House of Lords: Relevant or Relic? An Analysis of the Political Relevance of Legislature Upper Houses

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House of Lords: Relevant or Relic? An Analysis of the Political Relevance of Legislature Upper Houses

Abstract
This purpose of this paper is to explore the political relevance of parliamentary upper houses. The paper attempts to give both a definitive definition of political relevance and to determine if upper chambers meet this definition. To do this the example of the British House of Lords, a hallmark example of weak upper chambers, is used as a case study.
The House of Lords has been a legislative institution in Great Britain for over seven-hundred years. However, in modern politics the British people view the Lords as a relic of a bygone aristocratic age where those of “high birth” ruled over the common people. For the past few decades, there has been a heated debate in the United Kingdom over the future of the Lords. Past reforms have included removing hereditary peers, strictly limiting the Lords’ power, and changing the method of choosing members of the House. For this reason, it is fair to ask if the House of Lords is still politically relevant in British politics today. However, this question can, and should, extend to encompass all parliamentary upper houses. This is because of the trend for bicameral legislatures to concentrate power in the lower chamber, the people’s chamber, as opposed to the upper house, which is considered as the more prestigious but less powerful house. This paper sets out to accomplish three goals: the first is to compile an all-encompassing definition of political relevance, something that the political scientist community has not addressed before; second, to develop a method of determining political relevance; and third to examine whether or not parliamentary upper houses are still politically relevant using this method. To do so this paper will examine the weakest of the weak upper houses the British House of Lords. The purpose of this is to show that if even the House of Lords, the hallmark example of the weak upper house is still politically relevant, and then it can inferred that all the other upper houses in modern democracies are also politically relevant. Once complete this paper will show that although upper houses are not as powerful as lower houses, they are nonetheless relevant in the political system.

There has been much debate on the relevance of upper houses of parliaments in the modern age. While some argue that upper houses are relics of a bygone age, others argue that in many upper houses, while being less powerful than lower houses; still have a role to play in today’s political environment. In this section, the current role of upper houses will be examined. An examination of one specific example, the British Houses of Lords, the hallmark of “weak” upper houses will then be done.

In contemporary politics the upper house have become almost relics in many political systems. With the exception of the United States, in all bicameral parliaments the lower house holds the majority of the political power. (In the United States the upper house, the Senate, is superior to the lower house, the House of Representatives, in both precedent and in actual legislative power.) (Fish and Kroenig, 2009) For the purposes of this paper, the United States Senate will be ignored as the exception to the rule that upper houses are weaker than lower houses in bicameral legislatures. What has become an important issue for debate among the political science community is if the upper house is still a relevant body.

Sir Ivor Jennings argues that upper houses are really only politically relevant in federal systems, such as the United States. Nevertheless, those in unitary systems they can become redundant and unnecessary. (Jennings 1958) De Minon agrees with this point, but goes further to argue that even in federal systems the usefulness of bicameral
legislatures is quickly disappearing. This is due to the current trend of federalist states to become more centralized. Moreover, because of this centralization the upper houses are not as necessary. De Minon points to Germany as a prime example of a federal state with a centralized government and weak upper house. De Minon argues that this uselessness of upper houses leaves them irrelevant (De Minon, 1975).

Money and Tsebelis address this issue of bicameralism in federal and unitary systems. They argue that the primary difference is that in federal system, there is a balance of power between the two houses, but in unitary systems, an upper house can become redundant because it does not have a clear constituency. In addition, in unitary systems the primary role of the upper house is to provide a “learned” body who can act as the protectors of that state’s constitution. (Money and Tsebelis 1992) In other terms, Money and Tsebelis argue that the upper houses in both systems are not “useless”, to use de Minon’s word, but that they are, on the surface at least, provided responsibilities. (Money and Tsebelis 1992)

Druckman, Martin, and Thies also disagree with de Minon. They argue that even if the upper house is useless and weak that does not automatically transition into irrelevance. They argue that even the weakest upper houses still have some influence in their political systems. This is because one power that is consistent throughout upper houses is the power either to veto legislation, or delay legislation. Though many countries have put restrictions on when their upper houses can do this, it nevertheless gives them political capital. Whether this influence translates into outright power is debatable but not, according to the authors, the influence itself. (Druckman, Martin, and Thies 2005)

It is time to turn attention to the House of Lords in particular. Most view the House of Lords is the main example of a “weak” upper house. In fact, many disregard the house completely and argue that it has no relevance in modern Britain. This was the case as early 1929. In that year, Eugene Parker Chase argued that the people would never consider the Lords legitimate while its members are selected “by providence and not merit”. (Chase 1929, 572) This was especially true before the passage of the Life Peerage Act of 1958. The Life Peerage Act addressed one of the most controversial elements of the House of Lords. Its members inherited their seats by creating a system where peers are appointed only for their life and their children could not inherit their title. The new law only allows these "Life Peers" to sit in the House of Lords. The Prime Minister appoints these peers, while the monarch confirms the selection. More recently, Russell and Cornes argue that because the House of Lords have no component that is elected, either directly or indirectly, then the House is illegitimate. In order to create legitimacy, they argue, the people of Britain must have some voice in who is allowed to sit in the House. (Russell and Cornes 2001, 89) Peter Dorey goes further to argue that unless the entirety of the House of Lords is democratically elected then the House is illegitimate. (Dorey 2006, 15)

Others argue that the Lords are irrelevant because they have very little authority. What no one will argue is that the House of Lords has no independent authority of the House of Commons. Prior to 2009, the House of Lords functioned as the highest court in the Britain, but that power was revoked when the Supreme Court of the United Kingdom was formed. The powers it does have are meant to check the power of the House of Commons: the ability to delay any legislation (except for money bills) for a maximum of one year; the power to introduce legislation; the ability to adopt
amendments to legislation sent up from the House of Commons; and the power to adopt or defeat legislation from the Commons. The Lords possess these de jure powers, meaning that these are the Lords’ powers according to the written law. What is in doubt is how these de jure powers translate into de facto powers, meaning the powers the Lords have in practice, (In practical terms these powers are often different) or if they transition at all. Chase argues that even though the Lords may have these powers on paper, the Commons can easily overturn the will of the Lords. (Chase 1929, 573) Patterson and Mughan point out that, compared to other European bicameral parliaments, it is much easier in the British system for the lower house to overrule the upper. (Patterson and Mughan 2001) This highlights the uneven balance of powers within the British parliament.

Another strong argument made in defense of the Lords is that since the Commons appoints the Lords, the Commons control the decisions of the Lords. Dorey makes this assertion saying that it is impossible to forget that the Prime Minister and his government from the Commons now appoint the Lords, and that because the Commons control membership to the Lords they are not to be considered autonomous. (Dorey 2006, 20) Nevertheless, this argument is rather unconvincing; first, he fails to realize that once the Commons have appointed a Lord, that Lord is there for life; this means that once the Lords are appointed they can do what they like, within the confines of the Lords’ Constitutional responsibilities, without having to worry about retaliation from the Commons. In this sense, the Lords are comparable to Justices on the United States Supreme Court. Once appointed it is difficult to influence voting behavior.

The previous arguments are the main arguments that deal with the Lords being politically irrelevant, but there are scholars who argue that the Lords do retain some relevancy. In terms of the makeup of the Lords, Alexandra Kelso agrees with Russell and Cornes Kelso that there must be a democratic element to the selection of Lords, but argues that the Life Peerage Act does create an indirect election for the Lords, since they are de facto chosen by the democratically elected Prime Minister. This, Kelso argues, does give the Lords legitimacy. The major oversight Kelso, Russel, and Scaria make is that none of them address if the British people themselves view the House as legitimate.(Kelso 2006, 14) This is a crucial point because, not only does an institution need legitimacy legally, but it needs to appear to be legitimate as well.

Russell and Sciara address the issue of how powerful the Lords are as a legislative body. They argue that the Lords have gained more power by using defeats, or striking down legislation sent up to them by the Commons. The authors examined all of the cases in which the Lords defeated a bill in chamber and the reactions of the Commons. In all of these cases, the Commons worked with the Lords to reach an agreement to get the legislation passed rather than overruling them. They divided these compromises into three categories: a win for the Commons, meaning they got most of what they wanted at the expense of the Lords; a draw, both Houses got something they wanted; and a win for the Lords. The results showed that between 1996 and 2006 when the Lords won 40.1% of the time. (Russell and Scalia 2008, 5) What this mean in terms of the authority of the House of Lords is that even though they may not have the power to translate their positions on issues into policy, they do have some power in the legislative process, if they did not this number would be much lower.
Russell and Sciara also examine how much power the Commons have over the Lords. They argue that the Lords are by no means a puppet of the Commons. They argue that this can clearly be seen in its regular use of defeats and delays. (Russell and Sciara 2008, 3) Kelso agrees with this point, but further argues that the tension between the Labour Party and the Lords during the 1990s is another indication of the Lords’ autonomy. If the Commons controlled the Lords, this tension would not exist. (Kelso 2006, 10) Even to Chase writing in the 1920s before the Peerage Act of 1958, the fact that the freely elected Commons did not have complete control over the, then, hereditary Lords was his greatest criticism of the House. (Chase 1929, 577) This is not to argue that these authors believe the Lords to be completely autonomous, but to argue that they are not merely a rubberstamp for the Commons. The Lords have control over their decisions and that these decisions are not dictated by the Commons. However, not everyone agrees that the Lords have at least some autonomy from the Commons.

Although academics in the past have attempted to answer several question regarding the legitimacy, authority, autonomy, and level of influence in the House of Lords, each has addressed these factors individually and not as a whole. None has taken the next step and examines these four factors together and their relationships to one another in order to understand fully the true political relevance of the Lords. Are they still relevant in the United Kingdom of today, or are they a relic of a bygone age. The exact question this paper addresses.

The most important question to ask of any institution is “is it politically relevant?” Webster dictionary defines relevant as having significant and demonstrable bearing on the matter at hand; meaning does a body have influence, in this case influence on policy and legislation. However, it is necessary for an institution, specifically a legislative institution, to have more than influence in order to be relevant. In order to be considered politically relevant a legislative institution must possess, or must appear to possess legitimacy, authority, and autonomy in addition to influence on legislation is this order of importance.

Perhaps the most important factor of political relevance is legitimacy, or by what, if any, right the institution has claim to power. Legitimacy can come in many forms; the most common form today is in the form of democratic legitimacy: the right to rule based on democratic elections. However, this right can be in other forms: legal legitimacy codified in laws and statues; control of the military can lead to dictatorial legitimacy; even divine right, or the idea of “God’s chosen ruler” is a form of political legitimacy. Legitimacy is vital for a political institution because if a populace does not view that body as being legitimate it has no incentive to follow those institutions orders. This is why I include dictatorial legitimacy, or right by might, because even though they may not be traditionally legitimate a dictator’s control over the military gives him a strong claim on power. (Hetherington, 1998)

The second most important factor of political relevance is authority. Now, many would intuitively think this would be the most important factor in political relevance, but remember that if a body is not viewed as legitimate it does not have a claim on power. This why Legitimacy must be established first. What authority means is what the institution can actually do; another term for this might be de facto powers. (Reed, 2001) Does the body have the authority to levy taxes, to declare war, to regulate trade, to print money, to approve treaties, to submit a budget, even to declare a national holiday
are all important questions because they demonstrate how much power that institution has. I am making a distinction here between de jure and de facto powers, because this is more helpful to this discussion. This is due to the realization that all legislative bodies will attempt to maximize their authority to the fullest extent allowable under the law. Even an institutions ability to create this maximization is a reflection of their authority.

The third factor for relevance is autonomy, whether or not the legislative body is governing, or is being governed. As with authority, autonomy builds upon the previous factors, and that the previous factors, legitimacy and authority, are necessary in order for a legislative body to be autonomous. The point is to examine whether the institution has control over itself and its decisions, or is merely a rubber stamp. Nevertheless, an institution can be legitimate and have some authority while not being autonomous. If that institution is a puppet, or if its decisions are dictated to it by another branch of government, or even another house of the same legislature, then that body is not truly autonomous. The parliament is usually dominated by the lower house with the upper having few if any means to assert what authority is has; this is an issue that many upper houses in parliamentary systems face. An example of this is would the institution be more analogous to the United States Congress, which is independent of the other two branches of government, the Executive and Judiciary, or to the Senate of the ancient Roman Empire which was controlled by the Executive branch.

The last factor is influence. This is the concept of whether or not an institution can change legislation in other parts of government to receive its preferred policies. This factor addresses those institutions mentioned above, which may not be completely autonomous but are still relevant to that political system. This is because those bodies still have some influence over the institutions that hold dominance over them, such as blocks on legislation, limited veto power, etc. This is the definitive difference between a body that is merely subservient, meaning they may not be autonomous but still have influence and body that is a only a rubberstamp, a body with neither autonomy nor influence. For example, in many European systems, the lower house of parliament carries dominance over the upper house, but in most instances, the upper house retains some influence over legislation.

So far, it has been established that in order for a legislative institution to be considered politically relevant it must have legitimacy and at least some independent authority, and either be autonomous or have influence on policy, or both. Therefore, it is necessary to determine if the House of Lords meet these qualifications. However, the more difficult task is how to quantify these separate factors and determine if the House of Lords possess them.

In order to determine if the House of Lords are legitimate it is necessary to first examine how that body was created. Was it codified in legislation, was it created by an individual, and was it established through the tenants of some religion? This will determine which type of legitimacy the Lords are basing themself off. However, this is not enough. In order to determine legitimacy it must be determined whether the population believes that the House is legitimate. Perception is the key here, because if the House is not viewed as legitimate then it is not legitimate, no matter how it was created or by what means it claims the power to legislate. In order to do this polling data will be collected in regards to how the people of Great Britain view the
House of Lords. The way in which it will establish that the House of Lords has independent authority is by examining what the House can and cannot do. These powers will then be examined and determine if these powers give the Lords any real authority. Autonomy will be determined by examining what checks the Commons have on the Lords, and how the Lords are chosen. These factors will show if the Lords are autonomous or if the Commons is controlling them. Lastly, the House’s level of influence will be investigated by examining how effective the Lords are at getting their positions passed in legislation. To do this the rate at which the Commons approves bills introduced in the Lords will be viewed. This rate will show how influential the Lords views are in the House of Commons. By the use of these measurements, one can develop a valid means to quantify the political relevance of the House of Lords.

Since this study will rely heavily on qualitative data, with some quantitative data, the reliability of the sources used will be paramount. All qualitative sources will have been peer reviewed and all quantitative sources, including polls, will come from only the most trusted British organizations.

The reason one can examine the House of Lords in order to assess the relevance of upper houses in bicameral legislatures is methodological in nature. As stated before the House of Lords is the hallmark example of the weak upper house, it is perceived as outdated, irrelevant, and unnecessary, which is common with most other upper houses. Nonetheless, because of the nature of its composition the reputation of the House of Lords suffers from these blemishes to a much greater degree than its elected counterparts. For this reason, the House of Lords can be incredibly useful in assessing the relevancy of all upper houses. Because, if it can show that even the House of Lords, the weakest of all upper houses, has some political relevance it will show that the other upper houses should still be politically relevant.

As stated above in order to establish legitimacy two factors will be looked at: what give the House legitimacy, and whether the public perceive the body to be legitimate. The foundations of the House of Lords lie in the Magna Carta of 1215, which created a council of twenty noblemen who had the authority to overrule the reigning monarch if his decrees violated their rights. From the period of the thirteenth century to the mid-nineteenth century, the House of Lords reigned as the premier House in the Parliament. It was only after the English Civil War and the subsequent Glorious Revolution that the Commons began to gain more power in the Parliament. (Miller 1962) However, the Commons would not become the dominant chamber until the reforms of the mid nineteenth century. In addition, though there is no British Constitution, the body of laws and statutes that have been taken to form the unwritten constitution clearly provides for the House of Lords. (Round 1915) What this is taken to mean is that the House of Lords can clearly claim to be legitimate based on the principle of legal legitimacy, the definition of which plainly mean legitimacy based on laws and statutes.

However, this only answers half the question of whether the House of Lords is legitimate or not. The more important question is whether the House of Lords is perceived as legitimate by the British people. While it is clear that the House is legally legitimate, this question is more difficult to answer. To answer this recent polling data and how it relates to the Lords will be examined. The following tables all represent polls taken by Ipsos MORI, the world’s largest research company, showing public opinion in the United Kingdom regarding the House of Lords.
The data in table 1 shows that between the years of 1999 and 2006 there was a marked increase in how the public viewed the legitimacy of the House of Lords. Among all of the British voters, forty-three percent believe that the Lords are now more legitimate than they were in the 1990s. It worth noting that conservative voters did not have an increase at the same level as the liberal voters. One explanation for this discrepancy is that during the time this poll was taken the liberals had a majority in the Lords. This rise in perception of legitimacy can be due to many factors, but is most likely due to the House of Lords Reform bill of 2005, which created an independent Supreme Court of the United Kingdom, a power that was previously held by the Lords. It may seem counterintuitive to think that a loss of power would result in a heightened sense of legitimacy, but this specific power given to the Lords was extremely unpopular the people of Britain who preferred an independent judiciary. So even though this law may have taken away power from the Lords, that power was replaced by popularity. This poll provides the best evidence that the Britons view the Lords as legitimate, but in order to be more thorough two other pools will be considered.

Although this exact question does not address legitimacy as directly as the previous table, one can make several inferences regarding how the people of Great Britain view the House of Lords. First, about one-sixth of the population believes that the House of Lords is in no need of reform, that the House is legitimate and functioning adequately. While a clear minority, it is more common than those that believe the House is a clear danger to British politics and must be reformed immediately, a mere seven percent. What is clear is that the overwhelming majority, 72%, believe that the House of Lords is in need of reform, but think that other issues are more important at the moment. This implies that the majority of the population does not see the Lords as a direct threat to their liberty. If the majority of people believed the House to be illegitimate, the number of people who believe that reform of the Lords is a top priority would be much higher.

In table 3 it can be seen that the British people as a whole, believe that when it comes to how well each House carries out its role, the House of Lords does a better job than the House of Commons. This again reinforces the fact that the British people see the Lords as legitimate. Although the poll does not use the word legitimate, the fact that the majority of people believe that the Lords are fulfilling their duties, and that they are in fact doing a better job than the Commons, show that they appear legitimate.

As mentioned before, legitimacy is the most important factor when it comes to political relevance. It has been shown that the existence of the House of Lords is strongly rooted in British law, and, with these three tables, the people of Britain understand the House to be legitimate. With this accomplished it is now prudent to turn our attention to the authority of the House of Lords.

In order to determine if the Lords have any de facto authority this paper will determine what legislative powers the body possesses. According to the website of the United Kingdom Parliament, the House of Lords have only three real powers: the power to introduce legislation, the power to delay legislation for up to one year, and the
power to amend or defeat legislation originating in the Commons. (www.parliament.uk, 2012) Nonetheless do these de jure powers translate into de facto power? First, it is necessary to examine the power to introduce legislation. The Lords can independently draft legislation and introduce it into the Parliament. In fact, In 2012, of the one hundred and twenty bills put before the parliament, thirty-six originated in the House of Lords, which calculates to about thirty percent of the bills. (www.parliament.uk, 2012) It is worth mentioning however, that the Lords most commonly introduce bills related to minor domestic matters. The Lords almost never introduce bills associated with social, political, or foreign issues; these matters are left to the Commons. Therefore, even though the Lords do have the power to introduce legislation on any topic, in practice they limit themselves to a relatively small sphere of influence.

The next primary power of the Lords is the power to delay legislation. The Lords are authorized to delay legislation sent up from the Commons for up to one year, but this ability is not as powerful as it may seem. First of all the Lords cannot delay so called money bills, bills designed to raise money through taxes or spend public money. (www.parliament.uk, 2012) The definition is loose and can encompass many different types of legislation. The only individual who decides what is a money bill is the Speaker of the House of Commons, and this decision is final, once a Speaker has designated a bill, as a money bill there is no means to appeal this decision. In addition, since the Speaker has a habit of labeling any major piece of legislation money bill the Lords are de facto locked out of the major legislation, and cannot employ their primary means of checking the Commons. This relegates the use of delays to mainly minor, domestic policies, but as has already seen it is in these areas that the Lords are at their most powerful anyway.

The last main power of the Lords is the power to amend or defeat legislation passed up from the Commons. The Lords frequently take advantage of these powers. (Russell and Cornes 2001) Rather than introducing their own bills to address topics outside of their ordinary sphere of influence, mainly minor domestic issues, they amend bills from the Commons to reflect their policies. However, if the Commons do not accept the Lords’ amendments, the Lords do have the ability to defeat the bill by not passing the bill. This does not stop the bill from being passed, as the Commons can overrule the Lords; but it does complicate matters for the Commons. In recent years, the Lords have been using this power of defeats to greater and greater effect. Table 4 shows how in 2003 the Lords used defeats to get their policies through the Commons.

*See table 4

What is meant by a win for the Lords is that the policies of the Lords are expressed to a greater degree than those of the Commons. The fact that the results showing the Lords winning over forty percent of the time is surprising, especially given the weak perception of the Lords, one would expect this number to be much lower. The reason for this result is that the process for overruling the Lords is usually slower and more arduous than compromising with them (this is to be discussed further in the section on autonomy). It is clear that the Lords’ use of amendments and defeats have given them some degree of political power, even though they de facto have a limitation on their power to introduce legislation and their delaying power is so strictly controlled. While clearly not the major power holder, they nonetheless are not powerless.
bystanders in the politics of the United Kingdom.

Shifting focus now, whether or not the Lords are autonomous from the Commons, or whether they are puppets of the lower house must be addressed. This will do by examining the checks placed on the Commons by the Lords. Then how the Lords are selected, all in an effort to determine if the Lords can claim autonomy, will be investigated. Note that discussing the checks the Lords have on the Commons will not be discussed here; these checks were discussed in the section on authority of the Lords.

The system of checks placed on the Lords by the Commons is specifically designed so that the democratically elected house can overrule the appointed upper house. If a bill is defeated by the Lords, the Commons reserve the right to reintroduce that bill in the following session of Parliament. When the bill is reintroduced, the Commons do not need the Lords to approve the bill before it can be passed into law. What this essentially does is to allow the Commons to bypass the Lords on the second go around, if the first failed. Nonetheless, the Commons must wait up to a year in some instances in order to take advantage of this mechanism. This also explains why the Commons are willing to negotiate and compromise with the Lords as often as they do. (See section on authority) The impact this has on the level of autonomy the Lords possess is that the checks placed on the Lords are no stricter than those placed on the Commons. Additionally, although there is a mechanism for the Commons to bypass the Lords this mechanism is slow and more often than not, the Commons chose to negotiate rather than take advantage of it. This indicates that the Lords are not puppets controlled by the Lords, but are an autonomous house. However, in order to say confidently that the Lords are independent of the Commons, one must examine the system in which the Lords are chosen.

Many different groups can put forward candidates to sit in the House of Lords. Some of these groups include the Prime Minister, the House of Lords Nominating Committee and individuals political parties. Also, although frowned upon, candidates can even nominate themselves. Candidates are then reviewed by the House of Lords Appointments Commission. Established in 2000, the House of Lords Appointments Commission is a nonpartisan group that vets candidates for the Lords and either accepts or denies the request. Then the list of approved candidates are handed over to the Crown for Royal Assent, which the Crown provides in a rather rubberstamp like manner. Before the Commission was created in 2000, the Lords were nominated only by the Prime Minister. This gave the Commons direct control over the composition of the Lords. Now the process is more neutral. One more factor that is important to note once a Lord is nominated, approved, and created, unless that Lord behaves improperly or commits a crime, he is a Lord for life. This means that even if a Lord is not voting in the way the group that nominated them wanted to, there is nothing that group can do. Therefore, if a conservative Prime Minister nominated a Lord to vote conservatively in the House, and that Lord starts to vote with the liberals, there is no mechanism for the Prime Minister to remove that Lord. How this relates to autonomy is that even though the Commons may have some influence on selecting the Lords, they have no way to control them afterward. This coupled with the lack of highly restrictive checks for the Lords by the Commons illustrate that the Lords are not puppets of the lower house but are independent and free to express their own policies in their legislation, even when
that policy contradicts those of the Commons.

The last factor concerns political relevance, influence on legislation. Influence will be measured by the rate at which legislation introduced by the Lords become law. In the British system bills are introduced in one House of Parliament, approved, sent to the other House for approval and then sent to the Crown, monarch, for approval. This approval is known as Royal Assent and is the last stage of a bill before it becomes law. The chart below shows how often bills from the Lords have become law since 2007.

*See table 5

As can be seen from table 5 no bill originating from the Lords has been passed into law since 2008. Now, while this may appear to indicate that the Lords have little influence on policy, it must be remembered that overall the Lords do not introduce many bills to begin with, as already discussed, they tend to amend bills from the Commons to reflect their policies rather introduce their own legislation. However, aside from that, the fact that very few bills introduced by the Lords eventually become law does indicate that while they may have some influence using delays and defeats (see section on authority for more details) they have nowhere near the amount of influence the Commons possess.

What this research has shown is that the House of Lords meets the requirements put forward and should be considered politically relevant. It is legitimate, and is seen as legitimate by the public. The Lords have some level of authority. The upper house is autonomous of the lower house. Additionally, although they have some influence on legislation from the Commons it is not sufficient to say with certainty that the House can influence bills put forward by the lower house. Nonetheless, what does all of this mean? Our definition of political relevance was that an institution must be legitimate, possess independent authority, and either is autonomous in the policies it expresses, or has some influence on policies put forth by the dominant house in order to be considered politically relevant. When looked at by this definition it has been shown that the House of Lords are politically relevant because it meets all the requirements of the definition. It is legitimate, has some power, and is autonomous. In addition because the House of Lords is considered by many to be the weakest and least politically relevant of all upper houses, one can further hypothesize that parliamentary upper houses in general are politically relevant. Again, this is not to say that they are as relevant, or more relevant, than lower houses, which are by far more powerful and influential. What is meant is that they are not as weak and powerless as their reputations would lead one to believe, they are not relics of an older idea of governance but are still relevant in the modern political system.
Table 1:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Voters</th>
<th>Far More Legitimate</th>
<th>More Legitimate</th>
<th>No Change</th>
<th>Less Legitimate</th>
<th>Far Less Legitimate</th>
<th>Total more Legitimate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Labour</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal Democrats</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All voters</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Data taken from Russel and Scaria, 2006. Data was collected by Ipsos MORI poll for Constitution Unit, May 2005. 1,007 valid respondents, with results adjusted to be representative of the population as a whole.*

Table 2:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I support reforming the House of Lords, and the government should make it an immediate priority</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I support reforming the House of Lords, but there are more important things that the government should be concentrating on at the moment</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don’t support reforming the House of Lords</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Taken from Ipsos MORI interviewed a representative sample of 1,006 adults aged 18+ across Great Britain. Interviews were conducted by telephone 14-16 July 2012. Data are weighted to match the profile of the population.*
Table 3:

Question: To what extent do you agree or disagree that …?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Tend to agree</th>
<th>Neither agree nor disagree</th>
<th>Tend to disagree</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Don't know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>the House of Commons generally carries out its policy role well</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the House of Lords generally carries out its policy role well</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Taken from Ipsos MORI.com. Results are based on 1,490 adults aged 18+ in the UK. Interviewed face-to-face in home from 23-28 November 2006.

Table 4:

Question Outcome by Significance of Government Defeats in 2003

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Policy significance</th>
<th>Gov’t win</th>
<th>Lords win</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>% Lords win</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Minor policy</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>30.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium-significance Policy</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>42.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significant policy</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>40.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>274</td>
<td>40.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Data taken from Russell and Sciara 2008. Based out of 274 cases from the 2003 session of Parliament.
Table 5:

Question: How many bills originating in the House of Lords becomes Law?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Session of Parliament</th>
<th>Total number of Bills</th>
<th>Number of HL Bills</th>
<th>Number of Bills Given Royal Assent</th>
<th>Number of HL Bills Given Royal Assent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2007-2008</td>
<td>161</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008-2009</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009-2010</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010-2012</td>
<td>390</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Data taken from parliament.uk and compiled from among 828 bills since 2007. Note that HL designates bills originating in the House of Lords.
References


Russell, M., & Sciara, M. (2006). Legitimacy and Bicameral Strength:
A Case Study of the House of Lords.