohort.<sup>61</sup> Moreover, the scale of Labour's victory brought in many MPs who were not expected to win their seats, named the 'unlikely lads' by one of their number.<sup>62</sup> Importantly, these people were disproportionately likely to be unlikely lads rather than lasses (just 15 per cent of these MPs elected in the unexpected gains were women), because AWS applied only to key (winnable) and inheritor seats (where the incumbent MP was standing down). And therefore, the new women did *not* sit in the most marginal seats. The average marginality of a newly elected woman MP in 1997 was 19 per cent; that of a newly elected man was 17 per cent. So while the newly elected women MPs did sit for more marginal seats than the rest of the PLP that was because they were newly elected, rather than because they were women, and compared to the male MPs of the new intake – who were twice as likely to

<sup>60</sup> For the folklore, see Austin Ranney, *Pathways to Parliament* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), p. 281; for the desires of the Labour leadership, see 'Labour moves to rein in rebels', *The Times*, 27 May 1998; and for the almost complete lack of any effect, see Cowley, *Revolts and Rebellions*, pp. 111–13.

<sup>61</sup> Cowley, *Revolts and Rebellions*, pp. 113–14.

<sup>62</sup> Cowley, *Revolts and Rebellions*, pp. 10–11.

rebel – they actually sat for slightly safer seats. It seems difficult therefore to attribute much significance to the marginality of their constituencies as a cause of their cohesion.

That said, the very scale of Labour's victory may produce a partial explanation for the differential cohesion. Many of these unexpected victors were largely unknown to the central party before their election, bringing fears within the party hierarchy that they might cause trouble once at Westminster. The day after the election, Peter Mandelson ordered every one of Labour's regional press officers to provide the party headquarters at Millbank with a list of 'little-known and potentially troublesome new MPs'.<sup>63</sup> They identified at least twenty 'suspect' MPs.<sup>64</sup> And indeed, these unlikely victors became slightly more likely to rebel – although the differences were neither huge nor statistically significant.<sup>65</sup> This, therefore, although not an effect of marginality *per se*, might be a plausible explanation for a slightly lower level of rebellion amongst the new women.

*Other characteristics.* Of course, different MPs may respond to these various pressures in different ways. Moreover, they may respond to them in different ways because of their different personal characteristics. Here we examine three variables previously found to relate to rebellion: education, group membership, and previous political history.

There is little evidence that the answer lies in the MPs' educational backgrounds. Some 71 per cent of the new women had been educated at university, compared to 72 per cent of the new men. We can also swiftly reject membership of the Campaign Group. Three women from the 1997 intake joined the Campaign Group (5 per cent of the women elected in 1997), compared to six men (also 5 per cent).<sup>66</sup>

A rare piece of evidence demonstrating some difference comes with the final variable, when we examine the previous political history of the MPs. The new women MPs were disproportionately likely *not* to have been local councillors. Almost three-quarters of the newly elected men (74 per cent) had been councillors, compared to exactly two-thirds of the new women (although this difference is not statistically significant). And since experience in local government appears to make MPs more rebellious, this is at least a plausible explanation for the different rates of cohesion.

#### MULTIVARIATE ANALYSIS

There appears therefore to be little evidence to support most of the attempts to explain away the difference between the new women and the new men. Only two of the variables examined point in a consistent direction. The unexpected victors (who were more likely to rebel) were disproportionately men. And MPs with a background in local government (who are more likely to rebel) were also disproportionately men. Other evidence is more mixed – such as with political roles – or appears to show no effect at all.

Of course, many of these variables are not independent of one another. Some may be exaggerating the effect of individual variables upon an MP's propensity to rebel. Others

<sup>63</sup> Derek Draper, *Blair's Hundred Days* (London: Faber, 1997), p. 8.

<sup>64</sup> *Sunday Times*, 23 November 1997. One party insider described some of those elected as 'flotsam and jetsam left-wing candidates' (*Sunday Telegraph*, 4 May 1997).

<sup>65</sup> A total of 34 per cent of the 'unlikely lads' rebelled, compared to 25 per cent of the new MPs who expected (or realistically hoped) to win their seats, although this difference is not statistically significant (Cowley, *Revolts and Rebellions*, p. 114).

<sup>66</sup> Ann Cryer, Eileen Gordon and Tess Kingham. Gordon's membership of the Group was, however, the source of some controversy. She denied it ('I don't join groups') but was regularly listed in Socialist Campaign Group News as a member. 'Hard-left group attracts new MPs', *Sunday Times*, 21 September 1997.



may be masking interrelationships. In order to find out which variables are exerting an independent influence on an MP's propensity to rebel, we need some multivariate analysis.

The dependent variable utilized here is simply Rebelled (coded as 1)/Not rebelled (0). The independent variables are analysed in two stages. First, data on the backgrounds or characteristics of MPs, where we have data on all MPs, is used. Then, secondly, data from the BRS, where we have data for a minority of MPs, is added. Our second model is thus more fully developed, but suffers from a lower number of cases. The first set of independent variables includes Age (at the time of the 1997 election), Percentage Constituency Marginality, Unexpected Victor (coded 1 for yes, 0 for no), University Educated (coded 1 for yes, 0 for no), Campaign Group Membership (coded 1 for yes, 0 for no), Sex (coded 1 for women, 0 for men) and Council Experience (coded 1 for yes, 0 for no). The second model then adds in data from the BRS: Ideology (using the tax and spend scale, since that measured propensity to rebel best of all the ideological variables), Delegate Role (coded 1 for yes, 0 for no), Ambition for Government Office (coded 1 for yes, 0 for no), and, lastly, a variable measuring the Difference between the MP's ideological position and their constituency party (where positive scores indicate that the party was to the right of the MP).

The results are shown in Table 7. The first model – using data on all MPs – finds three variables exerting a statistically significant impact on the propensity to rebel: Age, University Education, and Sex. Of these, the third is the most important for our purposes here, because it means that even once we control for everything else, and when examining just the new MPs, Sex remains a significant variable. By contrast, a similar logistic regression (not reported here in full for reasons of space) concentrating on just the longer-serving MPs does not find Sex to be significant. The presence of Sex as a significant independent variable amongst the new MPs, and its absence from the older MPs, confirms that what we have with the new women is not a sex effect, but something specific to that group of women MPs.

When we introduce the attitudinal data (Model 2), however, only two variables appear to remain statistically significant: Ideology and Age. Sex continues to exert an influence on the propensity to rebel, with women MPs being less likely to have rebelled, but the difference is no longer large enough (or consistent enough) to be statistically significant. Yet this model, because it is examining only the new MPs, and of the new MPs only those where there is attitudinal data from the BRS, is based on just eighty-one cases in total. The smaller the number of cases, *ceteris paribus*, the larger any differences need to be before they are significant. And even here, Sex only just fails to be statistically significant.<sup>67</sup> What appears to be happening is that, once we control for everything else that might be explaining the differences, Sex still appears to exert an influence on the propensity to rebel; even controlling for everything else, the women from the 1997 intake were less likely to rebel than their male peers. The difference is not large enough (or consistent enough) to be statistically significant (that is, large enough or consistent enough for there not to be the possibility that it was created by chance), but it still exists.

This finding does, though, help put some of the claims about the behaviour of the newly elected women MPs into perspective. The initial large difference in behaviour between the newly elected women and the rest of the PLP becomes smaller (but still statistically significant), once we compare the new women with the new men. It becomes smaller still

<sup>67</sup> Sex:  $p = 0.086$ ; Council Experience:  $p = 0.054$ .

TABLE 7 *Logistic Regression, Labour Rebellions, New MPs, 1997–2001*

	<i>Model 1</i> <i>B</i>	<i>Model 2</i> <i>B</i>
Ideology		
Tax/Spend	—	– 0.90*
Roles		
Delegate	—	– 10.84
Self-interest		
Ambition	—	– 0.54
Age	0.12***	0.21**
Constituency Party	—	0.31
% majority	– 0.01	– 0.10
Unexpected Victor	– 0.16	– 0.10
Other characteristics		
University Educated	– 0.96*	– 1.37
Campaign Group	10.26	16.85
Sex	– 1.29**	– 2.33
Council Background	0.83	3.99
Constant	– 5.96***	– 7.73
% correctly predicted	78.0	86.4
Nagelkerke $R^2$	0.40	0.66
<i>N</i>	182	81

\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

(and no longer statistically significant) once we control for the women's other characteristics. There *is* still a difference between the newly elected women and the newly elected men, but it is a difference of degree, not direction. But attempts to explain that difference away completely remain unconvincing.

#### WOMEN'S STYLE OF POLITICS

However, the majority of the women MPs themselves do not seek to explain this difference away. Rather, they claim it is part of a different, women's, style of political behaviour.

The contention that women practise politics in a different, feminized, way to men is a long-standing one. Women are said to 'introduce a kinder, gentler politics', one that is 'characterized by co-operation rather than conflict, collaboration rather than hierarchy, honesty rather than sleaze'.<sup>68</sup> The one explanation for the new women's loyalty that receives the greatest support from the women MPs – being mentioned by more than half – is precisely this: that women MPs employ a different style of politics.<sup>69</sup>

<sup>68</sup> See, for example, Bochel and Briggs, 'Do Women Make a Difference?'; Norris, 'Women Politicians'; Norris and Lovenduski, *Political Recruitment*; Karen Ross, 'Women's Space in "Male" Space', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 55 (2002), 189–201.

<sup>69</sup> Sarah Childs, 'A Feminized Style of Politics' (*British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, forthcoming) found that almost two-thirds of the interviewed newly elected women MPs thought that women MPs had a different style of politics in general; just over half thought this was the cause of the differences in cohesion.

Importantly, this style of politics was perceived by many of the women to be both distinct from, and more effective than, a style of politics involving overt rebellion, the latter being perceived as reflecting a masculine mode of politics more concerned with gesture politics than effecting change. (Several of the women also thought that loyalty itself was a female attribute.)<sup>70</sup> Many of the newly elected women were also forthright in their questioning of the assumption that voting with the government was a negative activity. As one said: 'I don't actually think that loyal women or loyal MP actually equals bad'.<sup>71</sup>

We have already demonstrated that a simple sex difference as an explanation of the women's loyalty does not stand up to empirical analysis, but some of the newly elected women believed that this style of politics was not shared by all women MPs, rather that some of the more established women MPs practised what they saw as a 'masculine' style of politics.<sup>72</sup> Before 1997, this argument goes, when the number of women MPs was significantly lower, women MPs had to 'outmacho the men' (they had had to be 'hard and tough [and] played the game like one of the boys') but with the increase in number comes a 'culture of confidence' that allows women MPs to behave in a feminized way.<sup>73</sup> One senior male MP put it in the following terms: in the past the women MPs who were elected were 'male women' or 'atypical women' but now they were 'conventional women'.<sup>74</sup> Another put it more bluntly: the previous women MPs were 'odd'.<sup>75</sup> The difference, therefore, is one of gender, not sex.<sup>76</sup>

Rather than rebelling, the new Labour women MPs claim to operate 'behind the scenes': 'we've probably tend[ed] to use the tools that are available to us behind the scenes as a first course of action ... I have always found it possible to use the avenues that are open behind the scenes'.<sup>77</sup> They consider that criticism can be communicated to government in many different ways through lobbying, private conversations and holding meetings with ministers and through the PLP's backbench groups.<sup>78</sup> One woman MP discussed her loyalty in analogous terms to the family: 'Sometimes I don't like one or two things my ... [children] do ... privately I will give them all sorts of grief about it ... publicly I support them wholeheartedly'.<sup>79</sup> Whilst it is hard to document such behind the scenes activities, the women MPs themselves are convinced that it is important:

[A] lot of working behind the scenes goes on and I think [that] is not appreciated, anyone who thinks that ... all the Labour women are too loyal, if I can put it that way, has not been at

<sup>70</sup> Interviews, 19 June 2000, 10 May 2000, 16 May 2000.

<sup>71</sup> Interview, 22 May 2000.

<sup>72</sup> For a fuller account, see Childs, 'A Feminized Style of Politics'. Many of the newly elected women also claimed (i) that the newly elected men are more likely to reject the traditional masculinized style of politics; and (ii) that party differences are also important.

<sup>73</sup> Childs, 'The New Labour Women MPs', p. 67; Ross, 'Women's Space in "Male" Space'.

<sup>74</sup> Interview, 6 January 2000.

<sup>75</sup> Interview, 21 March 2000.

<sup>76</sup> Gender is 'a culturally shaped group of attributes and behaviours given to the female or the male'. Sex is biological, but gender is a social construction (Maggie Humm, *The Dictionary of Feminist Theory* (Hemel Hempstead, Herts.: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989), pp. 84–5). For a more sophisticated discussion, see Judith Squires, *Gender in Political Theory* (Cambridge: Polity, 1999).

<sup>77</sup> Interview, 23 May 2000.

<sup>78</sup> A point made repeatedly in interviews conducted in 2000: 13 June, 22 June, 8 June, 23 May, 16 May, 12 July, 15 May, 20 June, 10 July.

<sup>79</sup> Interview, 10 May 2000.

meetings with say the Home Secretary over hunting, with the Trade and Industry Secretary over employment rights.<sup>80</sup>

Many of the women also rejected the idea that rebelling was an effective strategy to achieve reform.

If you are a sort of macho ‘oh I’m going to vote against the government’ ... I don’t [think] that your influence is even as much as the people that are saying ‘look Jack, this is ... not working ... you don’t really get anywhere [by] being a rebel ... people [who] vote against the government [are] ... not really doing anything other than making a gesture.’<sup>81</sup>

Or, as Fiona Mactaggart argued in a Fabian pamphlet:

Public rebellion is not generally a reliable indicator of the ability of a Member of Parliament to achieve change, but you can count votes. Voting against your own party is one way to claim political virility and independence, but it doesn’t get results unless the total number actually changes the legislation.<sup>82</sup>

Moreover, as Phyllis Starkey pointed out, much of the media criticism was based on the premise that ‘only MPs who criticise the government in public are influencing Labour’s policies’, and that ‘constructive debate does not make for good copy’.<sup>83</sup>

Some of the women argued that supporting the government in the lobby has the effect of ensuring that when they raise criticisms with ministers they are more likely to be listened and responded to: ‘If those of us who genuinely vote with the government come along and say “this has got to stop” you know people listen ...’.<sup>84</sup> She then added, discussing specifically the cut in lone parent benefit:

I don’t think that any government would have reversed it [the lone parent cut] if there had been a mass rebellion ... if they’d won it by a handful of votes, I don’t think then a few months later they would have turned it around ...

Another MP agreed:

I think particularly on that [lone parent] bill and on others there were women who have abstained or voted with the government ... [they felt] we have been loyal, so what are you going to do about it? ... we didn’t vote against you we voted for you [pause] ... we should have something in return, what are you going to do?<sup>85</sup>

In themselves, the newly elected Labour women MPs’ claims about their loyalty are revealing, for they show that many of the women MPs have thought through, and can defend, their decision to remain loyal to their party. Their loyalty, therefore appears to result not from being Stepford Wives or spineless, but – at least for more than half of them – from a belief in a different style of politics. It also reflects a calculating and instrumental approach to cohesion and rebellion, rather than the unthinking one portrayed in the media.

Plausible as this is, though, we are faced with a problem: for this to explain the behavioural difference between the newly elected women and the rest of the PLP, we need to show that the new women were *more likely* to practise this style of politics than other

<sup>80</sup> Interview, 15 May 2000.

<sup>81</sup> Interview, 15 May 2000.

<sup>82</sup> Fiona Mactaggart, *Women in Parliament: Their Contribution to Labour’s First 1000 Days* (London: Fabian Society, 2000).

<sup>83</sup> Letter to *The Times*, 4 April 1998.

<sup>84</sup> Interview, 12 July 2000.

<sup>85</sup> Interview, 20 June 2000.

MPs. Interviews with male Labour MPs and with the longer-serving women often reveal almost identical explanations for their loyalty.<sup>86</sup> They too work behind the scenes. They too take problems to ministers. They too often have a calculating and instrumental approach to cohesion and rebellion. The idea that the newly elected women are more likely to use, or are more effective at using, such behind-the-scenes avenues is anyway a disputed one. One of the more established women MPs, for example – once she had stopped laughing – described the idea that women were better at behind-the-scenes pressure as ‘absolute nonsense’ and ‘an excuse’.<sup>87</sup> Even one of the newly elected women argued that such behind the scenes contacts were less useful than they might appear:

I do feel sometimes [that] people ... who have not been in what I call the hard edge of politics before think that because they say something and they appeared to be listened to [that] that’s a very big deal and actually I think it makes them think they’ve been listened to but really [they] have minimal impact ... I’m probably over cynical.<sup>88</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The lack of rebellions by the newly elected women MPs was one of the most striking features of the 1997 parliament and one that attracted much criticism. As this article has shown, the high levels of cohesion are not merely the product of biased, misogynistic or inaccurate media reporting (although there was undoubtedly more than a little of this). Rather there was a difference between the voting of the newly elected women and the rest of the PLP.

Moreover, many of the explanations that seek to explain away this difference do not stand up to empirical verification. Once we control for all of the variables, we find that the difference between the new men and the new women fails to remain statistically significant, but only just (at the conventional measurement of  $p < 0.05$ ), even with a very small sample size. Some difference still remains.

We are left with three possible explanations. The first is that put forward by most of the women’s critics: that there was, for some reason, something feeble or second rate about this particular batch of women MPs that was responsible for their differential rate of rebellion. It is not an argument that either of the authors of this article feel is convincing, but there is almost no way of definitively disproving these sort of claims.

The second explanation is that it is possible to explain the difference away, but that this analysis has failed to do so, either (i) because it has failed to include variables that are responsible for the difference; or because (ii) the data employed are not sufficiently fine to spot the differences between the different groups. Both are possibilities.

For example, it could conceivably be that despite being similarly ambitious, the new women perceive the costs of rebelling to be greater than do the men. This argument was contained in Douglas Hurd’s latest novel (of all places), in an argument between Roger Courtauld, a former Conservative Home Secretary, and Sarah Tunstall, another senior Conservative politician:

‘You don’t understand about women in politics.’

‘Don’t change the subject, Sarah.’

‘It is the subject. Or part of it, as it concerns me.’

<sup>86</sup> Cowley, *Revolts and Rebellions*, chaps. 8–9.

<sup>87</sup> Interview, 4 July 2000.

<sup>88</sup> Interview, 15 June 2000.

‘What do you mean?’

She tidied her hair with one hand. ‘There are still too few of us. We still feel it’s a world run by men, under the rules they made. Loyalty to the party is one of them.’

‘Rules are there to be broken, when necessary.’

‘That’s a silly remark, as you know. Frivolous, masculine. Women feel they must hold on to the rules even more tightly because they did not make them. Men can fool about with rebellion and disloyalty. We women can’t afford that.’<sup>89</sup>

Of course, as a general explanation for cohesion, this argument falls down because women MPs in general clearly have not felt so constrained, having been just as likely to ‘fool about’ with rebellion as much as, if not more than, the next man. But if for some reason this particular batch of women had a higher than normal perception of the cost of disloyalty, then this could be (part of) the explanation for their behaviour. Unfortunately, we have no way of knowing if this is the case or if other variables not examined here could explain the difference. Given what data are available, some difference still remains.

The dominant explanation put forward by the new women themselves is that they ‘do’ politics differently. The problem is that it is extremely hard – if not impossible – ever to test this empirically. It is at best a plausible argument, one that awaits further research and one that is far more positive to the newly elected women than the standard media line that they are just too feeble to stand up to the nasty whips. Given that many of the other explanations appear to have little validity, it will continue to be used by many of the newly elected women and their supporters, whilst their detractors will dismiss it as wishful thinking.

<sup>89</sup> Douglas Hurd, *Image in the Water* (London: Little, Brown, 2001), p. 236.

