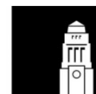

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Understanding the power of the prime minister: structure and agency in models of prime ministerial power

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Abstract

Understanding the power of the prime minister is important because of the centrality of the prime minister within the core executive of British government, but existing models of prime ministerial power are unsatisfactory for various reasons. This article makes an original contribution by providing an overview and critique of the dominant models of prime ministerial power, highlighting their largely positivist bent and the related problem of the prevalence of overly parsimonious conceptions of the structural contexts prime ministers face. The central argument the paper makes is that much of the existing literature on prime ministerial power is premised on flawed understandings of the relationship between structure and agency, that this leads to misunderstandings of the real scope of prime ministerial agency, as well as its determinants, and that this can be rectified by adopting a strategic-relational view of structure and agency.

Keywords: prime minister; political leadership; political time; structure-agency; strategic-relational approach

This article makes an original contribution to our understanding of the office of the British prime minister by way of an extended critique of the dominant models of prime ministerial power, highlighting some of the problems taking away from the explanatory capacity of these models, and proposing some solutions to these latter. The central argument set out in what follows is that most analyses of the power of prime ministers are premised on foundationalist ontologies and positivist epistemologies, which result in flawed understandings of the relationship between structure and agency, and overly parsimonious conceptions of the structural contexts in which prime ministers operate. While this paper does not seek to prescribe 'correct' ontological and epistemological viewpoints for scholars of British politics — indeed, this is viewed herein as a fool's errand — it does seek to broaden the range of structural factors commentators incorporate into their analyses, and to ensure that analyses of prime ministerial power develop a greater appreciation for the temporality of structural factors affecting prime ministers.

The structure of the article is as follows: in the first section we outline four main models of prime ministerial power: Greenstein's leadership style model, Heffernan's power resources model, Buller and James' statecraft model (which continues Jim Bulpitt's work on the same theme) and the emergent political time model rooted in Stephen Skowronek's analyses of the US presidency, which has recently been adapted for use in the British context by Byrne *et al* (2017). Then in the second section we turn our attention to an assessment of the models. We start by providing an overview of the structure-agency debate, before moving on to identify the views on structure and agency prevalent in the literature on prime ministerial power. We then explain how adopting a strategic-relational approach to structure-agency can help overcome some of the problems with this literature, by recognising the selectivity of the structural contexts faced by prime ministers, by taking into account a broader range of such relevant contexts, and by providing a more realistic account of the motivations of political leaders.

Models of prime ministerial power

The leadership style model

The leadership style model is based on the work of Greenstein (2009) which, although it is primarily geared towards assessing presidential performance, is also premised on the idea that the highly personalised nature of the modern US presidency makes the strengths and weaknesses of the individual incumbent of key importance, essentially asserting that the performance of political leaders can have a stronger determining effect than the 'impersonal forces and structures' that have traditionally preoccupied scholars of American government. The Greenstein approach is highly agent-centred, putting the focus on leaders' political and personal qualities and skills, their characters and leadership styles, and their successes and failures in office. Drawing out the mix of qualities exhibited by individual presidents, Greenstein shows there is no single presidential personality or a uniform set of traits associated in any straightforward way with presidential effectiveness or achievement. He applies a set of common criteria for analysing and comparing presidents, related to the demands of the presidential role, and his framework highlights the significant variability of presidential performance. Making due allowance for constitutional, institutional and political differences, however, Greenstein's model provides yardsticks that permit comparisons across nations and, with necessary detailed adaptations, it has been used in evaluations of the leadership styles and strengths and weaknesses of British prime ministers (Theakston 2007, 2011, 2012).

On this model, prime ministers have first to communicate effectively, selling and promoting themselves, their parties, and their policies, and reaching out, connecting with and persuading the wider public. Second, they need to show organisational capacity, including the ability to forge a team of aides and get the most out of it, and also the ability to design effective institutional arrangements. In the British context, the key issues here relate to the prime minister's immediate team of advisers in Number 10 and the way in which the prime minister organises and uses the Cabinet system. Third, there is the issue of political skill in terms of a mix of persuasion, conciliation, manipulation and brokerage to manage and deal with their Cabinet colleagues, parties

and others. Political skill is complemented by (the fourth factor) the vision of public policy goals to which it may be directed. The fifth and sixth aspects of Greenstein's model are more psychological variables: 'cognitive style' (or how leaders process advice and take decisions) and 'emotional intelligence' (how leaders manage their emotions and turn them to constructive purposes rather than being dominated by them and allowing them to diminish their leadership). The assumption is that, by definition, a prime minister with the 'right' skills, style or approach to the job is effectively a powerful prime minister.

The power resources model

The power resources model of prime ministerial power associated with Heffernan's analyses of successive Labour and Conservative prime ministers from the early 2000s onwards is something of a corrective to the strongly agent-centred leadership style model rooted in Greenstein's analysis of political leadership (Heffernan 2003, 2005, 2013). The basic premise of this model is that prime ministers can be the 'predominant' actor within British government (that is, can still hold 'considerable, if never overwhelming, intra-executive authority and influence'), but only when his or her 'institutional power resources' are bolstered by the possession of a range of 'personal power resources' (Heffernan, 2003: 347).

Heffernan identifies four institutional power resources of crucial importance to prime ministerial power and the same number of personal power resources. The first institutional power resource relates to the prime minister's status as the formal head of the government, which grants him or her a range of legal prerogatives unavailable to other governmental actors. These include the right to propose and to veto legislation, the right to appoint ministers, and the right to be consulted about all consequential government matters. The second is control over cabinet and the cabinet committee system, which has been strengthened in recent years, notwithstanding the need to accommodate a coalition partner capable of collapsing the government in David Cameron's first term as prime minister between 2010-15. Thirdly, the prime minister now has what Heffernan (2003: 360) describes as a '*de facto* prime ministerial department' in the form of an expanded personal office and a thoroughly co-opted Cabinet Office. Lastly, the focus of the news media on

the prime minister grants the latter a 'bully pulpit' of sorts that potentially allows him or her to set the news agenda and to affect the framing of important political issues.

The first personal power resource the prime minister possesses is 'reputation, skill and ability', by which is meant the ability to manage other important actors within government who, if they were to be poorly managed, might have the capacity to sabotage the prime minister's designs and in some cases mount a credible leadership challenge to the prime minister. The second is 'association with actual or anticipated political success', which relates mainly to the prime minister's position at Westminster and is premised on the notion that '[t]he prime minister who finds him or herself fêted as a success, described by friend and foe alike as indispensable and as an asset, will be a much more powerful prime minister than one considered a liability and a failure' (Heffernan, 2003: 352). Thirdly, 'public popularity' — maintaining a winning public image that results in favourable poll ratings — helps prime ministers to make the most of their position at the centre of the new leader-driven party politics. Lastly, Heffernan cites 'standing within his or her party' as the key personal power resource determining prime ministerial power and argues that 'leadership of a unitary, centralised, and disciplined parliamentary party' will allow a prime minister to avoid problems such as governmental sclerosis, parliamentary rebellions, and indiscipline in handling the party's media relations.

Furthermore, not only do each of these personal power resources feed into the others in the sense that, for example, repeated parliamentary rebellions against legislation brought forward by the government can undermine the public image of a prime minister as a strong leader (in turn generating further rebelliousness within parliament) but it is only through possession of these personal power resources that the prime minister's institutional power resources become truly effective. For example, the prime minister's efforts to use his or her media visibility as a bully pulpit will be that much more effective if they are already associated with prior political success but, if they are not, then the bully pulpit will merely serve to shine a light on the prime minister's deficiencies.

The statecraft model

As was the case with Greenstein's analyses of 'leadership style', it is not immediately apparent that the statecraft approach constitutes a 'model' of prime ministerial power. In the work of its originator, Jim Bulpitt (1986) it was primarily a means of explaining Thatcher's electoral successes, whereas in the work of some of Bulpitt's most notable adherents, Jim Buller and Toby James (2012, 2015), it has more explicitly been used for evaluative purposes. However, thanks to Buller and James' efforts to flesh out the notion of structure implicit in Bulpitt's work, it is possible to tease out a model of prime ministerial power underpinning statecraft analyses.

Central to this statecraft model is the analysis of the strategies and responses of party and government leaders to the challenges, pressures and dilemmas they face as politicians seeking above all to win elections and gain and then hold on to office (Clarke *et al*, 2015). The statecraft model situates a prime minister in a context of party government and collective leadership (focusing on the 'court' or clique of close colleagues and advisers around the PM), with electoral imperatives and constraints looming large. Developing a winning electoral strategy by putting together and projecting an image and a package of policies that can mobilise the support of a majority coalition of voters is the first key component of a successful statecraft. Secondly, leaders must demonstrate and hold on to a reputation for governing competence, something that involves issues of policy choice, delivery and implementation and, crucially, success in the economic policy field. Thirdly, leaders need to manage their parties (in parliament and the wider organisation and membership), looking at a minimum to stay in the saddle and avoid the problems of party disunity and infighting, or more positively trying to ensure their party is a key resource for appeals to the electorate and governing rather than a constraint. Fourthly, leaders need to win the battle of ideas — or establish 'political argument hegemony' — dominating, if possible, the terms of political argument about policy agendas, problems and solutions. Finally, because the constitutional 'rules of the game' can affect the conduct and outcome of the party-political struggle for office, leaders may need to maintain aspects of the political or electoral system that advantage their party or seek to change those that disadvantage them.

The political time model

Skowronek's (1997) 'political time' model focuses on what he sees as the three most important structural constraints or 'orderings' of political leadership. These are: 'the constitutional ordering of institutional prerogatives,' by which he means political leaders' formal powers; the 'practical organization of institutional relationships and responsibilities', by which he means political leaders' informal powers (such as the prime ministerial 'bully pulpit' discussed earlier); and the 'political ordering of institutional commitments' — that is, political regimes comprising a coalition of interests sharing a common legitimising ideology, and associated with a particular collection of policies and institutions. Skowronek describes the rise and fall of these regimes in terms of the rhythm of 'political time', arguing that the power presidents have is a function not merely of the resources (both formal and informal) they inherit, but also of their *authority* – that is, the public perception of what it is legitimate for a president to do given the state of the existing regime. On this basis, he posits four broad types of political leadership: 'the politics of articulation', used to describe political leaders affiliated to a resilient political regime, who may attempt 'orthodox innovation' but never fundamental reform; 'the politics of disjunction', used to describe political leaders affiliated to a vulnerable political regime; 'the politics of reconstruction', which refers to political leaders opposed to a vulnerable regime and who therefore have the most effective authority warrant of all; and, finally, 'the politics of preemption', which refers to political leaders intent on reconstructing a resilient political regime, but who are destined to fail because they lack the necessary authority warrants to fashion a coalition of interests capable of supporting such a reconstruction.

It is worth noting, however, that the political time model, like Greenstein's leadership style model, originated in analyses of US politics and the power of presidents, and there has been some debate over the steps that need to be taken in order to make this model applicable to the UK. Perhaps the most obvious difference between the two cases is that there is no British equivalent of the codified US Constitution context, and this blurs the distinction between the formal and informal powers of the prime minister. However, in terms of the effect on the rhythm of political time, the most important differences are the reality of cabinet government in the UK, which places a significant constraint on the exercise of prime ministerial power within the executive, and the dependence of the prime minister on the support of his or her MPs for their security of tenure,

which is not the case for presidents, who receive their mandate directly from the electorate. Conversely, a prime minister who can be assured of the support of their party will achieve dominance over the legislature in a way that most presidents cannot, which serves to enhance their order-shattering, affirming and creating capacities. Lastly, in the Westminster system prime ministers face an organised and institutionalised opposition of a kind not seen in US politics, with a clear Leader of the Opposition and shadow cabinet amounting to a government-in-waiting (Laing and McCaffrie, 2013: 86). While these factors mean that prime ministers and presidents are enabled and constrained in different ways, the fact that they have in common their centrality as agents of change in their respective liberal democratic political systems means that prime ministers, like presidents, encounter political time as a structural constraint on the exercise of their power.

[Table 1 here]

Assessing rival models of prime ministerial power

A notable feature of the literature on prime ministerial power is a general lack of engagement with issues of ontology and epistemology, coupled with an underlying positivist epistemological bent. This leads to understandings of prime ministerial power that are inadequate because they fail to properly theorise the relationship between structural contexts and the agency of political leaders, take in only a limited range of structural contexts, lack an appreciation of the variability of these structural contexts, and have insufficient regard for the fact that structural contexts are discursively constructed. These themes are addressed in the rest of this paper, with the overall argument being that while the statecraft approach, as elaborated by Buller and James (2012, 2015), goes a long way to avoiding these pitfalls, it is only by supplementing it with insights taken from the political time model and a strategic-relational view of structure-agency that we can arrive at a well-rounded account of prime ministerial power.

The structure-agency debate

Consideration of the structure-agency debate can shed light on some of the problems with existing analyses of prime ministerial power. The most straightforward approaches to structure-agency can be described as 'structuralist' and 'intentionalist'. The former accounts for political change solely in terms of the effects of structures or contextual factors, while the latter do so in terms of the intentions of political actors (whether individual or collective), implying that there are no structural constraints impeding their ability to achieve their intentions. Thankfully, none of the models of prime ministerial power considered in this paper can rightfully be considered either structuralist or intentionalist. Even the leadership style model, which stresses the importance of the communication, organisational and political skills, and vision, cognitive style and emotional intelligence of political leaders, only gives these equal weighting to the 'impersonal forces and structures' that also play a part, such as the emergence of the modern American presidency in the 1930s, associated with the creation of the Executive Office of the President and a greater willingness on the part of presidents to use their administrative powers (Greenstein, 2005). Similarly, the distinction between personal and institutional power resources underpinning the power resources model is alone enough to avoid accusations of intentionalism. Rather, the flaws in these approaches stem from their failure to explore in sufficient detail the structural preconditions of political leadership, both in relation to how they conceive of structure-agency and the limited range of structural contexts affecting political leadership that they consider (this theme is explored in more detail below). This is largely excusable in relation to the leadership style model because, as noted above, it was designed for the purpose of *assessing* political leaders, and it is only with some considerable artifice that it can be treated as a model of prime ministerial power. However, it is less excusable in relation to the power resources model, which starts out from the premiss that 'the actions of both institutions and actors cannot be understood separate to the political, social and economic context within which they are located' (Heffernan, 2005: 605).

There have been efforts to move beyond simplistic structuralist and intentionalist views of structure-agency. The first of these worth considering is Giddens' 'structuration' approach, which not only rejects both structuralism and intentionalism, but also 'proportional' accounts of social change that resolve the structure-agency dilemma merely by specifying the correct amounts of

structural and agential factors leading to a particular outcome. Instead, Giddens argued in favour of a view of structure and agency as *mutually constitutive*, in that structures are both the medium and outcome of agency. Giddens refers to this as the 'duality of structure', while structuration is used to refer to 'the structuring of social relations across time and space, in virtue of the duality of structure' (Giddens, 1984: 376, cited in Hay, 2002: 119). The problem with this approach to structure-agency lies in Giddens' contention that, while structure and agency represent an ontological *dualism*, in analytical terms they can only ever form a *duality*, because it is not possible to analyse them both at the same time. The result is a form of concrete analysis that flits between structuralism and intentionalism, instead of actually transcending them both (Hay, 2002: 120).

Another important approach to the structure-agency dilemma is the 'morphogenetic' approach, which Buller and James (2012, 2015) use in their statecraft analyses. Unlike Giddens' structuration approach, the morphogenetic approach does not propose an ontological dualism of structure and agency; it insists that the two are both analytically *and* ontologically separate.[1] This leads to a particular conception of the temporality of the relationship between structure and agency: structures are not merely irreducible to people, they pre-exist them, and social and political change is the product of the interaction of agents with these structures in a process of 'structural elaboration'. This is referred to by Archer (1999) as the 'morphogenetic sequence'. Buller and James (2015: 83) endorse this view of structure agency as part of their advocacy of 'philosophical realism', stating that 'realism's answer to this question is to analyse structures and agents *as if* they were separate, even though they are not.' A key problem with the morphogenetic approach is that it represents a highly agent-centred view of social and political change, because it is only from the point of view of agents that structures appear to be something apart from, and preexist, agency. Looked at in broader perspective, structures are comprised of the agency of a multiplicity of other agents (even if the structures in question are always more than the sum or their parts or, in other words, display what realists call 'emergent properties') (Hay, 2002: 125).

[1] It should be noted that this is a point of contention, because the author most closely associated with the morphogenetic approach, Margaret Archer, has equivocated between viewing the structure-agency dualism as purely analytical and as also ontological (cf. Archer, 1989 and Archer, 1995). Additionally, Buller and James (2015) do avowedly subscribe to the former position. Although the key point is that in both instances the analytical separation between structure and agency is maintained for the purposes of concrete analysis.

A final approach, and one which potentially allows for a more productive understanding of structure-agency as it relates to the power of political leaders, is the strategic-relational approach of Jessop (1996) and Hay (1995, 2002). The strategic-relational approach has the same ontological, and a very similar epistemological position, as the morphogenetic approach – it is foundationalist in ontological, and realist in epistmological, terms. Where it departs from the morphogenetic approach, and overlaps with the structuration approach, is its insistence that the distinction between structure and agency is an analytical, *not* ontological, choice. Like Giddens, exponents of the strategic-relational approach see structure and agency as mutually constitutive but, unlike Giddens, they seek to acknowledge this in the concepts they use to analyse political change. The strategic-relational approach, therefore, seeks to replace the artificial dualism of 'structure' and 'agency' with 'strategic action' and 'strategically selective context', respectively, whereby the former is conceived of as intentional conduct oriented towards a particular environment, and the latter as environments favouring particular strategies (Hay, 2002: 129).

These environments are 'relational', both in the sense that they are comprised of strategic action, and in that their effects are relative to the specific actors encountering them, the strategies they employ, and when and where they employ them (Jessop, 1996: 124). From this point of view, the fact that the structures encountered by agents are comprised of the strategic action of other agents means they can be defined as 'those elements in a given temporal-spatial strategic context which cannot be altered by a given agent (or set of agents) pursuing a given strategy during a given time period', and agency is reformulated to mean the ability to effect (or, equally, prevent) change in a given strategically selective context (Jessop, 1996: 124). Considered in the round, what this calls for is a shift away from analyses that posit abstract structures that affect different agents in the same way, regardless of time and space and the particular strategy pursued, and towards a type of political analysis cognisant of the uniqueness of particular conjunctures, in terms of the strategies pursued by particular political actors, and how these activate particular structural contexts, with their own strategic, temporal and spatial selectivity (Jessop, 1996: 126).

Structure-agency and prime ministers

There are a number of practical consequences of the strategic-relational view of structure-agency for analyses of prime ministerial power. Chief among these is that the prime minister should be conceived of as a *strategic* actor operating within a *strategically selective* context. This means recognising that structural contexts affecting prime ministerial power will differ from one prime minister to the next, and that these structural contexts will 'select for' (although not determine) certain outcomes depending on the strategies deployed, and when and precisely where. The overview of models of prime ministerial power presented in the first half of this paper illustrates that this view of the prime minister as a strategic actor operating in a strategically selective context is not prevalent. It is notably not present in the power resources model, as is clear from Heffernan's (2003: 348) argument in favour of a 'locational' view of power:

> Power is relational between actors, but it is also locational. It is dependent on where actors are to be found within the core executive, and whether they are at the centre or the periphery of key core executive networks. Depending on the properties of actors and the nature of the network, domination of some actors by others can, at times, be as important as dependency.

The impression the power resources model gives is that all prime ministers are powerful actors simply by virtue of being located at the ''core' of the core executive' (with a prime minister needing to combine his or her own personal power resources with location-dependent institutional power resources in order to become 'predominant'), and while it clearly is the case that the location of political actors can affect their ability to exercise power (no one would argue, for example, that a junior civil servant has the potential to be as powerful as the prime minister), the abstract, atemporal and aspatial nature of the structural contexts faced by prime ministers, as identified by Heffernan, is misleading. If we view power straightforwardly as ability to 'have an effect' on the structural contexts determining the range of possibilities of other actors (Hay, 1995: 191), and consider that each of the institutional power resources Heffernan identifies can be shown to be

almost inconsequential under the right circumstances, then the claim that location alone is enough to make a prime minister powerful ceases to be convincing.

Looking at these in closer detail, being the formal head of the government and possessing a *de facto* prime ministerial department will matter little if the governing party lacks a majority in parliament, and although the first-past-the-post electoral system militates against this outcome most of the time, it has occurred several times in the postwar period and in two of the past three general elections (in 2017 and 2010). Winning political parties in hung parliaments are usually able to turn their victory into meaningful political power, either through a formal coalition or confidence-and-supply arrangement in a minority government (affording the prime minister a diminished, but still crucial role in government), but this outcome is not guaranteed. The position of the prime minister as formal head of the government will always grant him or her the right to propose and veto legislation, and to be consulted about all consequential government matters, but genuine gridlock in parliament would render these powers meaningless. Similarly, *de facto* control over cabinet and its committees can be severely undermined if cabinet is riven by deep divisions of the kind witnessed during the Blair-Brown years and which are particularly common in coalition governments where the usual corrective of internal party discipline is missing (even if the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government was, for the most part, able to avoid damaging divisions due to a mutual party interest in a five-year parliamentary term (Hayton, 2014)). Additionally, while the bully pulpit might grant a popular prime minister with good communication skills more scope to coax and cajole other strategic actors within government, a gaffe-prone prime minister lacking these attributes will find the bully pulpit useless or even counter-productive if using it merely reinforces damaging negative public perceptions. For example, while David Cameron was a skilful public communicator and therefore able to effectively make use of the prime ministerial bully pulpit, Theresa May proved herself woefully inadequate in this respect during the 2017 general election campaign, as her inflexible and robotic communication style (earning her the 'Maybot' epithet) undermined the cut-through of her 'Strong and Stable' campaign slogan.

The power resources model is alluring because it holds out the promise of being able to identify the handful of enduring structural factors determining the extent of prime ministerial power

and can, with only minor modifications from one premiership (or even one decade) to the next, explain the predicaments of future prime ministers equally as well as it explain the predicaments of the current prime minister, but it is limiting for analyses of prime ministerial power because it neglects the agential, strategic, temporal and spatial selectivity of the key structural contexts affecting prime ministers. It would hardly be controversial to note that the structural contexts faced by prime ministers 'select for' certain strategies, in the sense that, for example, the large number of taxpayers and beneficiaries of welfare spending in the electorate selects for (although does not preclude) electoral strategies based on large tax rises or cuts in public spending, but there is much less awareness of the other kinds of selectivity at play in the exercise of prime ministerial power in the existing literature. For example, it is clear that one of the key structural contexts facing any prime minister – the media – exhibits a marked agential selectivity. The fact that most of the largest circulation print newspapers are strongly Conservative-leaning (Deacon and Wring, 2016) means that Labour prime ministers are effectively playing the media on a higher difficulty setting (notwithstanding the notable exception of Labour's superior social media operation under Corbyn, drawing on the activism of several hundred thousand new Labour party members and the Corbynite outrider organisation, Momentum).

Similarly, the temporal selectivity of certain structural contexts is neatly illustrated by the political time model, because its shows that the effectiveness of the institutional power resources identified by Heffernan (2003, 2005) varies depending upon a prime minister's position in political time – i.e., whether he or she is affiliated or opposed to a resilient or vulnerable regime. Equally, the effectiveness of an institutional power resource such as the Prime Minister's Office is dependent on its size in terms of such things as budgets and staffing levels, which is an important 'secular time' variable. Meanwhile, in terms of spatial selectivity, consider an institutional power resource such as the prime ministerial bully pulpitt, the effectiveness of which clearly differs depending upon the audience towards which it is directed (for example, Conservative prime ministers have struggled with messaging directed at a Scottish audience since at least the early 1980s). Buller and James' (2015) application of the morphogenetic approach to the analysis of prime ministerial power provides a more realistic account of structure-agency in relation to prime

ministers, and at one point they even seem to advocate a view of structural contexts as strategically selective, arguing that, at times, 'agents may find themselves in strategically selective environments that favour certain positions or preferences,' but this is a limited view of the strategic selectivity of the structural contexts faced by prime ministers, and it is not made at all clear in their work how the fundamental ontological differences between the morphogenetic and strategic-relational approaches can be overcome.

Prime ministers and strategically selective contexts

Another clear weakness in the existing literature on prime ministerial power relates to the range of structural contexts that are typically taken into consideration. To varying extents, the models of prime ministerial power discussed in this paper are premised on unduly narrow views of the structural contexts in which prime ministers operate, resulting from the quasi-intentionalist, 'proportional' and morphogenetic views of structure-agency found in these models. As was noted above, the strategic-relational view of structure-agency calls for *conjunctural* analysis attuned to the uniqueness of particular conjunctures of strategic action and strategically selective structural contexts. The fact that relevant contexts will vary from one prime minister to the next means that analysts should consider a broader range of structural contexts in arriving at their conclusions. Of course, there is the issue of the trade-off between complexity and parsimony to contend with — no account of prime ministerial power can be completely exhaustive, and there is something to be said for the notion that parsimony in this respect can lead to the construction of more useful, easier to understand models (Hay, 2002: 36) — but it is not difficult to show that existing models of prime ministerial power overlook some of the most decisive structural contexts affecting prime ministerial power.

This is most obviously the case with Greenstein's leadership style model, because while it lends itself well to comparative assessments of the performance of political leaders, thanks to the detailed criteria it provides for assessing the strengths and weaknesses of particular political leaders, it has little to say about the broader context in which political leadership takes place. His account is lacking in systematicity in this respect, and his remarks on structure are limited to a

recognition of the emergence of the 'modern American presidency' as a result of Roosevelt's reformist New Deal politics and the transformative effect of World War II, after which the president supposedly became the principal source of policy initiative and legislation (Greenstein, 2009: 178). This is surely an assertion which justifies Greenstein's focus on the personal qualities of political leaders, but is not warranted given the extent to which these personal qualities need to be 'activated' by structural contexts of various kinds in order for political leaders to wield power, and the extent to which this easy differentiation between structural context and the agency of political leaders can be shown to be illusory.

The range of structural contexts considered in the power resources model is similarly limited and, in particular, the distinction Heffernan (2003: 349) makes between 'structure' and 'context' in relation to prime ministerial power is unhelpful. He states:

> An actor such as the prime minister operates within structures, principally institutions and networks. These structures are affected by context, which is best described as political, economic and social environments. Clearly, actors, structures and contexts affect each other, just as networks affect outcomes and outcomes affect networks. All influence how the core executive operates and the policy outcomes it produces.

There are several problems with this treatment of structure: firstly, it seems as though Heffernan views the relationship between these three elements (agency, structure and context) in terms of cause and effect rather than co-constitution, which is mistaken given that, as was noted above, many of the structural contexts strategic actors face consist of other actors deploying their own strategies; secondly, he also seems to posit a directional relationship between the three, as if context affects structure, which in turn affects the power of the prime minister; and, thirdly, it is not clear that these two things — structure and context — can be so neatly separated when we consider, for example, that important social cleavages relating to class, gender and ethnicity permeate deeply into various institutions forming structural contexts faced by the prime minister. This problem is compounded by the fact that Heffernan chooses not to expand in any significant

detail on his definition of context as 'political, economic and social environments.' The (possibly unintended) effect of establishing this division between context and structure is to push a range of relevant structural contexts outside the purview of Heffernan's analysis. This makes it easier to highlight the range of enduring institutional power resources at the disposal of prime ministers, but also diminishes the explanatory capacity of the power resources model, giving the false impression it propounds that the key determinants of prime ministerial power are institutional in nature and remain the same from one prime minister to the next.

The statecraft model's treatment of the structural contexts affecting prime ministerial power is more satisfactory, as Buller and James (2012, 2015) confront head on the issue of the ontological status of structure-agency (favouring a morphogenetic approach), and incorporate into their analysis a fairly wide array of structures (some of which are observable and some of which are not) making up different 'layers' of the social, which are seen to interact with each other as well as with agents. This allows them to account for the power of prime ministers not just in terms of their personal leadership style, or a limited range of factors linked to their immediate institutional environment, but also in terms of broader structural factors (the ones Heffernan describes in terms of 'political, economic and social environments'), such as the dynamics of the capitalist economy. For example, they reflect on the fact that prime ministers now have to contend with a global financial system that severely constrains their room for manoeuvre in terms of such things as interest rate policy and public spending, and they rightly point out that the financial crisis was both a product of 'securitization' as an emergent property of the global financial system *and* the belief on the part of financial investors that nation-states would not be willing to step-in to save ailing financial services providers, stemming from — among other things — the failure of Gordon Brown's Chancellor of the Exchequer, Alistair Darling, to act promptly when it became clear that the Northern Rock building society was finding it difficult to meet the claims on its deposits (Buller and James, 2015: 90). However, as was mentioned above, the statecraft approach lacks an awareness of the temporal selectivity of particular structural contexts affecting prime ministerial power and it's attempt to build this awareness into the model through the concept of the Natural Rate of Governability (NRG) is a failure.

The concept of the NRG was an attempt by Bulpitt (1996) to engage more with the temporal aspects of the structural contexts of prime ministerial action. It suggests that the structural contexts facing prime ministers will vary in such a way as to make governing in some conjunctures more difficult than in others, depending on a range of factors. It is a structural context in its own right, but it is not seen to determine the agency of political leaders, because they are granted the 'relative autonomy' to choose which aspects of the NRG they will prioritise. Unfortunately, the concept of NRG is severely undertheorised in Bulpitt's work, and he does not specify in any significant detail precisely which factors determine how governable a particular conjuncture is for a prime minister. It is not difficult to think of a number of such structural contexts – lacking a parliamentary majority, experiencing an economic crisis, confronting a hostile media, or dealing with a series of damaging strikes by trade unions will all clearly adversely affect the governability of a polity – but this theme needs to be explored in more detail for the concept of NRG to be truly useful. Buller and James (2015: 80), for their part, reject the concept on the grounds that it is barely any easier to operationalise than the concept of 'structure' it was designed to mediate, but we can add to this two further criticisms. Firstly, that the NRG seems to have an objective quality in Bulpitt's work, in that it is pre-exists the particular agents that encounter it and is experienced by different political leaders in the same way (even if the way these latter respond to it may differ). This is unsustainable from a strategic-relational perspective, given the agential selectivity of structural contexts, and it is clearly not the case that, for example, a polity is just as governable the day before a general election leading to a loss for the incumbent as it is the day after.

Secondly, although it may be possible to flesh out the concept of the NRG (specifying the range of factors determining governability, addressing the ontological status of structure-agency the concept entails, addressing the issue of whether or not it is possible to quantify rates of governability in particular conjunctures, etc.) in order to make it more useful, there is little it does that Skowronek's concept of political time cannot already do. This is because political time does a better job of accounting for the variable temporality of structural contexts affecting prime ministerial power thanks to Skowronek's account of the relationship between the three structural layers (or 'orderings' to use his preferred terminology) encountered by political leaders – the constitutional

and institutional situatedness of political leaders, their various informal powers, and their place in political time, linked to health of the existing political regime – thus demonstrating that there is a cyclical aspect to governability.

Prime ministers as strategic actors

One final weakness cutting across models of prime ministerial power relates to how the agency of prime ministers is conceptualised. It has already been argued that conceiving of prime ministers as *strategic* actors can help overcome the artificial dualism of structure-agency and help operationalise a view of structure-agency as co-constituted. The purpose of this section is to shift the focus of the paper away from such meta-theoretical concerns and onto more concrete concerns to do with the motivations of political leaders, because the way these are conceptualised in the existing literature on prime ministerial power is almost as limited as the range of structural contexts it considers. This is most clearly the case in the statecraft model, wherein prime ministers are conceived of as almost purely office-seeking. Bulpitt's (1986) original schema clearly does acknowledge that prime ministers and their courts have a range of interests and preoccupations – they seek predominance in elite debate, quiescent party relations, and to portray a competent image when it comes to the management of the state apparatus – but it is also clear that there is a hierarchy among the individual elements of statecraft, with formulating a winning electoral strategy being chief among them. Buller and James (2015: 539) note that this stems, in part, from the lack of institutional pluralism in British politics, with the lack of a powerful second elected chamber, a weak committee system in Parliament, and the absence of an elected regional tier of government combining to elevate the status of national elections. While it is difficult, for obvious reasons, to deduce the actual motives of individual political leaders, to suggest that the institutional context of prime ministerial conduct can have such a strong determining effect seems like quite a leap, and it is reasonable to suppose that a range of other factors will feed into the motivations of political leaders. Most notably, their ideological bearing will predispose them to certain policies and, time and again in British politics, we have seen party leaders refuse to jettison policies damaging to their statecraft. For every 'dementia tax' u-turn performed by a leader such as Theresa May, there

is an obstinate refusal to change course by a leader such as Thatcher over the Community Charge, and Blair over the Iraq War. Furthermore, it is also the case that political leaders' encounters with structural contexts are always discursively mediated, which means that they might perceive the structural contexts they are faced with as more or less constraining or enabling than they actually are, which – paradoxically – can alter prevailing circumstances.

Similar criticisms could be made of the political time model, even if it entails a more nuanced view of the motivations informing the exercise of prime ministerial power than the statecraft model, granting that they will vary based on the point at which a political leader enters the regime cycle, and their status as either affiliates or opponents of the regime. Reconstructive leaders (as the name implies) will be motivated to reconstruct the polity, while disjunctive and articulatory leaders will seek to conserve as much of the polity as possible (even if articulatory leaders are better equipped for this task). Nevertheless, this is a simplistic operationalisation of the concept of ideology as it relates to political leaders, and one that places too much emphasis on the importance of the structural contexts affecting them, leaving almost no room for agency. As Milkis (1995: 488) argues, the title of Skowronek's book would can be considered a misnomer, because he allows too little scope for presidents to actually 'make politics': they either accept the role history has marked out for them as either reconstructor, articulator or disjunctor, or fight against it in vain as a 'preemptor' (a political leader who is before their political time and opposed to a resilient regime).

Skowronek (1995: 523) counters this accusation of quasi-structuralism by insisting that political agency *is* at the centre of the political time model: presidents are not 'assigned' roles, but fashion them themselves, within particular structural contexts, and faced with the dilemmas presented by political time. This is to caution against viewing the political time model as a purely 'cyclical' theory: the crucial thing, Skowronek suggests, is to acknowledge that 'similar roles tend to be recreated at will over vast stretches of history' *and* that political leaders have performed these roles in ways that were not pre-determined, leading to meaningful secular time changes that, in turn, form part of the structural context encountered by subsequent political leaders. This is unobjectionable, but it should also be reaffirmed that all structural contexts, including the structural

context of political time, are discursively mediated, and that political leaders will not necessarily be cognisant of or accept their place in political time, leading them to experience their structural contexts differently from one another. Additionally, as was argued above, structural contexts are agentially, strategically, temporally and spatially selective, meaning that the objective quality Skowronek attributes to the structural contexts forming part of his political time model is illusory and, in combination, these two factors rob it of much of the predictive capacity claimed for it by Skowronek and some of his adherents.

Conclusion

Understanding the power of the prime minister is important because of the centrality of the prime minister within the core executive of British government. However, existing models of prime ministerial power are flawed due to the prevalence of unduly simplistic and narrow conceptions of structure, particularly in relation to the breadth of structural contexts they take into consideration. This paper has put forward the argument that we can better understand the power of the prime minister by adopting a strategic-relational approach, which aims to overcome the duality of structure and agency by viewing them as co-constituted. Adopting a strategic-relational approach entails replacing 'structure' and 'agency' with the concepts of 'strategic action' and 'strategically selective contexts', and calls for a type of analysis that is essentially conjunctural. This, in turn, entails a broadening of the scope of analyses of prime ministerial power, because the structural contexts relevant to political leadership will vary markedly from one prime minister to the next. Additionally, the argument has also been made that the political time model of prime ministerial power can help us in this task, by shedding light on the significance for prime ministers of the rhythm of political time – whether they are affiliated or opposed to an existing regime, which is either resilient or vulnerable.

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Table 1. Key characteristics of models of prime ministerial power

	Leadership style	**Power resources**	**Statecraft**	**Political time**
Approach to structure-agency dilemma	Quasi-intentionalist	Proportional	Realist	Quasi-structuralist
Conception of structure	Broad-ahistorical ('modern American presidency')	Narrow-ahistorical (institutional power resources)	Narrow-historical (electoral constraints)	Broad-historical ('orderings' of constitution, institutions and regime cycle)
Conception of motives informing prime ministerial agency	Change-effecting	Change-effecting	Power-seeking	Variable (depending on political time)
Key actors	Prime minister	Prime minister; cabinet; party	Prime minister; cabinet; party	Prime minister; 'electoral coalitions'