The Rise and Decline of European Parliaments, eleventh –eighteenth centuries

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Introduction

Parliament is one of the institutional innovations of the Middle Ages that has become quite popular in recent times. In European history this body, which represented the various segments of the population – usually the Church, the nobility and the cities - was arguably the most important institution through which a King demonstrated that he was committed to constraining his actions. Although the way in which it is elected changed radically after 1800, having a Parliament that monitors the executive and is central to the lawmaking process has become standard for almost all nations from the mid 19th century onwards. The spread of Parliaments during the 19th and 20th century came after a long period in which the institution, after its initial and relatively successful rise during the late Middle Ages (1200-1500), was, in large parts of Europe, increasingly on the defensive and sometimes was (quasi) abolished. During the period between 1500 and 1800 Kings often refused to convene Parliament, and found various ways to limit its powers. The power and privileges of Kings versus Parliaments was the main issue in the great social-political conflicts of the period, such as the Dutch Revolt of the 1570s, the English Revolution of the 1640s and the French Revolution of 1789, but this issue played a role in many of the 'smaller' socio-political conflicts of the period as well.[1]

Economists often assume constraints on the executive – such as a Parliament – contribute to the efficiency of economies via the protection of property rights (North 1981). In their seminal paper on the consequences of the Glorious Revolution in England, North and Weingast (1989) argued that the institutional changes following the coup by William and Mary, created the basis for the following period of rapid economic change in England, leading up to the Industrial Revolution (a paper that has lead to a large debate on the long term consequences of the Glorious Revolution). In this paper we try to broader the scope of this debate by analyzing the growth and development of European Parliaments in the centuries before 1800. The questions we address are the following:

- What was the long term development of this particular institutions: when did it arise, and where, how did it spread over Europe, and when did – in certain parts of the Continent – start to loose some of its functions;

[1] There are other important examples, such as the revolt of the estates of Bohemia in 1618, which started the Thirty years war, and the rise of the cortes of Catalonia against 'Madrid' in 1640 – both revolts were not successful.

- Why did Parliaments emerge in certain regions (and not in others – such as Northern Italy, or the Ottoman Empire), and why did they decline in importance after ca 1450 or 1500 in parts of Europe?
- What were the economic effects of Parliaments and their activities: did the presence of an active Parliament in a region enhance city growth (as North would expect)? Did it contribute to the stability of the currency? Was a Parliament a real 'constraint on the executive'?

In short, we want to know what explains the rise and decline of the European Parliaments, in order to more fully understand the preconditions and some of the long-term consequences of the early development of this rather rudimentary form of 'democracy'. Out theoretical starting point in derived from New Institutional Economics 'a la North': we will test a number of propositions of the reasons why Kings, under certain circumstances, were willing to credibly commit themselves to being constrained by such an independent body, and why, in certain parts of Europe, this willingness disappeared after about 1500, leading to the decline of Parliaments and the Revolutions that were so typical for the period.

The development of European Parliaments

First, however, we have to deal with the question: What is a Parliament? Since times immemorial Kings - both in Europe and outside it - had councils that met to give advice and deliberate about the main issues of politics. The relative importance of such councils in medieval Europe was probably linked to its feudal socio-political structure, which implied that a sovereign could not just tax his subjects whenever he needed extra money, he could only tax those living on his royal domains but most of his subjects had quite different lords, as his feudal vassals held a large part of the royal realm in fief. When a sovereign needed extra money for instance to finance a costly military or political adventure he had to contact his lay and clerical vassals who held a fief and ask them for a one-off subsidy. His vassals controlled the people living on their fiefs and only they could levy taxes there. Often such a request for a subsidy was met in an assembly to which the sovereign summoned his noble and clerical vassals in order to discuss, negotiate and agree on the requested sum. Such meetings of the two estates (clergy and nobles) with the sovereign might be called a *curia regis*, though other names including parliaments were also in use. These meetings therefore reflected the fact – prevalent in European thinking about law and power –that 'political power was, to some extent, broken up and divided by the king and great dignitaries', because 'as subjects were bound to their lord, so the lord is bound to his subjects' (Marongiu 1968: 22). These assemblies were a real pan-European phenomenon: they can be found in England – before and after William the Conquerer – in Germany (where the Emperor organized more or less regular Hoftage), in France, Spain and Italy (in particular in Sicily) (for an overview Marongiu 1968: 22-31). The King, who mainly relied on his own domains as source of income, also had to acknowledge the power of bishops and the high-nobility because they also owned and controlled vast estates.

The literature on the development European Parliaments does make a clear distinction between these councils, ad hoc assemblies, and Parliament. The latter is, according to Antonio Marongiu (1968), the author of a seminal overview of the rise of Medieval Parliaments, an independent body, representing the subjects of the realm, containing members of three estates (the clergy, the nobility and the cities – in a few cases also the peasantry was represented), whose

main functions are the granting of taxes and the participation in realm-binding legislation, while sometimes its functions might include the high court of justice, foreign relations (decisions on war and peace) or the appointment or abdication of a sovereign. What distinguishes the Parliament from a council or an assembly is that it forms an independent body, a legal and political entity, with certain rights and obligations, which guarantees the continuity of its activities (Marongiu 1968: 47). Another major difference with previous councils is the presence of representatives of the cities in Parliament – if only the Church and the nobility are present, the institution is usually not considered to be a full grown Parliament.

According to this widely shared definition, the first Parliament was convened in 1188, in – surprisingly perhaps – Leon, in Spain. King Alfonso IX (1188-1230), who had just succeeded his father, called for a meeting of the bishops, the magnates and 'the elected citizens of each city' (O'Callaghan 1969: 1514, who makes the point that 'for the first time is an unequivocal attestation of the presence of townsmen in a meeting of the royal council'), obviously to stabilize his regime.[2] In the decrees that resulted from this meeting of the first Cortes, Alfonso IX 'acknowledged the existence of a body of law binding himself as well as his subjects' (O'Callaghan 1969: 1515) – in short, he considered himself (also) to be subject to the rule of law. He promised 'to administer justice impartially and not to act arbitrarily… The security of persons and of property and the inviolability of the household also were guaranteed.' He declared, finally, that he would not make "war or peace or treaty except with the counsel of the bishops, nobles, and good men (*boni homines*) by whose counsel I ought to be guided" (ibidem, 1515). Clearly, what was at stake were the 'property rights' of the inhabitants of the kingdom of Leon and Castile. Moreover, from other sources it can be reconstructed that among the first 'deals' that were made between the cities and the King was the buying off of the latter's privilege to debase the coin. The cities were opposed to such debasements, which were already understood as forms of hidden taxation, and were willing to pay a certain sum to the King on his promise that he would not change the value of the currency in the next seven years. A renewal of this deal was necessary every seven years; therefore, the meeting of 1188 was followed by more or less regular meetings, where the main issue is negotiations about the subsidies the King asked from the cities (Ibidem, 1518). Taxation and coinage, therefore, were from the beginning central to the agenda of the meetings of the first European Parliament. Another interesting aspect of this first Parliament is that not only representative of the cities were present, but that the sources state that they were 'the elected citizens of each city' (*cum electis civibus ex singulis civitatibus*) (Ibidem, 1514). This implies that the first Parliament was also linked to the emergence of communes in the cities of Leon and Castile in the same period.

The reason why, it has been argued, parliaments with urban representatives started on the Iberian Peninsula at the end of the 12th century is linked to the special circumstances of the *Reconquista* of these years. The kings of Leon and Castile were able to capture a number of large cities from the Moors; in order not to alienate the new citizens these captured cities had been turned into independent towns – communes - with royal consent, instead of given in fief to some lord who had helped with the military campaign. To broaden his tax base and not to miss an opportunity to levy taxes on the existing urban wealth representatives of these towns had to be present too at the assemblies in which the subsidies for the sovereign were agreed upon, as none of the assembled clergy or nobles could speak for them. Somewhat later on in the middle ages towns could become free from their clerical or lay lords by paying for such a privilege, and in

[2] But see Blockmans, 1998: 39, who nuances the primacy of the Leon cortes (a similar meeting had probably been held in 1187, and perhaps already in 1135).

order to profit from the taxes that could be levied from the inhabitants of such towns the sovereign also had to summon their representatives to parliaments to join in the consultative process as a third estate next to the first and second estates formed by the clergy and nobility. Therefore, the spread of the communal movement is closely linked to the spread of Parliaments.

From these early beginnings in the 1180s, the concept gradually spread to the rest of Western Europe. It is unclear, in most cases, if this was the result of the explicit copying of this institution, or of parallel evolution under similar circumstances. That there was a good deal of exchange within Europe at the time, is quite certain. It is perhaps also no coincidence that the next Parliaments emerged in other parts of Spain: Barcelona (kingdom of Catalunya) had (probably) the next one in 1192, and the next century saw regular Parliaments meet in the different Spanish kingdoms (including, after 1254, Portugal). The Parliament of Sicily, another early starter, was explicitly modeled after Spanish examples, after the King of Aragon had taken over the control of the island (Marongiu 1968). In France, the first Parliaments were regional phenomena; Languedoc (1226) and the county of Toulouse (1249) were the first to get one, after being incorporated by the French king, which points to the regional spread of the institutions, and to a similarity with Spain, where they also were established after the incorporation of new territories (Blockmans 1998: 43). Only in 1302 were the first Estates General for the whole Kingdom convened (Ibidem, 51). It was only in the final decades of the 13th century, or even the 14th century that the new institution spread to the rest of Europe, and became a regular feature of political life there. In England, where the Magna Charta of 1215 is usually considered the foundation of 'Parliamentary democracy', there were indeed assemblies convened by the King after 1215, even called Parliaments (Marongiu 1968: 82). British scholars have discussed the degree to which these were indeed precursors of the 'model Parliament' that came into existence in 1295. The first time that it is certain that representatives of the cities (boroughs) were present, was only in 1275 (which we therefore counted as the first English Parliament); the next instance is 1295 (Ibidem, p. 90). England was exceptional, however, because after 1295 it began to meet very regularly - already in the 14th century Parliament was the first to meet in more than 50% of years.

The activity index

Using this definition, we have tried to measure the rise and development of Parliaments in Europe by counting the number of calendar years per century in which for the various areas a Parliament, Estates-General, Cortes, Corts, Diet, Sejm, Riksdag, Bundestag, Generallandtag, or Reichstag assembled for official sessions during shorter or longer periods in a year. This measure can vary from zero – when no Parliament was convened (or none existed), to 100, when in all years a meeting took place. We argue that this activity indicator reflects the potential impact of Parliament. When Kings needed them, they would be convened regularly, or they might have acquired the right themselves to meet without being called for by the King. Very active Parliaments, such as the English/British Parliament after the Glorious Revolution or the Estates General of the Dutch Republic from 1572 onwards, met annually, to discuss all issues of importance. By contrast, the way in which French Kings managed to establish 'absolutist' rule and govern without Parliament, was by simply not convening it again, leading to the virtual impotence of the institution (and de facto 'absolutism') in the period between the 1570s and 1789. These extreme examples illustrate that the 'activity index' can be used as a proxy of the degree of influence of Parliaments, which is zero when they do not meet at all, and 100 when

they meet all the time. Such a measure is probably rather good in catching the extremes – zero and near-100 – and is perhaps more problematic when we try to measure situations in between, when, for example, Parliament meets once every three years (as in the Swedish case), or meets regularly during part of the century, and not at all during the rest. The 'activity index' is meant to be a rough proxy of their influence and importance, but it does not measure its effective impact on decision making itself, which is much less easy to establish, of course.

Using this index gives the following picture. Broadly speaking, three different regions can be discerned. As we have seen, Southern Europe initially took the lead – in the different kingdoms of Spain and southern Italy, and with a small delay, in France, the number of gatherings of Parliamentary institutions increased strongly in between the 13th and 15th centuries (Figure 1). But decline set in here early as well – from the 16th century onwards the number of meetings declines across the board in this region. Central and North West Europe were slower in accepting the innovation (Figure 2). The real 'take off' in parts of Germany and the Low Countries occurred only in the late 14th or even the 15th century; England was the exception here, it had an early and very decisive start (see below); Poland too had a very high level of Parliamentary activity during the 15th century. In Central Europe (parts of the Holy Roman Empire, Poland and Hungary) decline followed after 1500 (Poland) or 1600 (almost all other states, with the exception of Hungary and the Palatinate) (Figure 3). In north west Europe, Parliaments continued to flourish after 1500 – Belgium (which became part of the Habsburg empire) is the exception here. Switzerland (which from the 16th century onwards had the highest level of Parliamentary activity of all Europe) is here included in north western Europe. Sweden joined the club in the 16th century; its first 'modern' Parliament convened in 1527 (although there were meetings of a kind of proto-Parliament from 1435 on). Denmark, on the other hand, never developed such an institution in this period – the proto-Parliament, which never included representatives of the cities, met now and then before 1660, but was officially abolished in that year, which marked the high point of Danish absolutism. This was a rare event anyway – usually Parliaments continued to exist, although absolutist kings often stopped convening them.

It is possible to construct an even more accurate 'activity index' for the English Parliament, because we know for (almost) each year since 1295, during which days it was in session, and when it was not. We can therefore reconstruct an annual 'activity index' of the number of days it was in session – which can vary from zero to 365 (Figure 4). The gradual growth of the activities of the institutions are clear from the Figure. Already in the second half of the 15th century, during the Wars of the Roses (1453-1487), the practice was introduced of having Parliament in session throughout the year. Henry VIII's Reformation was another reason for having a Parliament meeting all year (1529-1536). The struggle between absolutism and Parliament during the first half of the 17th century is shown by the alternation of long periods when it was not convened (the longest period was between 1630 and 1640) and periods in which it met all the time (most significantly of course the 'Long Parliament' that deposed Charles I and reigned from 1640 tot 1660). After 1688 it met permanently – the small 'gaps' in the series being explained by the periods between dissolution and election of a new Parliament.

The 'activity index' as a proxy for 'constraints on the executive'

One of the reasons for developing the activity index of Parliaments, is that we were unhappy with the quality of other measures of the degree to which executives in early modern Europe were being constrained by 'vertical' institutions. In order to proxy for the different institutions present in this period, DeLong and Shleifer (1993) used a simple dichotomy of Prince versus Free; they found that being Free (or a Republic) had a strong positive effect on urban growth between 1300 and 1800. In practice this dichotomy is rather problematic, however, as many countries are in between the two extremes. Similarly, Acemoglu et al (2005) developed a measure of 'constraints of the executive' which is more nuanced, but based on a rather impressionistic reading of the available literature (we reviewed this in Bosker, Buringh and Van Zanden 2008).

The issue we started with is how to explain the rapid process of urbanization in Western Europe in the 800-1800 period. Can better institutions have played a role – when and where? In a previous paper on this process we demonstrated that these proxies of 'better institutions' (by DeLong and Shleifer 1993 and by Acemoglu etal 2005) did indeed have a positive effect on urban growth. Do Parliaments as 'contraints on the executive' have a similar impact on urban growth?

We ran a number of regressions testing this idea. Firstly we used a dummy variable, Parliament, to measure whether or not a country/region in a certain period had such an institution. Secondly, we used the Parliament activity index, as explained above.

Table 1 Explanations of the log of citysize in 800-1800, cities > 10,000 inhabitants only (with and without time trends) (regression coefficients with their p-values)

Bishop	-0.04	-0.04	-0.08	-0.09
	0.73	0.70	0.46	0.43
Archbishop	**0.43**	**0.43**	**0.37**	**0.38**
	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01
Capitol	**0.60**	**0.60**	**0.53**	**0.54**
	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
University	**0.23**	**0.23**	**0.20**	**0.20**
	0.00	0.00	0.01	0.01
Muslim	0.21	0.20	0.14	0.15
	0.17	0.20	0.35	0.32
ln fup	0.92	0.91	0.85	0.86
	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Prot	-0.05	-0.07	0.09	0.09
	0.62	0.47	0.36	0.36
Commune	**0.12**	**0.13**	**0.17**	**0.17**
	0.03	0.03	0.00	0.00
Parliament dummy (0/1)	**0.11**	-	***0.07***	-
	0.01	-	0.10	-
Parliament activity index (0-100)	-	**0.002**	-	**0.001**
	-	0.02	-	0.05
nr. Observations	2475	2475	2475	2475
century FE	yes	yes	yes	yes
city FE	yes	yes	yes	yes
country time trends	no	no	yes	yes

All specifications point to a certain, but limited positive impact of Parliaments on urban growth, without strongly affecting the other coefficients. We also included a 'communes' variable in the regressions, which is one when a certain city has a certain independence – can be considered a corporate body, or commune (for details about how to measure this, see Bosker et.al. 2008). Communes also have a strong positive effect on city size; but positive coefficient of the communes variable can also be interpreted as meaning that larger cities have a bigger chance of have a communes. The three ways to proxy Parliaments were: Parliament (first regressions) is a dummy of the existence of a Parliament in the state concerned; Parliament activity index is the number of years during which this parliament met during the preceding century, and the Parliament proxy more or less measures the same, but classifies them into three groups: active, semi-active, rarely active (because for some Parliaments we have only rough estimates of the number of years they met).

It appears that Parliaments may have enhanced city growth (although the reverse connection cannot be excluded, that they emerged in states with relatively large cities). A further testing of these relationships specified per sub-period shows however that the link is not very strong, and it mainly rests of the fact that during the 17th and 18th century the most urbanized region of Europe – the Netherlands and the UK – have a strong Parliament. Before 1700 we do not find strong links.

Communes and Parliaments: conceptual problems

An important reason for the absence of strong links between urban size and Parliamentary institutions before 1700 is the fact that Northern Italy is a black hole in the map of European Parliaments. During the Middle Ages large parts of the peninsula did not have a sovereign that could call for a Parliament, but was governed by cities, which had become more or less independent from the Emperor in the 11th and 12th centuries (also, but this is an old discussion we do not intend to take up, northern Italy was probably less 'feudalized' than other parts of Western Europe). These developed into city states, which gradually were taken over by noble families (such as the Medici), or in a few cases were acquired by foreign royalty. During the crucial centuries of parliamentary development (between 1200 and 1500), the most advanced parts of Italy therefore 'missed' the development of this institutional innovation – it only took root in the south (Sicily, Southern Italy, the Papal State, and Sardegna) and in the extreme north (Friuli, Piedmont).

Somewhat similar is the development of the Low Countries, where cities – in particular in Flanders – became semi-independent, formed to some extent their own coalitions and had their own meetings, but did not develop Estates before they were integrated into the Bourgundian state in the late 14th and early15th century. The three Flemish cities (Ghent, Ypres, Bruges - the freedom of Bruges joined this club in 1384) had already set up regular consultation of each other in the 13th century, and together held up to 350 to 450 meetings per year during the first half of the 15th century (Blockmans 1998: 56). But the Flemish Estates – an assembly of the three estates with the sovereign (or his representative) – was only established in 1400, making Flanders a latecomer within Europe. The same applies grosso modo to the other parts of the Low Countries, which usually did not acquire formalized estates before 1400, but had quite active meetings of their cities, sometimes with the sovereign, perhaps also joined by members of the nobility and the church (an overview in Kokken 1991: 5-36). Once the estates of the various provinces were established, they also met very frequently; averages of 30-50 meetings per year are not rare, indicating the high demand for consultations (Kokken 1991: 126-128, who also notices that the Holland estates stepped up their activity even more after 1572, when they had on average 210 meetings per annum). The Low Countries therefore fall in between the two other developments paths – between the 'bottom up' communal institutions of Northern Italy and the 'top down' Parliaments founds elsewhere. Its most characteristic feature is that often meetings of the large cities of the county precede the emergence of 'full' Estates in the late 14th/early 15th century (initiated by the dukes of Burgundy); moreover, the new Estates, because of the long tradition of having 'similar' meetings organized by the cities, are very active from the start.

This leads to a reconceptualization of the 'constraints on the executive' idea; it makes sense to merge the two institutions we used in the first round of regressions into one, capturing both the effects of commune and Parliament. For Italy this implies that we include the city-states into the regression (Mantua, Milan, Florence, Venice, Genoa, Lucca, Pisa and Bologna), because in these city-states the communes fulfilled all the roles that we also ascribed to our parliamentary assemblies. For France we add a number of provincial estates and their numbers of meetings to the lists of those already obtained of the French Estates-General: the Estates of Languedoc, Brittany, Burgundy, Provence, Dauphine and Normandy. For the Low Countries we probably have to add the estates in Zeeland, Holland, Gelre, Brabant and Hainault. A number of German city-states (free imperial cities) now also classify: Aachen, Augsburg, Frankfurt am Main, Goslar, Luebeck, Noerdlingen, Speyer, Ulm, Worms, Cologne, Bremen, Hamburg, Nuremberg, Regensburg, and Mainz (before 1462), Konstanz (before 1548) and finally Soest (before 1609).

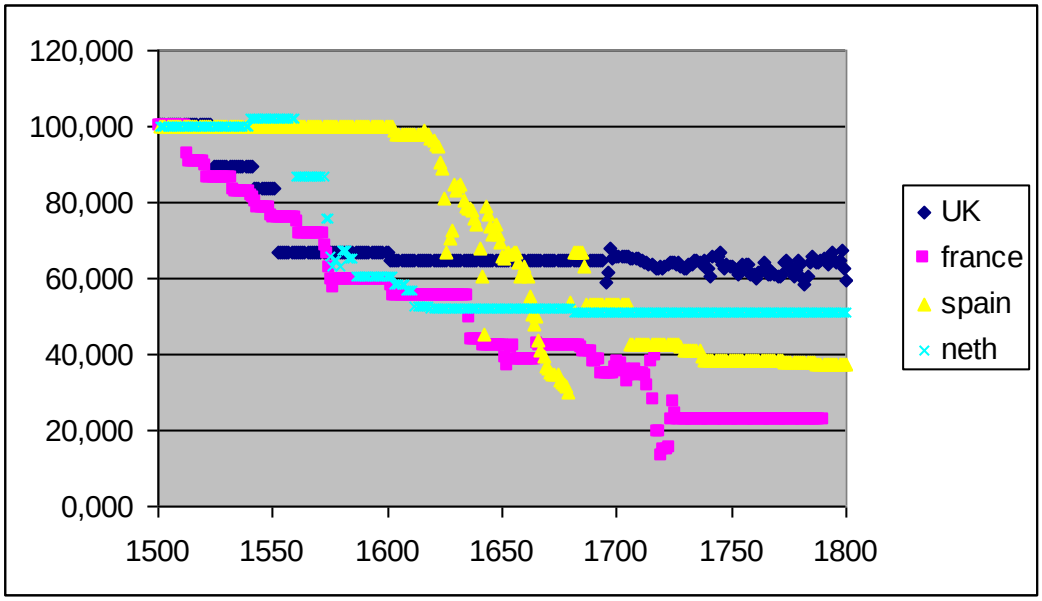
As well as the now French cities: Colmar (French from 1673), Toul and Verdun (both French from 1552) Metz (French from 1551) and Strasbourg (French from 1681). For Switzerland Basel (before 1501) and Bern and Zurich (both before 1351) were free imperial cities of the Holy Roman Empire. Therefore for these German city-states we interpret the fact whether or not there is a local commune in the city-state as if it is similar to a fully privileged parliament, as those local communes fulfilled the three roles that we also ascribed to our parliamentary assemblies. For all these city-states (Italian, French, Swiss and German) we can presume our activity index (numbers of years of meetings in a century) to be very close to 100, as it is improbable to imagine that the local commune or 'Rat' would not have met at least once in a given year. (Of course in the very first century of a commune in a town, we should probably attribute a number close to 50 to the activity index in question; to take into account that it then will have had a shorter period for meetings).

We hope to present the results of the effect of this changed concept on city growth at the seminar (work in progress)

The economic effects of Parliaments: limiting currency depreciation

One of the most discussed issues in Parliament was linked to the royal privilege of the coinage, which was often used by sovereigns to debase the currency. Parliaments from 1188 onwards were usually opposed this form of hidden taxation, and aimed at limiting the number and size of debasements (Blockmans 1998 60). One of the ways to find out how effective Parliaments were, is to look at what happened with the value of the currency of the states involved – data which are not very difficult to collect (Spufford 1986, Metz 1990 datasets of www.iisg.nl/hpw). To illustrate the idea, Figure 5 shows the silver value of the currencies of four countries in the 1500-1800 period. England saw an early and successful stabilisation from the middle of the 16th century onwards, when an experiment with devaluation in the 1540s known as 'the great debasement' had resulted in chaos (Gould 1970). The currency of Holland was also successfully stabilized after 1580 (the Revolt of 1572 had necessitated a devaluation). Spain felt no need to devalue during the 16th century, when large inflows of silver underpinned the value of its currency, but this changed during the 17th century when it entered a long period of monetary instability. France is an example of a similar process of slightly more gradual monetary instability. After 300 years the currencies of the two countries with a robust Parliament had declined only modestly, whereas the currencies of the two 'absolutist' countries had gone down by 60% or more.

Figure 5 Percentage of silver in currency between 1500 and 1800, the situation in 1500 = 100%.



Is this indicative of more general patterns? Table 2a compares two sets of countries, with active Parliaments and without them. The differences are huge, with the exception of the 16th century, when Spain distorts the picture. Leaving Spain out of Table 2 in the 16th century would lead to an average depreciation of 0.50% ± 0.31 per year for the parliaments without a constraint on the executive in the 16th century.

Table 2a Currency depreciation in % per year in countries with parliaments with a constraint on the executive and those with parliaments without one.

	With			**Without**		
	Average	Stdev	N	Average	Stdev	N
14th	**0.20**	-	1	**1.00**	1.00	5
15th	**0.40**	0.20	3	**0.79**	0.42	7
16th	**0.48**	0.10	4	**0.42**	0.34	6
17th	**0.17**	0.15	3	**0.90**	0.55	6
18th	**0.07**	0.12	3	**0.52**	0.45	6

For the table above we did not yet include the Italian city-states, as they did not have parliaments in a strict definition, though we can make a distinction between city-states with or without a constraint on the executive. Including those Italian city-states leads to the following table:

Table 2b Currency depreciation in % per year in countries with parliaments with a constraint on the executive and those with parliaments without one.

	With			**Without**		
	Average	Stdev	N	Average	Stdev	N
14th	**0.38**	0.15	4	**0.84**	0.79	8
15th	**0.52**	0.22	6	**0.75**	0.35	10
16th	**0.48**	0.10	4	**0.42**	0.34	6
17th	**0.38**	0.43	4	**0.90**	0.55	6
18th	**0.08**	0.10	4	**0.52**	0.45	6

The table that includes the Italian city-states presents a similar picture, with the same remark as previously concerning 16th-century Spain.

Both tables show that generally the average currency depreciation is less when there is a parliament with a constraint on the executive in that century.

Further conceptual problems/refinements: medieval power sharing versus 'absolutism'

Medieval Parliaments were based on feudal structure of the sharing of power between Sovereign and his vassals, but this concept became less appealing during the Early Modern Period, when the growing interest in Roman Law was used to reformulate the ideas about power. Increasingly, absolutist ideas became popular – among, in particular, sovereigns and their advisers who managed to consolidate increasingly large territorial entities. France is often seen as the most successful case of such a process. Until the mid 15th century France more or less shared in the general increase of Parliamentary influence and activity, although most provincial estates were (much) more active than the Estates General, which were usually only called in cases of emergency – when new taxes had to be introduced. This changed however during the middle decades of the 15th century, when then King of France managed to introduce taxes which did not require the approval of Parliament, but were managed by his own officials (such as the taille, introduced in 1439/40). From then onwards, the role of the Estates general was much more limited – only in situations of extreme urgency were they convened (but in the periphery of the French state regional assemblies continued to play a more important role).

Koenigsberger has introduced the distinction between *dominium regale* (the situation in France after about 1440) and *dominium politicum and regale* (the situation in England) to describe the dichotomy that developed within Europe: in some states the King continued to need the assent of Parliament to introduce new taxes, whereas in France, Spain (Castile), Portugal. Italy (Naples, Sardegna, Piedmont), Belgium (after the 1570s), and several German principalities the influence of Parliament had been limited, and the institution was often not convened anymore (Koenigsberger 1986: 1-4).

Linked to this continuing and often increasing role of Parliament in parts of Western Europe was the question about who could take the initiative to convene meetings of Parliament.

In the Middle Ages, the sovereign summoned the participants of a parliament in a writ to its meeting thereby indicating a date and a place. With such a summation the sovereign tried to prevent that certain vassals who would not show up were exempt from paying the subsidy that was to be agreed, and not appearing in parliament could have legal consequences for the absentees. Because in the early parliaments the sovereign had the initiative he could control the frequency of the meetings and with it try to influence the effectiveness of a parliament. Parliaments were called when it suited the sovereign, which, for example, meant that they met relatively often during the first few years of his reign, when he still had to consolidate his position, and less frequently during later years when Parliament was much less needed. Figure 6 shows such a relationship for the English kings between 1307 and 1508; during the first few years Parliament met during between 40 and 100 days per year on average (it concerns the average of the seven kings Edward II, III, Richard II, Henry IV, V, VI and VII), whereas after 15 years or so Parliament was much less active and met during less than 30 days on average. Another measure is the chance that Parliament was not convened during a certain year: this was zero during the first year of a King's reign, 14% in years 4-7, and increased to about 50% in years 15-22.

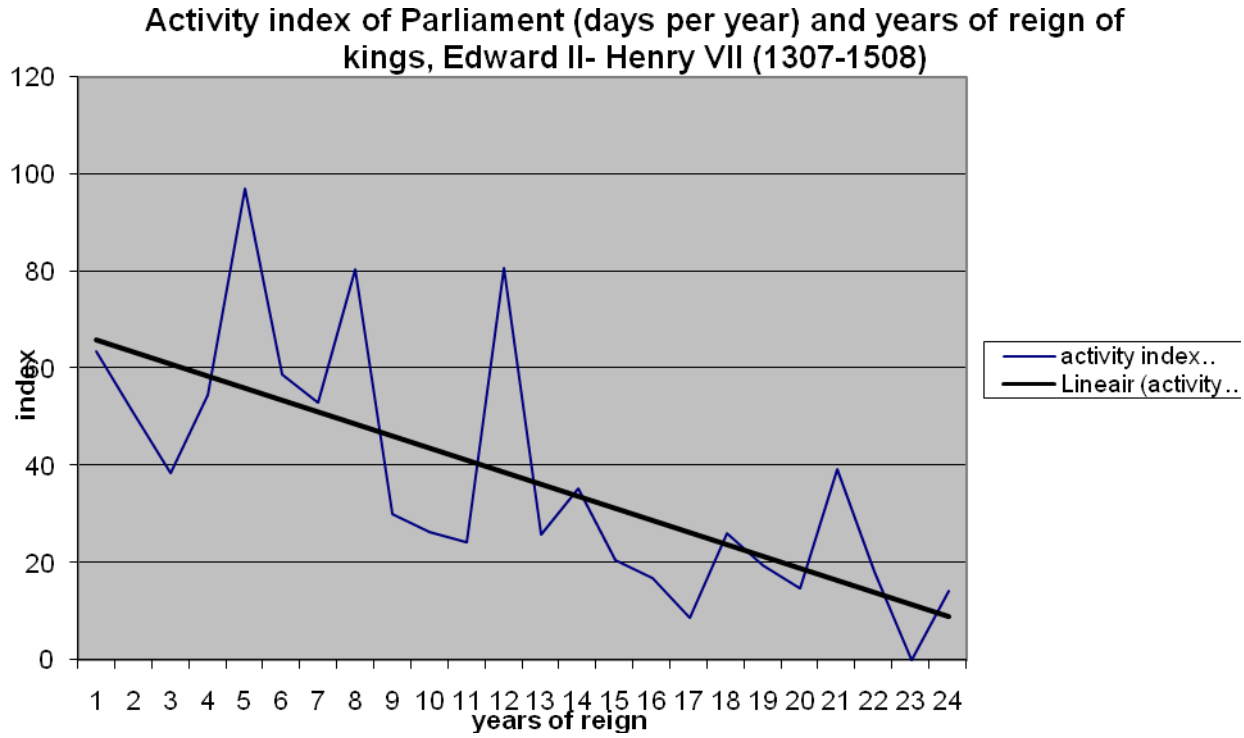
However, Parliaments sometimes acquired the right to convene themselves, or an agreement with the King was made to meet regularly at certain intervals. In Sweden, for example, Parliament met once every three years from 1617 onwards; in Switzerland, the Diet met almost every year since 1417 (and never missed a year after 1457). Similarly, the estates of Holland usurped the right to convene themselves during the Revolt against Spain (in the 1570s). Compared with the Dutch and Swiss examples, the English Parliament was relatively late in establishing such a rule; it was not convened between 1630 and 1640 (which in a way lead to the rebellion of Parliament and Civil War in the 1640s), and again in the early 1680s, which would set the stage for the Glorious Revolution of 1688. In the next draft of the paper we will classify parliaments with regular meetings (be it once every three years or more often) into one category and parliaments that were called upon according to the desires and policies of a sovereign into another; and analyse if this classification helps us to characterise the influence of medieval and early modern parliaments.

How encompassing is a Parliament? Obviously, not all social classes are represented; with the exception of the Swedish Parliament, the peasantry was not represented – but according to the original ideas behind the Parliament, they were represented by their lay and clerical lords, who had a clear interest in limiting the degree to which their subjects were going to be taxed. This implicates that all three estates in a parliament talked about the project that was to be financed, thoroughly discussed the necessary investments that were to be put up by them and if the future gains would be expected to be greater than the costs the full parliament could reach a conscious decision based on the perceived risks and the available information. The current literature on game theory indicates that such a process in which all parties have a similar financial stake in an endeavour makes that the eventual decision optimally incorporates all the available information, as there are no free riders. However, later on in the medieval period in a number of parliaments the estates of the nobles and the clergy succeeded in becoming free riders as they achieved from the sovereign freedom from the taxes that were agreed upon in parliament. Yoram Barzel and Edgar Kiser (2002) studied the medieval parliaments in England and France, and argue that such a freedom of taxation by some of the parties involved led to arbitrary taxation because of the disjunction between voting rights and tax payments and they show that it eventually also led to the demise of the role of the parliament in France. Therefore in our analysis of the influence of

parliaments in the Latin West per century we will have to classify those parliaments that had no free riders into one category and those that had one or more estates that were free riders in the other category.

The application of this first classification of parliaments leads to the French parliament entering the other category (that with the free-riders) in the 15th century (Kwass, 2000, 25). For Spain and Poland we know they also have had free riders, though we still have to find out when and where (Spain) this started. Alec Myers (1975, 61) indicates that in Castile and Leon the clergy and the nobles were generally exempt from taxes.

Figure 6



The rise and decline of Parliaments

Why did Kings establish an institution that limited their power? This is the key question of a large literature on 'the rise of democracy' that we summarize here (a recent review in Coll 2008). There appears to be agreement that the initiative was usually taken by the sovereign – it was a 'revolution from above', quite frequently occurring when a new King wants to stabilize his reign and/or is in need of additional revenues for fighting his enemies. In a famous case study of the Glorious Revolution, North and Weingast (1989) have argued that the extension of the powers to Parliament by the new royal couple, William and Mary, is an example of 'credible commitment': the King wants to signal to the population that he will not renege on his promises (as previous Kings, more specifically Charles II, did), but will be bound by a new division of power, in which Parliament can play a central role. In that respect, there is no fundamental difference between 1688 and 1188, when Alfonso IX made the same promises. More in general, the economic rationale for such an act of credible commitment is that the King constrains himself in order to enhance the protection of property rights in his realm, and expects in the long term to profit from it, as this is expected to increase investment and growth. In contrast, as North has argued, in a situation where property rights are not respected – where the King is not constrained by a Parliament – incentives for specialization and investments are limited. In the long run, therefore, both Kings (via increased tax income) and citizens may profit from such an act of credible commitment.

This is the 'classic' Laffer curve effect: a reduction and/or a credible stabilization of the tax rate may lead to higher incomes, and indirectly also boost tax income. By introducing the element of mobility of people and capital, and the competition between states that may result, the analysis can be further refined. When states are small and/or when people and capital are highly mobile, Kings have to compete for the resources mobilized by merchants and skilled workers. This implies that the degree of competition between executives is dependent on a number of factors:

- The *average size of states* (in terms of population and/or surface area); huge states such as the Roman, Chinese, Moghul or Ottoman empires, can much more easily control their citizens than small city states, which fiercely compete with each other. (states that were once relatively democratic – such as Rome – may therefore as a result of their very success have become autocracies)
- The *mobility of capital and skills*: do merchants have strong international networks or are they bound by the borders of the state? In particular when merchants form intensive network over the borders of the state, and/or are dominate by cultural or religious groups – such as Jews, Chinese - whose networks are not linked to the state, the pressure for the state to compete for these resources will be greater
- The *composition of the wealth of the country*: landed wealth is, by definition, immobile, and can therefore be taxed and controlled relatively easily; merchant capital and skills are in principle mobile, can be transferred from one state to another, and are therefore much more difficult to tax and control.

This may mean that, in a situation of small states and/or highly mobile factors of production, once state A introduces a Parliament, neighbouring states may be forced to do the same, as they do not want to lose their resources to state A (assuming that the costs of transferring capital and skills from one state to another are lower when they share a certain border). We can hypothesize

a kind of '*neighbourhood effect*', implying that the more neighbours have introduced a representative institution, the stronger will be the pressure to do this as well. This may lead to a gradual spread of the new institution, and perhaps even to a 'race to the top', states competing with each other in terms of the protection of property rights.

Is there a role for 'bottom up' forces in this picture? Acemoglu and Robinson (2005) have argued that the rise of democracy in post 1800 Europe (and the world) is dominated by the fear that the elite may have for a social revolution – a clear 'bottom up' element in their story (although it is still the elite that decide to introduce the reforms). For the pre 1800 story this element is perhaps less important, and also the risk that introducing a Parliament may imply the introduction of income-transfers to the lower classes, which plays a large role in their story, does not seem to be important within this context. What did matter was the degree to which other social groups than the Church and the nobility were organized. The communal movement, which meant that cities became to some extent self-governing, and were able, as corporate bodies with rights and privileges, to pout pressure on the king to stick to the promises made. A strong Parliament is therefore rooted in a strong civil society, of which the cities formed the core. It is therefore probably not a coincidence that the rise of Parliaments occurred after the communal revolution – which began in Italy in the 11th century, and spread rapidly to other parts of Western Europe in the 12th century. But too much communal power, destroying the power of the king, was bad for the rise of Parliaments as well, as we have seen in the case of Northern Italy (and the Low Countries).

These factors may help to explain the rise of Parliaments. Between 1000 and 1300 a highly fragmented political system emerged in Western Europe, characterized by relatively small states competing with each other, whereas at the same time a dense urban network arose, characterized by strong interconnections (Bosker et.al. 2008). Moreover, cities by becoming semi-independent communes, gained a strong political position in this new constellation, further increasing pressure on the King to acknowledge their position. We hypothesize that the rise of Parliaments is therefore explained by (1) the (small) size of states (2) the urbanisation process in these states and (3) the emergence of strong inter-city networks.

Similarly, we can hypothesize why Parliaments became less important – and were suppressed – in parts of Europe after 1500. The main driving factor was the consolidation of states into (much) larger entities – as happened in particularly in Spain and France. This lead to the emergence of new (or in fact very old) ideologies stressing the absolutist power of the King, whereas during the Middle Ages more 'democratic' interpretations of the role of the King had gained in importance. The religious division of Europe after the Reformation also may have played a role; in the 16th century the Catholic Church made a turn towards a more hierarchical stance (stressing, for example, the authority of the Pope), whereas Protestantism - certainly Calvinism and other more radical forms of the Reformation - tended to be more 'democratic', stressing individual belief, and the governance of the (local) churches from 'bottom-up' (Lutheranism and Anglicanism may have been in between).

This sums up the hypotheses we can derive from the reading of the literature. It is not easy, however, to really test these ideas in a consistent way. One of the problems is the unit of observation, which changes quite often – should we concentrate, for example, on the Holy Roman Empire as a whole, and study the ups and down of the imperial Diet, or focus on the development of Parliaments in different regions – such as Austria, Switzerland, Prussia, Saxony

etc. And how to incorporate the free cities in such an experiment? Similar problems emerge with Spain – where the different crowns merged in 1494, but independent Parliaments continued to exist separately until 1800. We have tried a number of approaches, which all have their drawbacks.

Cities as units of observation

What can we say about the rise of Parliaments? A possible approach is to start from the dataset of cities in Europe between 800 and 1800 and estimate the chance that a city becomes part of a state with a Parliament (instead of a state without a Parliament). Here we therefore take the city as our unit of observation (as explained, the paper is to some extend a spin off of another project on urban growth in Europe in this period). The question could then be: which cities have a larger/smaller chance to be part of a state that has a Parliament?
Advantages: many observations, we can control for other features of cities; disadvantage: the individual city is not the relevant unit – but the state is.

Table 3 Explanation of chance of being in a state with a Parliament, at city level, given no Parliament before

dependent variable:	parlament last century?
Data restrictie?	given NO parliament before
bishop t-1	**-0.09**
	0.00
archbishop t-1	**-0.09**
	0.00
capitol t-1	0.04
	0.41
university t-1	**-0.11**
	0.00
muslim t-1	**0.14**
	0.00
Protestant t-1	0.03
	0.63
ln fup t-1	**-0.14**
	0.00
commune t-1	0.02
	0.42
North West EU	**0.22**
	0.00
South EU	**0.34**
	0.00
century FE	Yes
	Probit
nr obs	2154
	robust se

Regions:
NW-EU: UK, NL, BE, Scandinavia, Suisse
S-EU: FR, POR, SP, IT
CE-EU: GER, PO, Cz, SLK, HUN, AUS (in the standard here)

Bishoprics and archbishoprics have a smaller chance of becoming part of such a state; this result, that centers of religious power have a smaller chance of becoming part of such a state, is one of the most consistent results of these regressions; perhaps the explanation is that (many) such cities – like Utrecht – became or remained (quasi) independent, and were not integrated into the What is perhaps most striking is the effect of being a muslim city in the previous century (all independent variables are defined with a certain time lag). Former Muslim cities have a higher chance of becoming integrated into a state with a Parliament, which is consistent with the idea from the literature that Parliaments (and communes) were granted by the sovereigns of Spain (and Southern Italy) to stabilize their regimes after taking over large areas from the Muslims. What is also striking, is that the fup-variable – which measures the degree of centrality of cities within the urban network, has a negative coefficient. This means that cities at the margin of the urban system of Europe – for example in southern Spain – had a higher chance of getting a Parliament than cities at the core (in northern Italy or Flanders, for example). This chance was also larger in Southern Europe than in Central Europe. This all fits into an explanation of the rise of Parliaments as an institutional innovation to stabilize the acquisition of new cities in a border region, which is consistent with the idea that the sovereign would grant such an institutions if he is afraid that scarce resources – capital and skills – may emigrate after the conquest.
Another result is that the existence of a commune in te previous period, does not contribute to the chance that the city/state may get a Parliament; here we probably have the Italy-problem again. Protestantism also does not play a role – but most regions/countries already get 'their' Parliament long before Luther became active - and the ones that did not get one before 1517, also did not get one after that date, which is also an interesting result (one needs 'medieval institutions' to initiate a Parliament – something we might want to test more carefully in the future).

Table 4 Explanation of activity of a Parliament, at city level: which cities get the most active Parliaments

dependent variable: Data restrictie?	Activity index
bishop t-1	**-2.67**
	0.02
archbishop t-1	**-4.62**
	0.01
capitol t-1	-2.61
	0.31
university t-1	-2.65
	0.26
muslim t-1	**-7.58**
	0.00
Protestant t-1	**37.12**
	0.00
ln fup t-1	**-4.42**
	0.00
commune t-1	**-3.95**
	0.00
North West EU	**21.42**
	0.00
South EU	**16.19**
	0.00
century FE	yes

nr obs	5940
	clustered se op city

Another way to 'exploit' the city dataset is to look at the link between the activity index of Parliaments, and the features of cities in the related regions. Does, for example, Protestantism, led to more active Parliaments? As far as the regressions can inform us about this, this indeed appears to be the case; again, (arch)bishops do not help at all, nor do universities for that matter (but this effect is not significant); muslim cities do 'produce' high activity of Parliaments (we do not have Parliaments that governed over muslim cities, notice that there is a time lag between here, but once established over cities that used to be muslim, these Parliaments are initially not very active). Again, the fup-variable has a negative coefficient – very active Parliaments are located in the periphery of the urban system – as has the commune variable (probably for the same reason). Protestantism is indeed very good for Parliamentary activity, which is a striking result, given the fact that these institutions emerged many centuries before Luther and Calvin. And whereas the emergence of Parliaments happened in the south (in the regressions of Table 3 the southern dummy was larger than the north-western one), the dummy for the south here is lower than for the north west; given that central Europe is the standard, this also implies that the average activity index for that region is even lower, controlling for other factors of course.

Countries as units of observation

A second approach to look at these changes is the country level. A lot of the data that are available, are grouped according to the recent borders of countries (borders 1990). This is a bit problematic, of course, because there are large differences with the actual borders in the 1100-1800 period. Here the dependent variable is the number of cities we find in states with a Parliament – which will be zero in countries without such an institution, and substantial in large countries with a Parliament (say the UK in 1800). By adding the number of cities in the previous period into the regression, we also however control for the size of countries.
Let us first look at the first column of Table 5, which focuses on the causes behind the rise of Parliaments (the condition is: no cities with a Parliament in t-1). What explains the rise of Parliaments from this perspective? Again, bishops again have a strong negative effect, communes do have a net effect (consistent with previous results), and, most significantly, the size of the urban population (in the previous period) has a strong positive effect. Regions without cities – Scandinavia for example – are less likely to develop a Parliament than regions with many cities. Again we find a significant dummy for the south of Europe; the dummy for the North West is not significant. What is also striking is that having a Parliament in one of the neighboring states, does not significantly increase the chance of having a Parliament in a country in the next period, which is contrary to what we expected (the coefficient is positive, but not significant).

The second column shows the result when the condition of no Parliament in the previous period is relaxed; the regressions only explain the number of cities in country X which have a Parliament, controlling for the number of cities in the previous period. Now the spread effect of Parliaments becomes quite large and substantial: a neighboring Parliament in a previous period has a strong and significant effect on the dependent variable. The usual negative effects of (arch)bishops are found again (although the number of archbishops seems to have a positive

effect now – perhaps our results are affected by multicollinearity here). Also the positive effect of urban population, and the surprisingly negative effect of the communes, which may be due to the Italy/Low Countries problem

Table 5 Explanation of number of cities with Parliament, fixed border of countries of 1990

dependent variable:	nr cities with parliament given NO cities with parliaments before	nr cities with parliament given SOME cities with parliaments before
data restrictie?		
nr cities t-1	-0.60	**-1.86**
	0.14	**0.01**
% bishops t-1	**-10.54**	**-57.62**
	0.06	**0.02**
% archbishops t-1	-18.14	**-166.86**
	0.33	**0.01**
% universities t-1	0.63	20.22
	0.95	0.48
% protestant t-1	-2.03	-0.41
	0.83	0.96
% commune t-1	-18.68	**-26.36**
	0.14	**0.05**
nr communes t-1	0.20	**0.89**
	0.26	**0.00**
nr archbishops t-1	0.19	**3.85**
	0.61	**0.00**
ln urban pop t-1	**4.25**	**8.67**
	0.01	**0.02**
North West EU	1.23	**20.30**
	0.62	**0.05**
South EU	**7.52**	**50.57**
	0.01	**0.00**
Neighboring parlament t-1	3.10	**27.34**
	0.57	**0.01**
century FE	Yes	yes
nr obs	70	68
	clustered se op land	clustered se op land

Parliaments as units of observation

Can we explain the activity index of Parliaments, one they are established? We know which cities belong to which Parliaments, and can estimates the share of communes among them, the share of universities, the share of protestant cities, the share of bishops etc. Can this help to explain why certain Parliaments were much more successful than others? Again, we control for the number of cities by including this variable from the previous period into the regression.

Table 6 Explaining the activity index of Parliaments

	parliament level
dependent variable:	activity index
data restrictie?	given parliament before
nr cities t-1	1.36
	0.21
% bishops t-1	15.38
	0.21
% archbishops t-1	7.85
	0.47
% universities t-1	**35.33**
	0.04
% protestant t-1	**25.49**
	0.08
% commune t-1	***-14.94***
	0.10
nr communes t-1	-0.05
	0.63
nr archbishops t-1	**-5.06**
	0.09
ln urban pop t-1	0.12
	0.50
North West EU	**42.60**
	0.06
South EU	**10.47**
	0.10
century FE	yes
nr obs	105
	clustered se op parlament

The activity index of Parliaments, once they are established, is positively correlated with the number of universities (more lawyers and other professionals seem to increase the activity index), with the share of protestants in the population, and negatively linked to the share of communes. Parliaments in the north west of Europe –and, much less so, in the south - are on average more active than those in central Europe. The size of the urban population does not seem to matter.

Conclusions

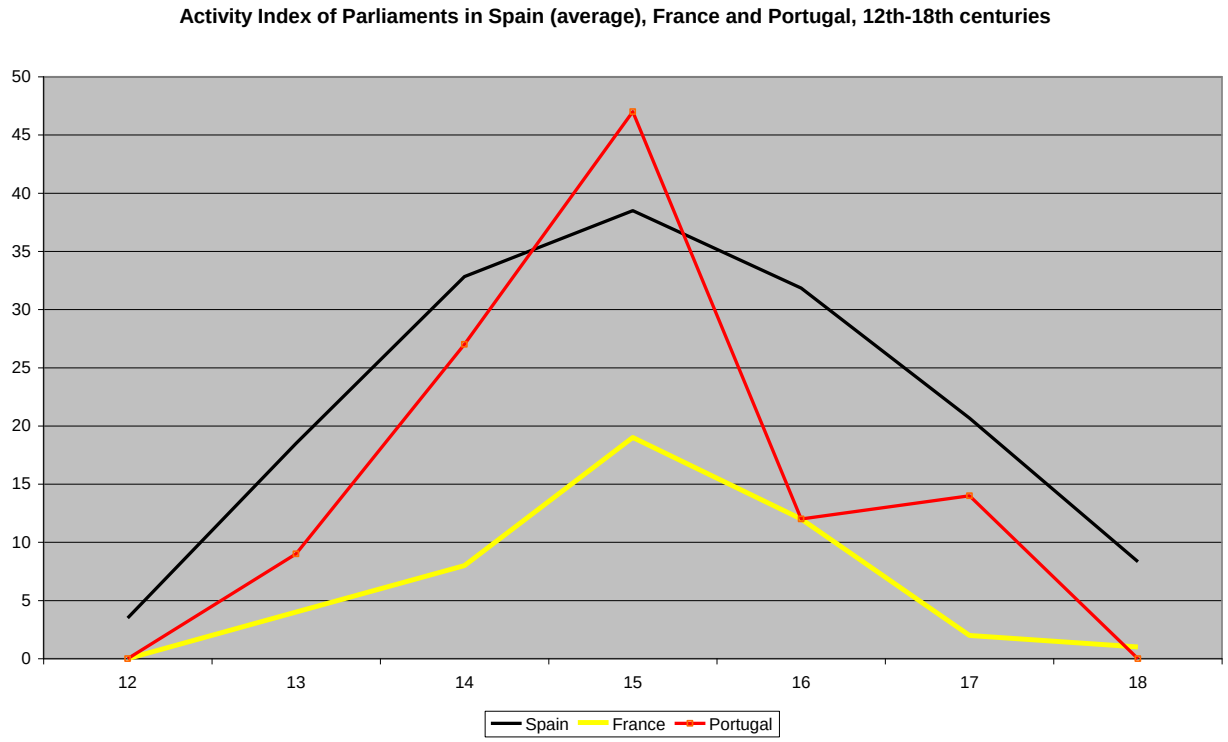
It is still too early to formulate definite conclusions. A few preliminary thoughts:

- we think we have developed some tools for a quantitative reconstruction of the development of European Parliaments between 1100 and 1800, which makes it possible to

analyse long term patterns of change in this institution, and get an idea of the possible impact it had on economic performance;

- we found some evidence that Parliaments are good for urban growth, and have more specifically been instrumental in slowing down the process of the erosion of the intrinsic value of the currency of their states; this was, from the start in the late 12th century, one of the goals of the cities represented in Parliament – they were on average relatively successful, demonstrating the impact that Parliaments have had on economic development; when Parliaments really became a strong countervailing power – such as in England after 1688 (or even earlier), or in the Netherlands after 1572 – the process of currency erosion almost ended, which may also point to their effectiveness;
- it appears that initially it was a southern European invention, which developed within the context of the Reconquista of the 12th/13th centuries, when the Spanish sovereigns had to foster more close bonds with the conquered cities and their citizens; Parliaments did not develop at the center of the urban system of the time, but at the 'periphery', and ex-Muslim cities had a much greater chance of being part of such a system than non-Muslim cities;
- within a few centuries the institution spread over the rest of Europe, indicating that it could be applied successfully in other circumstances as well; northern Italy, where strong communes had broken down the larger state-like structures, was the most significant region to remain outside the Parliamentary movement (it also spread rather slowly in the north of Europe, due to the absence of merchants/cities)
- we have not been able to analyse the reasons why, after about 1450 or 1500, Parliamentary activity in large parts of Europe, and in particular the south, began to decline; the regressions point to a possible religious dimension to this 'little divergence' within Europe; it is clear that in Protestant countries Parliaments continued to be active, or became even more active, and that in Catholic countries they in general became much less active (more in general, the religious infrastructure of the Catholic Church seems to have played a largely negative role in the rise and development of Parliaments, also before 1500); this may also be linked to changing concepts of the power of the sovereign (which were only to some extend linked to denomination); during the Middle Ages the fragmentation of power and sovereignty was generally accepted as a fact of life, but after about 1500 concepts of absolutist rule became more popular, a process that was linked to the consolidation of power in larger territorial states (such as Spain and France); the size of states may – as was theoretically expected – have played a role in these changes on the threshold between Middle Ages and Early Modern Period, but we have not been able to test this idea systematically;
- another way to look at this is ask the question why only in certain parts of Europe – in the Netherlands, England, Switzerland and Sweden – the rather rudimentary forms of Parliamentary control developed into more or less independent bodies who acquired the right to convene themselves (or to convene at regular intervals, as in Sweden), and were effective in constraining the actions of the executive – or in one case, the Netherlands, even became sovereign bodies themselves; the regressions shown in the paper give a few clues why this might have happened, but they clearly do not (yet) tell the whole story.

Figure 1



Spain is the average of Leon and Castile, Catalonia, Navarra, Aragon and Valencia

Figure 2

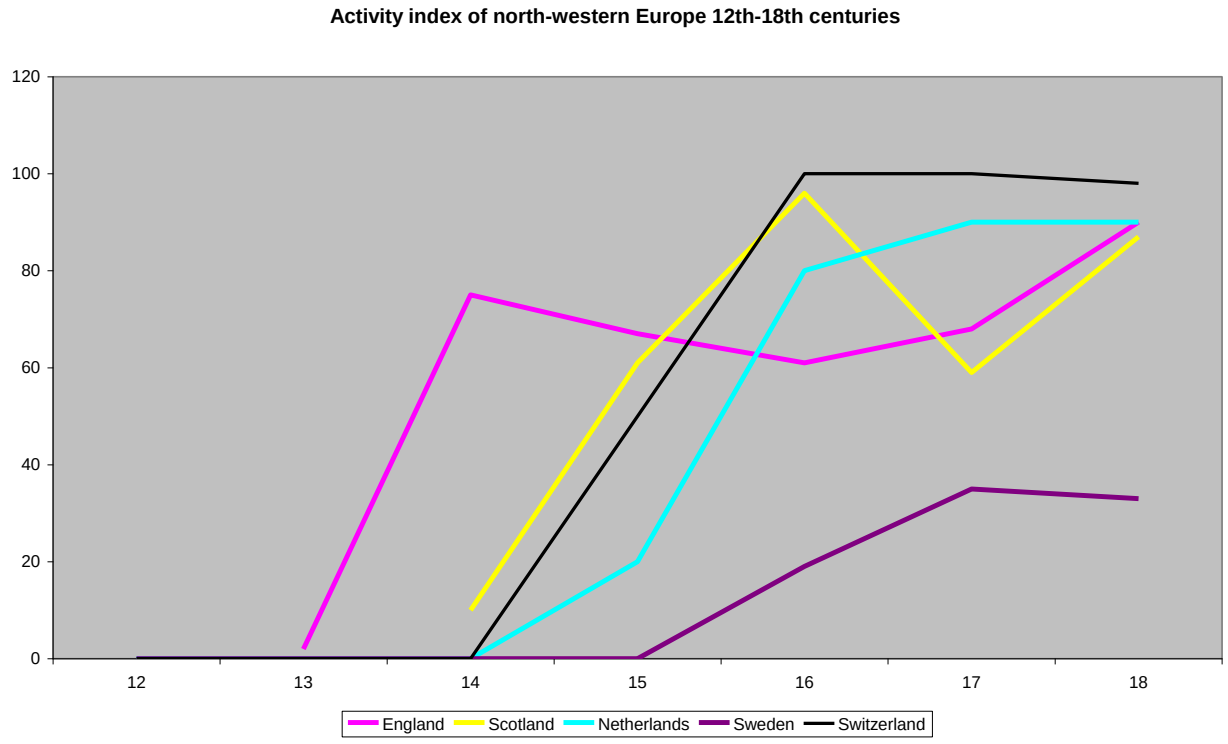

Activity index of north-western Europe 12th-18th centuries
120
100
80
60
40
20
0
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
England
Scotland
Netherlands
Sweden
Switzerland

Figure 3

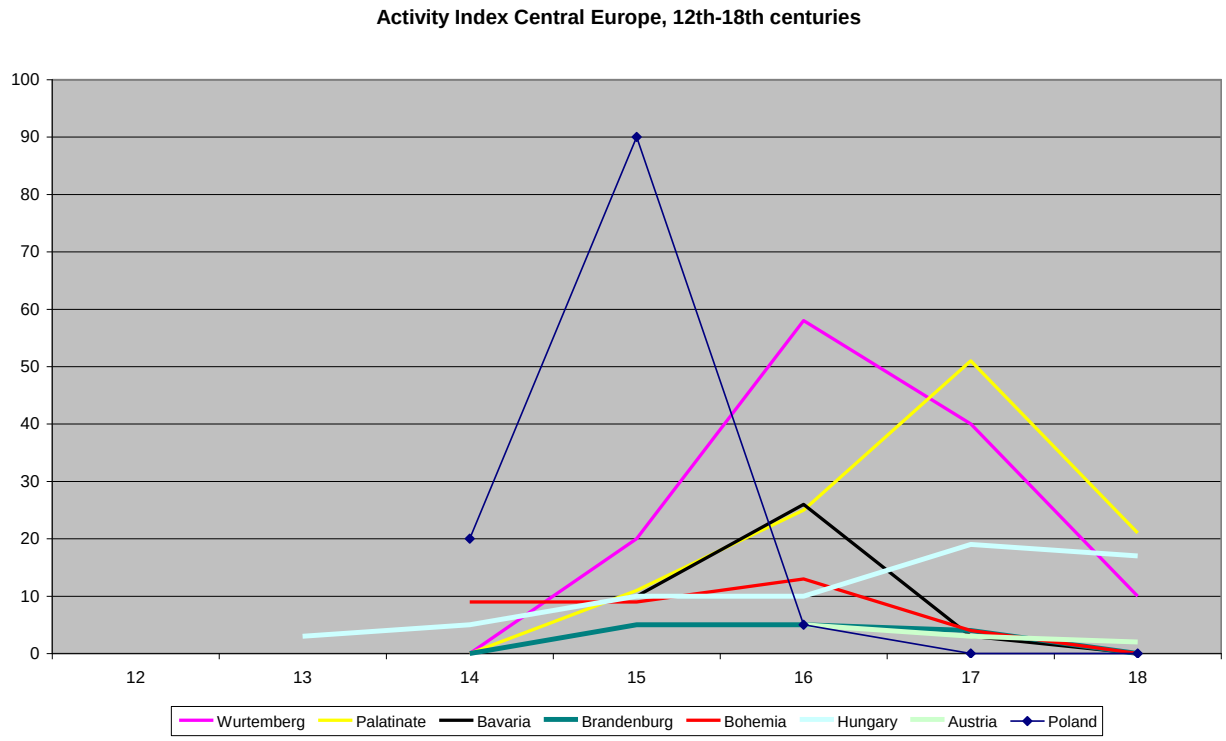

Activity Index Central Europe, 12th-18th centuries
100
90
80
70
60
50
40
30
20
10
0
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
Wurtemberg
Palatinate
Bavaria
Brandenburg
Bohemia
Hungary
Austria
Poland

Figure 4

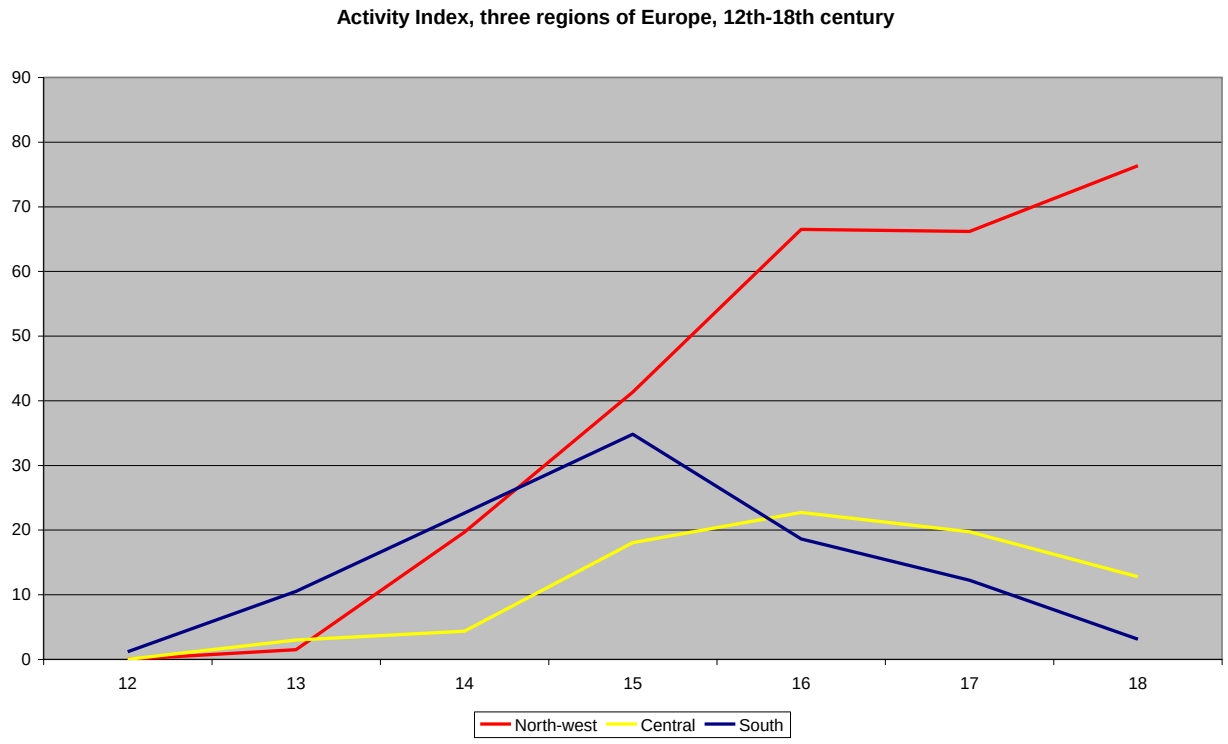
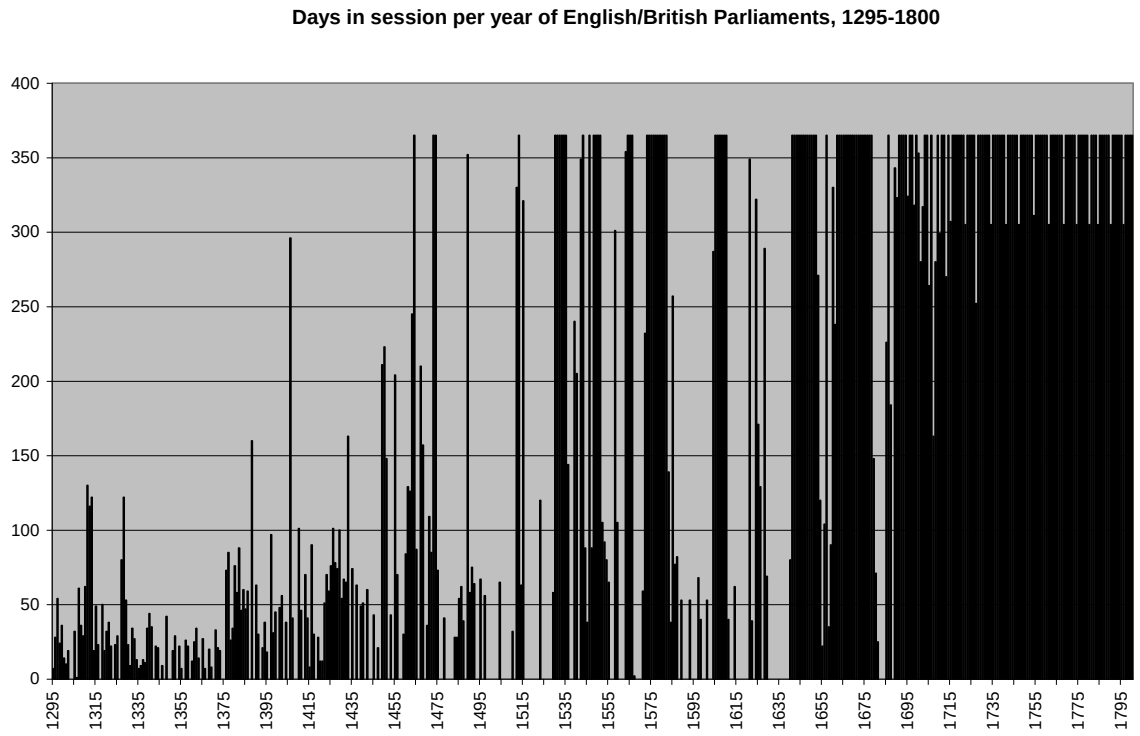
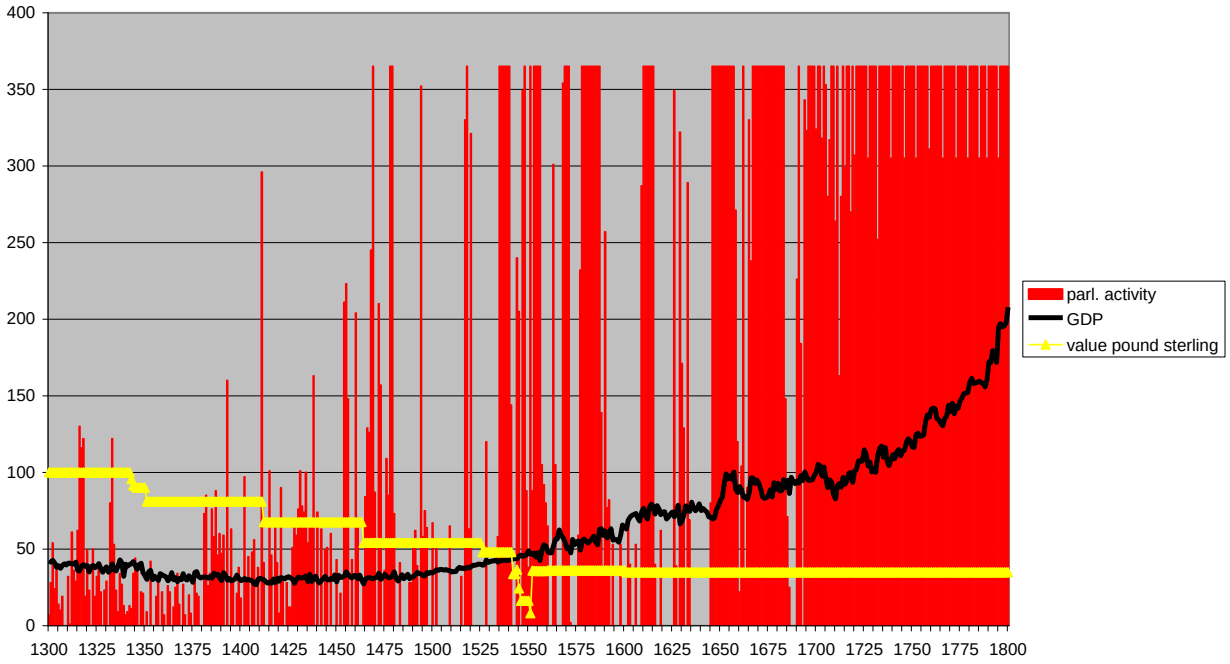

Activity Index, three regions of Europe, 12th-18th century
90
80
70
60
50
40
30
20
10
0
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
North-west
Central
South

Figure 5


Days in session per year of English/British Parliaments, 1295-1800
400
350
300
250
200
150
100
50
0
1295
1315
1335
1355
1375
1395
1415
1435
1455
1475
1495
1515
1535
1555
1575
1595
1615
1635
1655
1675
1695
1715
1735
1755
1775
1795

Parliament, economic growth, and the value of the pound sterling, 1300-1800



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