

Opposition in Times of COVID-19 – To Support or Not to Support?

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Abstract

COVID-19 has hit many countries all over the world, and its impact on (party) politics has been undeniable. This crisis situation functions as an opportunity structure incentivising opposition forces to support the government. Not much is known about what drives opposition parties to (not) support the government in crisis situations. This article integrates the literature on rally-around-the-flag, political opportunity structures, party types and party goals. More specifically, we focus on the behaviour of opposition parties towards the government's crisis response to the COVID-19 pandemic. We analyse whether and how the party type influences the position of the party vis-à-vis the governmental coalition, focusing on the case of Belgium. We categorise the seven opposition parties in Belgium as challenger or mainstream parties and explain their behaviour on the basis of policy-, office- or vote-seeking motives. Our analysis is based on party voting behaviour, elite interviews and an analysis of the main plenary debates.

Keywords: minority government, rally-around-the-flag, COVID-19, mainstream parties, challenger parties, opposition, party goals.

1 Introduction

The COVID-19 crisis has hit many countries all over the world, and its impact on (party) politics has been undeniable. In these circumstances, the government has been in the public eye and is deemed primarily responsible for tackling the public health and socio-economic consequences of the pandemic. In such times of acute crisis, a country can 'rally-around-the flag' and support the government in their attempts to overcome the crisis. This rallying effect has been frequently examined in the past in a wide array of crises. It has, among others, pointed to

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the important role that opposition parties play in this process: their behaviour largely determines whether or not a rally-around-the-flag effect occurs. This article builds on the insights of these studies and sheds light on the drivers of opposition parties' attitude vis-à-vis the government in times of crisis. More specifically, we focus on the behaviour of opposition parties towards the government's crisis response to the COVID-19 pandemic. We analyse whether and how the party type influences the position of the party vis-à-vis the governmental coalition. Consequently, the research question we address in this article is the following: what explains the different responses of the opposition parties to the government amidst the COVID-19 crisis?

Our analysis concentrates on the Belgian case. In general, Belgium is characterised by a political system with a strong division between opposition parties and parties forming the government, owing to the strong role parties play, often referred to as 'partitocracy' (De Winter & Dumont, 2006, pp. 972-973). However, during the COVID-19 crisis, the country was ruled by a minority caretaker government. In December 2018, the cabinet lost its parliamentary majority when the Flemish nationalist party N-VA left the government coalition following a political crisis centred on the UN Global Compact for Migration. The national elections of May 2019 resulted in a political deadlock: no new government could be formed until October 2020. Consequently, when the pandemic hit Belgium, the country was still steered by a minority caretaker government (Bouckaert et al., 2020, p. 18; Louwerse et al., 2021, p. 1027; Pilet, 2020, p. 9). With Belgium's political system characterised by a strict government-opposition dichotomy, we argue that the pressure for measures to tackle the health crisis, on the one hand, and the need of the minority government for additional parliamentary support, on the other, was conducive to the decision of the opposition parties to support the government. However, our findings show that the behaviour of opposition parties differs depending on their main objective, with mainstream opposition parties much more inclined to side with the government compared with challenger parties.

In the next part of this article, we set out the conceptual framework, namely what the important role of opposition parties is in the rally-around-the-flag process, and – specifically with regard to our analysed case – how the COVID-19 crisis and the minority caretaker government in Belgium provide an opportunity structure for opposition parties and why different party types might explain different attitudes. The second part gives an overview of our methodological approach, and the third part first provides an overview of the responses of the opposition parties and then discusses why these parties' attitudes were (not) in line with our expectations. The discussion closes with a number of conclusions about Belgium and COVID-19 and a note on the broader implications for the role of opposition parties in the rally-around-the-flag process.

2 Conceptual Framework

2.1 *A Rally-Around-the-Flag-Effect of the COVID-19 Crisis?*

A crisis – like the COVID-19 pandemic – can significantly alter the dynamics in a political system, in regard to the attitudes of both the general public and the political elite. Such a crisis can often have a rally-around-the-flag-effect: increased support for the government (Mueller, 1970, p. 21). This patriotic reflex has been substantially documented – mainly in the context of the United States (for an overview, see Baum & Potter, 2008) – in situations of war, diplomatic crises or (terrorist) attacks (Chowanietz, 2011; Lai & Reiter, 2005; Newman & Forcehimes, 2010). More recently, scholars have also studied this rallying effect in the context of an economic crisis (Weschle, 2014), environmental disasters (Ramos & Sanz, 2020), Brexit (Costello, 2020) and also the COVID-19 pandemic (Baekgaard et al., 2020; Kuhlmann et al., 2021; Louwerse et al., 2021; Schraff, 2020).

On the basis of Mueller's (1970) conceptualisation we can indeed argue that the COVID-19 pandemic constituted a potential 'rally-around-the-flag' moment. He identified three main elements for an event in order to have such an effect: (1) the crisis must be international in nature; (2) it must be 'specific, dramatic and sharply focused', and (3) it must involve the government and the country directly. The COVID-19 pandemic fulfils these conditions: it was a global crisis with major consequences that increased the pressure on governments to come up with a policy response. While pandemics are not a new phenomenon, the scope of COVID-19 took many countries by surprise (Bouckaert et al., 2020, pp. 6-9; Davies, 2020, pp. 131-134; Pattyn et al., 2020). Most countries were poorly prepared for this health crisis and national governments globally have been struggling to respond appropriately to the virus. The crisis was also characterised by a high degree of visibility: the impact of the pandemic was omnipresent in media broadcasting, resulting in high public awareness of the need for governmental action to mitigate the health crisis and its economic and social fallout.

While initial research of this rally-around-the-flag effect focused on demonstrating the relationship between crisis situations and public support for the government, more recent scholarship has tried to go further and uncover the causal mechanism behind this relationship. Researchers have pointed to the important role that the political elite – and, in particular, opposition parties – play in this respect (Berinsky, 2007; Chowanietz, 2011; Groeling & Baum, 2008). Crises affect the exogenous circumstances and influence the dynamics between government and opposition parties (Della Porta & Parks, 2018, p. 92) and can lead the opposition forces to stop criticising and even start supporting the government or, in the words of Conover (1981, p. 303 as cited in Costello, 2020, p. 2), "[I]t is a well-established principle that threats from outside a system promote cohesion within the system." In other words, a crisis functions as an opportunity structure that incentivises opposition forces to support the government.

While opposition parties play an important role in the rally-around-the-flag process, not all opposition forces respond similarly. Aside from the temporal dimension (see Louwerse et al., 2021), a number of context- and party-related factors also play a role. In his analysis on the rally-around-the-flag effect follow-

ing terrorist attacks, Chowaniec (2011, p. 674) focused on mainstream opposition parties because he assumed that ‘radicals and fringe elites’ might not support the government in times of crisis. Building on this assumption, Costello (2020) observed that not all parties are equally susceptible to the rally-effect, with a difference between nationalist and internationalist parties. Louwerse et al. (2021) found that (larger) parties with more government experience were more likely to support the government than parties without such experience. They also put forward another reason that can explain differences between countries in regard to whether or not a rallying effect occurred: the behaviour of the government itself. A rally-effect seemed more likely when the government was open to the involvement of opposition parties in crisis decision-making. They also pointed to the possible impact of the state structure in this respect: in Germany, the cooperative behaviour of some opposition parties could be a result of the federal state structure. Some parties that were in the opposition at the national level were part of regional governments and, as such, also part of the informal coordination regime that decided on the crisis measures, making it more difficult for them to blame the national government for their crisis management (Louwerse et al., 2021, p. 1037).

2.2 *The Opportunity Structure: The Belgian Partitocratic Regime, the COVID-19 Crisis and the Minority Caretaker Government*

We directly build on these assumptions by analysing the behaviour of opposition parties towards the government’s COVID-19 response in Belgium. While cooperation between opposition parties and parties in government had recently become rare in the country, the COVID-19 crisis created a situation that was much more conducive to the opposition parties taking a supportive stance towards the government.

In general, Belgium is one of the most prominent examples of a partitocratic political system (De Winter et al., 1996, p. 215; De Winter & Dumont, 2006, p. 957; Deschouwer, 2009, p. 190). Political decision-making is strongly dominated by the leadership of those parties that form a governmental majority, at the expense of parliament, in general, and opposition parties, in particular. All policy initiatives are meticulously stipulated in an extensive coalition agreement decided by the party leaders during the interparty negotiations to form a government. This document constitutes the basis for almost all policy initiatives launched in parliament through the government (Fiers & Van Hecke, 2020, pp. 212-213). In order to ensure government stability, permanent and unconditional support of the members of parliament of the majority parties is required. If a governmental initiative fails in parliament, this would trigger a crisis among the coalition parties and possibly the downfall of the government (De Winter & Dumont, 2006, p. 958). Consequently, the political groups in parliament are characterised by a very high degree of party discipline (Depauw & Martin, 2009): Members of parliament from the majority parties have consistently supported government-initiated proposals. ‘Alternative majorities’ that consist of a cooperation between some (but not all) governmental parties and some opposition parties are nearly non-existent. Any legislative proposals put forward by (one of) the opposition

parties are systematically voted down by the majority parties and vice versa: initiatives from the governmental parties are almost never supported by the opposition (Fiers & Van Hecke, 2020, pp. 212-213).

Given this constraining influence of *partitocracy* in Belgium, we argue that the combination of the COVID-19 pandemic and the caretaker minority government that was in place after the 2019 elections provided a political opportunity structure (POS) that incentivised opposition parties to support the government. Although the concept of POS originates from the social movement literature (Eelbode et al., 2013, p. 452; Goldstone & Tilly, 2001; Kriesi et al., 1998; McAdam, 1999), it can also be applied to party politics (see for example Fell, 2006; Spies & Franzmann, 2011). The founder of the concept, Eisinger (1973, pp. 18-25), used it to indicate the level of accessibility to power and the level of influence in the political system. Tarrow (1994, p. 85) defined POS as “consistent, but not necessarily formal or permanent, dimensions of the political environment that provide incentives for people to undertake collective action by affecting their expectations for success or failure”. Meyer and Minkoff (2004, pp. 1461-1462) highlighted how POSs can be used to explain policy changes. Applied to political parties, the analytical framework of POS allows an assessment of the influence of structural and environmental factors on the opportunities for parties and enables researchers to focus on the exogenous conditions for party success (Arzheimer & Carter, 2006, p. 422; Tarrow, 1998, p. 18).

At the time the pandemic hit the country in the spring of 2020, Belgium was governed by a minority caretaker government at the national level. In line with Louwerse et al.’s (2021) assumptions that a rally-effect is more likely when a government is open to the involvement of opposition parties in crisis decision-making, we argue that this situation of a minority caretaker government was conducive to the decision of the Belgian opposition parties to support the government. Although minority governments are no exception in Western parliamentary democracies (Crowley & Moore, 2019, p. 3; Elklit, 1999, p. 63; Strøm, 1990, p. 59), in Belgian political history a minority cabinet is exceptional (Ceuleers, 1977, p. 173; Gerard, 2016, p. 180; IPOVO, 1974, p. 12). The fact that there was a minority government in Belgium meant that the government parties had no other option than to be open to the involvement – and support – of the opposition parties in their management of the health crisis. The conventional wisdom is indeed that minority governments are vulnerable and opposition parties must be persuaded to support the government (Norton, 2008, pp. 245-246). Since opposition parties are necessary to build a majority, the opposition is in a veto position in relation to the policies that the minority government can pass. A minority government faces a permanent risk of being brought down by the opposition because it is only with the consent of opposition parties that a minority government can adopt a policy (Falcó-Gimeno & Jurado, 2011, p. 555; Green-Pedersen, 2001, p. 56).

An additional factor is the federal state structure of Belgium, which meant that some of the opposition parties at the national level were part of a governmental coalition at the regional level and consequently participated in the multi-level crisis decision-making. We assume that this inhibits these opposition parties

from heavily criticising the national government, similarly to what Louwerse et al. (2021, p. 1037) found with regard to the response of the opposition parties at the national level in Germany during the COVID-19 crisis.

2.3 Ceci N'Est Pas une Opposition? Different Opportunities for Different Opposition Parties

Although we argue that the COVID-19 crisis and the minority caretaker government constitute a POS for opposition parties to support the government, we expect that not all opposition parties will respond similarly to this changing environment. More specifically, we expect that the parties' response depends on the objective that the party considers most important. Following the classic categorisation of Strøm and Müller (1999, pp. 5-8), we believe that parties can hold office-seeking, policy-seeking and vote-seeking objectives. Office-seeking parties want to be part of the governmental coalition and control the executive branch, while policy-seeking parties want to maximise their impact on public policy. Vote-seeking parties aim to maximise their electoral support. We concur that these party goals are not necessarily mutually exclusive but do presume that parties prioritise among these goals. We expect that office-seeking and policy-seeking parties are more inclined to support the government and try to influence crisis policy-making, while vote-seeking parties try to use the pandemic to maximise their electoral support at the expense of the government.

Since there is no clear-cut way to operationalise a priori whether a party is office, policy- or vote-seeking (Schumacher et al., 2015, p. 1044), we rely on the differentiation between mainstream and challenger parties in order to distinguish between the various opposition parties. Mainstream opposition parties routinely alternate between government and opposition. In terms of ideology, mainstream opposition parties, namely Christian democratic, conservative, liberal and social democratic parties, are often traditional parties (Hobolt & Tilley, 2016, pp. 971-972). These parties have a centrist position on the classic left-right scale and assign importance to socio-economic issues. Their behaviour and stances show commitment to the principles of liberal democracy and to the formal and informal rules of the political games (Akkerman et al., 2016, p. 7). Mainstream parties are cautious in regard to mobilising around new issues or adopting positions far from other mainstream parties, since this would make it more difficult to enter into coalition government (Hobolt & Tilley, 2016, p. 974). Mainstream parties are referred to as conventional, in contrast to radical parties (Akkerman et al., 2016, p. 7; Kitschelt, 1989, p. 62): they are seen as established parties that are loyal to the political system.

By contrast, challenger parties rarely or never participate in government coalitions; they have not built a reputation for being good coalition partners, owing to uncertainty about their behaviour (De Vries & Hobolt, 2012, p. 252; van de Wardt et al., 2014, p. 987). These challenger parties often tend to focus on extreme or niche issue positions (without necessarily being single-issue or niche parties) to differentiate themselves from mainstream parties (De Vries & Hobolt, 2012, p. 251). Compared with mainstream parties, they place greater emphasis on their core concerns (Allen et al., 2017, p. 807), making it more difficult for

them to compromise. Examples of such parties are communist, green and extreme nationalist parties (Adams et al., 2006, p. 513; Hobolt & Tilley, 2016, pp. 972-973). Unlike mainstream parties, challenger parties are electorally punished when they moderate their positions (Adams et al., 2006, p. 513). These parties – unconstrained by the responsibilities of government – are characterised by an anti-establishment rhetoric, challenging the mainstream political consensus to break mainstream parties' appeal and boost their own electoral support (De Vries & Hobolt, 2020). They seek to reform or overthrow the existing political system and the norms and values on which it is based (Akkerman et al., 2016, p. 7).

We argue that mainstream and challenger opposition parties will respond differently to the political context of the COVID-19 crisis and the caretaker minority government. In times of crisis, we expect that mainstream opposition parties are willing to overcome their differences with parties in government in order to tackle the challenges posed by the pandemic. In multiparty systems like Belgium, these mainstream opposition parties have been in a government coalition with the ruling parties or want to build a reputation as a reliable coalition partner. In ideological terms, they are close to the other mainstream parties in government. On the other hand, we expect that challenger parties in opposition instrumentalise the crisis and distance themselves from the government. Free from any 'burden' to present themselves as potential governmental partners, challenger parties might exploit the crisis responses of the ruling mainstream parties to increase their popular support, since voters negatively affected by a crisis will punish mainstream parties and turn to challenger parties instead (Hernández, 2018, p. 458; Hobolt & Tilley, 2016, p. 972). It provides them with an opportunity to exploit their anti-establishment profile, in particular when other (mainstream) opposition parties do engage in cooperating with the parties in government. This also builds on the findings by Louwerse et al. of (2021) that (larger) opposition parties with government experience were more positive towards the government in parliamentary debates than opposition parties without such experience.

3 Methodology and Data

In order to examine whether and how the party type influences an opposition party's attitude towards the government in times of crisis, we focus on the case of Belgium in view of its specific political context and circumstances. On the one hand, the general political context of partyocracy makes the country the least likely to see opposition parties supporting and cooperating with the government. On the other hand, Belgium was one of the countries that was most severely hit by the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, the government had minimal policy leeway, since at the outbreak of the crisis Belgium had a minority caretaker government. These political circumstances provide a considerable incentive to opposition parties to cooperate with the government. In other words, while Belgium's general political context is least favourable, the specific political circumstances are most favourable for opposition parties to support the govern-

ment. This makes it a suitable case for an in-depth examination of the drivers behind opposition behaviour in times of crisis.

During the COVID-19 pandemic in spring 2020, there were seven opposition parties represented in the Belgian Chamber of Representatives. In line with our conceptual framework, we divide them into challenger and mainstream opposition parties. Authors have used two main approaches to differentiate between challenger and mainstream parties. The first approach categorises parties according to their party family: challenger parties are characterised as ‘new’ parties that are positioned at the extreme ends of the political spectrum (radical left and radical right parties) or parties with a focused ideological platform (green parties) (Adams et al., 2012, p. 1273; Schulte-Cloos, 2018, p. 412). The second approach categorises parties as challengers or mainstream depending on participation in government: parties that were not (recently) part of a governmental coalition are considered as challenger parties (Hobolt & Tilley, 2016, p. 975).

On the basis of these two approaches, three of the seven opposition parties can be categorised as challenger parties: Flemish Interest (‘Vlaams Belang’), the Workers’ Party of Belgium (‘Partij van de Arbeid van België/Parti du Travail de Belgique’) and the Greens, which are two separate parties – the Dutch-speaking ‘Groen’ and the French-speaking Ecolo (‘Écologistes Confédérés pour l’organisation de luttes originales’) – but form a joint political group in the Chamber of Representatives. On the basis of the Chapel Hill Expert Surveys, Flemish Interest and the Workers’ Party are, respectively, placed on the radical right and radical left end of the political spectrum (Bakker et al., 2021). Both parties have always been in opposition on the federal and regional levels and are not considered as potential coalition parties (Pilet, 2020, pp. 4-8; van Haute et al., 2018, p. 960). Moreover, both parties have been characterised as challenger parties (Hobolt & Tilley, 2016, p. 4 of the Online Appendix; Schulte-Cloos, 2018, p. 3 of the Online Appendix). The categorisation of the Belgian green parties is less clear-cut. Schulte-Cloos (2018, p. 3 of the Online Appendix) categorised both Green and Ecolo as green challenger parties. Hobolt and Tilley (2016, p. 4 of Online Appendix) categorised Green as a green challenger party, but Ecolo as a mainstream party. In the last two decades, both parties have participated in a number of governments at the national and regional levels (Wavreille & Pilet, 2016, p. 46). Despite this mixed evaluation, we consider that the categorisation of these two parties tilts towards challenger parties because they still hold a focused ideological platform (Wavreille & Pilet, 2016, p. 55), with, compared to mainstream parties, limited governmental experience, during which they were always a junior coalition partner.

We categorise the additional four opposition parties as mainstream: the Dutch-speaking socialist party sp.a (‘Socialistische Partij Anders’), the French-speaking socialist party PS (‘Parti Socialiste’), the French-speaking Christian Democrats cdH (‘centre démocrate Humaniste’) and the New Flemish Alliance N-VA (‘Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie’). The first three parties have alternated between government and opposition and have been characterised as mainstream (Hobolt & Tilley, 2016, p. 4 of the Online Appendix; Schulte-Cloos, 2018, pp. 2-5 of the Online Appendix). The categorisation of the New Flemish Alliance is more diffi-

cult. Schulte-Cloos (2018, pp. 2-5 of the Online Appendix) does not consider the N-VA as a challenger party, while Hobolt and Tilley (2016, p. 4 of the Online Appendix) do label it as a (right-wing) challenger party. However, we categorise the party as mainstream, because it has consistently been part of the regional government and – more recently, between 2014 and 2018 – of the federal government, even as a senior coalition partner. In addition, they hold a broad political platform, focusing on different policy issues (Abts et al., 2019, p. 849).

In line with previous studies and based on our categorisation, our central hypothesis is that the POS of the COVID-19 crisis and the minority caretaker government will incentivise the mainstream opposition parties to support the government and contribute to the government's policy because of policy- and office-seeking motives while the challenger opposition parties refrain from supporting the government because of vote-seeking motives.

Our analysis is based on party voting behaviour, semi-structured elite interviews with the seven parliamentary party leaders in the Chamber of Representatives conducted in May 2020, supplemented with an analysis of the main plenary debates on the COVID-19 crisis.¹ The interviews and debates were manually coded for references to policy-seeking, vote-seeking or office-seeking discourse on a paragraph level (See Tables 3, 4 and 5, in Annex). Policy-seeking references include statements on policy initiatives to tackle the COVID-19 crisis, references of elections or voters were labelled as vote-seeking, and statements on (potential) future government participation or on the need to form a government were coded as office-seeking (See Table 6 in Annex for examples of coded paragraphs).

4 Analysis: The Variable Attitudes of Challenger and Mainstream Opposition Parties

4.1 *Different Attitudes Among the Belgian Opposition Parties*

After the national elections of May 2019, negotiations on forming a new government remained deadlocked for more than a year. As a result, when the COVID-19 crisis hit Belgium in the first half of March 2020, the minority caretaker government of prime minister Sophie Wilmès was still in place, consisting of the Dutch-speaking liberal party Open Vld, the French-speaking liberal party MR and the Dutch-speaking Christian Democrats CD&V. It was argued that with no breakthrough in sight to form a new government, the limited competences of the Wilmès government would constitute a serious impediment to managing the imminent health crisis. On 19 March 2020, a vote of confidence was held in the Chamber of Representatives to provide the Wilmès government with full competences. A week after the confidence vote, on 26 March 2020, the Chamber voted again to grant the Wilmès government special plenary powers for three months. The aim was to enable the government to take swift measures to counter the COVID-19 pandemic. The parties that supported the plenary powers participated in a new established consultative body (the 'Superkern'), which met every week on Saturday mornings to discuss the government's corona response. The governing parties and supporting opposition parties came together at these meetings.

Table 1 *Voting Behaviour of the Political Groups in the Chamber of Representatives*

Opposition Party	Abbreviation	Party Type	Support for Minority Government (19 March 2020 Vote)	Support for Plenary Powers (26 March 2020 Vote)
Socialist Party Different	sp.a ^a	Mainstream	Yes	Yes
Socialist Party	PS	Mainstream	Yes	Yes
Humanist Democratic Centre	CdH	Mainstream	Yes	Yes
New Flemish Alliance	N-VA	Mainstream	No	Yes
Green/Ecolo	Groen-Ecolo	Challenger	Yes	Yes
Workers' Party of Belgium	PTB-PVDA ^b	Challenger	No	No
Flemish Interest	Vlaams Belang	Challenger	No	No

^a On 21 March 2021 sp.a changed its name to 'Vooruit'. At the time of the interviews and the debates the party was still called sp.a.

^b PTB-PVDA is the only nation-wide party in Belgium. The Francophone PTB and Flemish PVDA form, like the Greens, a single parliamentary party group but have, contrary to the Greens, a single party headquarters and party leader (Pilet, 2020, p. 10).

This ad hoc body obviously provided an important opportunity for some of the opposition parties to contribute to the ongoing crisis management and policy-making.

Table 1 provides an overview of the voting behaviour of the opposition parties in the Chamber of Representatives in regard to the vote of confidence and the vote on the special plenary powers.

The voting behaviour of the mainstream opposition parties sp.a, PS and cdH confirms our expectations: they supported the government, both in the confidence vote and the vote on special plenary powers. Similarly, the challenger parties Flemish Interest and the Workers' Party voted against, in line with our expectations. However, the behaviour of the mainstream opposition party N-VA only partially confirms our expectations because they supported the plenary powers but not the government. Moreover, the behaviour of the green parties does not confirm our expectations because they supported the minority government as well as its plenary powers.

4.2 Explaining the Different Attitudes of the Belgian Opposition Parties

4.2.1 Mainstream Parties

The attitude of the two socialist opposition parties PS and sp.a can be described as critical though constructive; the group leaders declared that they were not very

optimistic about the political situation but that they recognised that the investiture was required to take the necessary measures to tackle COVID-19.

We will, without hesitation, give you the confidence to take the necessary measures against the corona virus, because that is also a choice for solidarity. We must protect the vital interests of the Nation. Nevertheless, we will keep a watchful eye on the decisions of this government. (Laaouej, 19 March 2020, p. 7)

Their attitude is motivated by both office-seeking and policy-seeking motives (Tables 3, 4 and 5 in Annex). The socialist group leaders emphasised that their parties were taking the lead to form a full-fledged government that was capable of taking political responsibilities in the economic consequences of the crisis. This goal eventually materialised in October 2020, when a new (majority) government was formed, which included both the sp.a and the PS.²

We have called on the chairmen to talk to each other to find common ground among the parties in order to look for a [parliamentary] majority. We are trying to take the lead to ensure that we are ready by September and have a full-fledged government because we are now in a health crisis. (Interview A)

In addition – regarding the policy dimension – the group leaders stressed that they wanted to avoid cuts on social security: “Sp.a has specifically demanded that certainly no measures can be taken that reduce purchasing power of families or can effect existing social protection” (Kitir, 26 March 2020, p. 76).

PS and sp.a wanted to avoid that the health emergencies would result in negative economic and social effects. According to the socialists, granting the special powers to the minority government was considered as an important instrument to mitigate any potential loss of income among the population: “The special powers must be social powers in the first place” (Laaouej, 19 March 2020, p. 9-10). Moreover, the group leaders emphasised the importance of socialism, as it showed the pertinence of their political project focused on solidarity (Interview B):

The corona virus threatens our health, our economy and our security. The virus does not distinguish between rich and poor, between young and old, between country or language. Everyone can be affected, everyone is concerned, and we all have to take care of each other. (Kitir, 19 March 2020, p. 25)

The attitude of the francophone Christian Democrat cdH is motivated by policy-seeking objectives (see Tables 4, 5 and 6 in Annex). The party had a disappointing electoral result in the 2019 national elections and announced that it would not participate in a new national government. The group leader declared that their main objective was to be a catalyst for scientists and healthcare workers. During the debates, group leader Catherine Fonck – also a medical doctor – emphasised

the importance of the expertise of medical professionals and practitioners (Fonck, 26 March 2020, p. 78). She relied on her broad network in the medical sector to put pressure on the government to include their insights in the COVID-19 policy:

I was in close contact with both scientists and the [medical] field ... I tried as much as possible during this crisis to be a catalyst on bringing solutions, on putting pressure on the government to try to anticipate much more and to react faster. (Interview C)

By supporting the minority cabinet and its plenary powers, cdH had the opportunity to prove their focus on healthcare and their support for a fair healthcare policy. The group leader emphasised that her party only supported the government in the interest of tackling the COVID-19 crisis and, consequently, that this support was not unlimited (Interview C).

The mainstream opposition party that did not confirm our expectations was the New Flemish Alliance N-VA. The party supported the plenary powers but did not express its trust in the minority cabinet. This ambivalent attitude can be explained by two main factors. On the one hand, it was the N-VA that brought down the majority coalition in December 2018, resulting in the minority caretaker government. This made it possible for the party to have a hard and critical attitude towards this government. On the other hand, N-VA was the senior coalition partner in the regional Flemish government with parties that are part of this national minority government (the Flemish Liberals and Christian Democrats). In addition, the head of the Flemish government also participated in national security meetings during the COVID-19 crisis, making him part of the COVID-19 crisis management. This made it more difficult for the party to take on a hard and critical attitude towards the minority cabinet's crisis measures.

This resulted in support for the plenary powers of the federal government to enable efficient policies to tackle the COVID-19 crisis:

Our group supports the Special Powers Act, because there should be no semblance of the impression that obstacles are being placed that could hinder a swift and effective approach to the corona crisis. Parliamentary procedures should not be obstacles with a benevolent legislature, but they could be. So we certainly see the value of the special powers in these special circumstances. (De Roover, 26 March 2020, p. 56)

Any obstacles to effective crisis measures would evidently also cast a shadow on the regional Flemish government led by the party. Group leader De Roover indeed emphasised that “tackling the crisis as good and as jointly as possible is their priority” (Interview D). At the same time, N-VA criticised the vote of confidence for the caretaker government: “While the coronavirus is around, this cabinet asks, based on vague intentions and without a program, to be promoted to a fully-fledged government” (De Roover, 19 March 2020, pp. 1-2).

The findings show that N-VA was 'torn between two lovers': being constructive and being critical. This can be illustrated by the fact that office-seeking, as well as well policy-seeking and voter-seeking motives, were prevalent in their discourse (Tables 3, 4, and 5 in Annex). A too critical attitude might jeopardise the party's chances of becoming part of the new majority government, since government negotiations took place in parallel to the debates on the COVID-19 crisis. Group leader De Roover emphasised that their priority was to install a majority government as soon as possible (Interview D). However, these office-seeking motives were quickly abandoned when the party was sidelined in the negotiations, steering the party towards more vote-seeking behaviour:

We have shown our willingness to put the other differences aside but we were brutally and coldly rejected. Apparently, the fear of contamination by the N-VA among some parties was bigger than that for corona. The aversion to the biggest party of this country in this crisis situation stood in the way [of] taking such a widely supported solution. (De Roover, 19 March 2020, p. 2)

When its chances to participate in the new government appeared slim, the party aimed for new elections (Interview D).

4.2.2 *Challenger Parties*

The challenger party Flemish Interest confirmed our expectations: they supported neither the minority government nor the plenary powers. Instead, they took on a critical and hard attitude towards the minority cabinet. The behaviour of Flemish Interest can be explained by their voter orientation: they are not interested in influencing the government's policy constructively but rather in critically challenging the minority cabinet to maximise their own electoral support (See Tables 3, 4, and 5 in Annex).

The party's discourse was focused on emphasising the lack of (electoral) support for the minority government, while taking the position of defending the interests of the majority of the (Flemish) population:

You speak of unity, but we are further from it today than ever. Not only have you sidelined the two election winners, who together account for 1.4 million votes, you have publicly taken off even the largest party in this country, which also attracts 1 million votes. Il faut le faire! ... You will only receive a certificate of incapacity from us. You will receive the bill from the population. (Tom Van Grieken, 19 March 2020, pp. 11-13)

The party used sharp language to openly question the legitimacy of the government:

The last word will always be with the people. If you continue to betray the confidence of the people, then in the next elections the people will do away with the parties that would show themselves to be anti-democratic or anti-

Flemish in the coming months. In 2024, don't say I didn't warn you. (Dries Van Langenhove, 26 March 2020, p. 66)

The vote-seeking behaviour can also be illustrated by a statement of group leader Barbara Pas, who emphasised that they opposed the minority government because it did not represent the will of the voters: "The Wilmès government is a government that was not elected by the people. It is not a representation of what the voters wanted" (Interview G). She continuously stressed her party's demand for new elections: "We already asked for new elections when N-VA left the Michel government in 2018 ... Either they negotiate to form a full-fledged government, or they organise new elections" (Interview G).

In terms of criticism of government policy, Flemish Interest seemed to be aimed at cultivating a bad crisis response by the government by continuously stating that this minority government had a 'blunder approach' (Interview G). For example, the party's group leaders in the regional and national parliament launched a book in June 2020 called 'The Corona Blunder Book', in an attempt to show that the minority government completely failed in its attempt to tackle the health crisis.

In line with our expectations, the Workers' Party did not support the minority government, or the plenary powers. Contrary to Flemish Interest, the Workers' Party took a more constructive attitude towards the government's policy:

We support the requisition of mouth masks or reagents, as well as the measures that aim to oxygenate our economy. But the political debate continues in Parliament. You will be able to count on our support and that of the people, who show solidarity with the refuse collectors, the bus drivers and the nurses. (Hedebouw, 26 March 2020, p. 69)

However, they do not support the plenary powers, fearing such powers will be used to carry out an 'anti-social agenda': "The PVDA will vote against these special powers, but will always be available to support constructive measures" (Hedebouw, 26 March 2020, pp. 70-74).

Their discourse is characterised by both policy-seeking and vote-seeking (Tables 3, 4, and 5 in Annex). Their policy orientation was emphasised by the group leader of the Workers' Party, who explained that they did not support the minority government because of the content of its policy. More specifically, according to group leader Hedebouw, the governmental parties have proven in the past that they do not sufficiently invest in healthcare, one of the core themes of the political party. He emphasised that their main goal is to have a substantial influence on the content of the policy and that they were willing to constructively cooperate with other political parties. Although they were not in a position to substantially influence the content of the government's policy, the COVID-19 crisis constituted an electoral opportunity to show the importance of their political project: focus on healthcare and the working class. Furthermore, the group leader stressed that their secondary goal is electoral growth as a political party, which shows their voter-seeking motives (Interview F).

The Green group, consisting of Groen and Ecolo, had, contrary to our expectations, a tolerant and supportive attitude towards the minority cabinet. They trusted the minority government and supported the plenary powers. Group leader Kristof Calvo explicitly stated that their attitude was not driven by electoral considerations:

In all fairness, and this may sound a bit naive or implausible, but I don't have that much electoral calculation in mind at the moment.... This crisis rewards on the one hand the government parties and on the other hand [those parties that foster] the indignation. It may be true that we are neither one nor the other. But I don't want to make any other choice. (Interview E)

This is supported by the statements of the group in the parliamentary debates (Tables 4 and 5 in Annex). Group leader Calvo emphasised that the goal of the Green group is to get the country through this crisis with particular attention to the most vulnerable in society (Calvo, 19 March 2020, p. 5). Moreover, he claimed that there should be no difference between government and opposition during exceptional times of crisis. He recognised that there were ideological differences between the parties but that there was no room for contradistinctions between government and opposition (Interview E).

5 Conclusion

This article sheds light on the drivers of opposition parties' attitude vis-à-vis the government in times of crisis. More specifically, the focus is on the behaviour of opposition parties towards the government's crisis response to the COVID-19 pandemic in Belgium. We analysed whether and how the party type influences the position of the party vis-à-vis the governmental coalition. Given this constraining influence of partitocracy in Belgium, we argued that the combination of the COVID-19 pandemic and the caretaker minority government that was in place after the 2019 elections provided a POS that incentivised opposition parties to support the government. In other words, the need for a response to the pandemic as well as the particularly rare situation of the minority caretaker government created, much more than in 'normal times', a specific opportunity for Belgian opposition parties to support the government. More specifically, we expected mainstream opposition parties to support the government because of policy- and office-seeking motives while we expected the challenger opposition parties to refrain from supporting the government because of vote-seeking motives.

Our analysis, primarily, confirmed that, similarly to other countries, especially the UK (Louwerse et al., 2021), Belgium's opposition parties accommodated to the government's crisis response to the COVID-19 pandemic, albeit in different ways. These different types of behaviour by the opposition parties can certainly be explained by the fact that Belgium is a federal country and that some parties are in opposition at the national level but have government responsibility at the regional level. Similarly to the case of Germany (Louwerse et al., 2021,

p. 1029), this federal nature helps to explain why, for instance, N-VA supported the plenary powers but not the new minority government. More generally, the rally-around-the-flag did have its effect – so Belgium offers here another confirmation of this thesis – but in varying ways, as our analysis has shown, confirming findings about Belgium and other countries (Kuhlmann et al., 2021; Pattyn et al., 2020). In other words, it does help to explain opposition parties' attitude, but other factors (like federalism and partitocracy) played a decisive role as well.

Indeed, the exogenous pressure of COVID-19 on Belgium's partitocracy created a fading understanding of what 'opposition' actually means. The pandemic caused uncertainty and triggered positions of parties that were not entirely in line with what was expected. Also, the fact that a minority government was voted into office meant that every opposition party, whether challenger or mainstream, had to carefully choose its attitude towards the government and its COVID-19 response. PS, sp.a and cdH supported the government, both in the confidence and the special plenary powers vote, confirming our hypotheses. Similarly, the challenger parties Flemish Interest and the Workers' Party voted against, in line with our expectations. However, the behaviour of mainstream opposition party N-VA, as mentioned, only partially confirmed our expectations. Finally, the green parties did not confirm our expectations when they supported both the minority government and its plenary powers.

Our article made clear that the government formation influenced the attitude of the various opposition parties. Challenger parties such as Flemish Interest and the Workers' Party were very critical towards the minority government, whereas mainstream political parties, such as the Social Democrats, were more constructive towards the government. Moreover, the Greens took a rather constructive stance as they were hoping to be part of the new government, which eventually happened. For them the minority government looking for support in its COVID-19 response created a real opportunity. Given their disappointing electoral results in 2019, one may wonder whether they would have entered the government without the pandemic and their chance to show that they were 'governmentable'.

Mainstream opposition parties were clearly prompted by these political opportunities, while challenger parties adhered to what they always do: oppose the government (and its mainstream government and opposition parties). It remains to be seen whether the positioning of these parties will last beyond the pandemic or if a new minority government is voted in parliament. In other words, future research will be able to analyse whether this period – and the particular behaviour of the opposition parties – was truly exceptional or whether it will have lasting effects (in clearly distinguishing between mainstream and challenger parties, in the nature of opposition within the Belgian case, whether antagonistic or consensual), by comparing over time or with other cases, such as Denmark (where minority governments are no exception) or other Western European countries hit by the same pandemic. Such comparative analyses will further improve our understanding of the factors that explain the answer challenger and mainstream parties need to formulate: to support or not to support?

Annex

Table 2 *List of interviews*

Interview	Political Party	Abbreviation	Respondent	Date of interview	Medium
A	Socialist Party Different	sp.a	Meryame Kitir	19/05/2020	Telephone
B	Socialist Party	PS	Ahmed Laouej	12/05/2020	Zoom
C	Humanist Democratic Centre	cdH	Catherine Fonck	29/05/2020	Zoom
D	New Flemish Alliance	N-VA	Peter De Roover	06/05/2020	Zoom
E	Green/Ecolo	Groen-Ecolo	Kristof Calvo	15/05/2020	Zoom
F	Workers' Party of Belgium	PTB-PVDA	Raoul Hede-bouw	20/05/2020	Zoom
G	Flemish Interest	Vlaams Belang	Barbara Pas	18/05/2020	Zoom

Table 3 *Coding interviews*

	Policy-oriented	Office-oriented	Voter-oriented
Sp.a	High	High	Low
PS	High	Moderate	Low
cdH	High	/	/
N-VA	High	High	High
Groen-Ecolo	High	Moderate	/
PTB-PVDA	High	Low	High
Vlaams Belang	High	Low	High

Table 4 *Coding parliamentary debate (19 March 2020 - confidence)*

	Policy-oriented	Office-oriented	Voter-oriented
Sp.a	High	/	Low
PS	High	/	Low
cdH	High	/	/
N-VA	High	High	/
Groen-Ecolo	High	/	Low
PTB-PVDA	High	/	Low
Vlaams Belang	High)	/	High

Table 5 *Coding parliamentary debate (26 March 2020 – plenary powers)*

	Policy-oriented	Office-oriented	Voter-oriented
Sp.a	High	/	/
PS	High	/	/
cdH	High	/	/
N-VA	High	/	Moderate
Groen-Ecolo	High	/	/
PTB-PVDA	High	/	/
Vlaams Belang	High	/	High

Table 6 *Examples of coded paragraphs*

Orientation	Example of coded paragraph
Voter-oriented	This is a government, with 38 of the 150 seats in Parliament, that is not elected by the people. The government is not a representation of the voters' will [...] We have been without a government for a very long time. We have been asking for early elections since N-VA left the government. [...]
Voter-oriented	The last word will always be with the people. If you continue to betray the confidence of the people, then in the next elections the people will do away with the parties that would show themselves to be anti-democratic or anti-Flemish in the coming months. In 2024, don't say I didn't warn you
Policy-oriented	We try to be an opposition of ideas, an opposition of proposals, and there was room for this. We handed in a lot of proposals and a lot of them were taken into account. So there is room for a clean, moderated way of opposition.
Policy-oriented	Perhaps the most important thing is this: it is not because we are constructive and because we show understanding for the situation that the special powers may or can be abused by the government. In that regard, I repeat what I said this morning: I still don't understand why the government has taken the pharmaceutical law, which already went through the entire procedure in the committee, which was approved by the committee and is ready to be discussed in plenary, off the agenda, with the corona crisis as an argument.
Office-oriented	We have called on the chairmen to talk to each other to find common ground among the parties in order to look for a [parliamentary] majority. We are trying to take the lead to ensure that we are ready by September and have a full-fledged government because we are now in a health crisis.
Office-oriented	We have shown our willingness to put aside our differences but we were brutally and coldly rejected. Apparently, the fear of contamination by the N-VA among some parties was greater than the fear of corona. The aversion to let the biggest party in the country take its responsibility in this crisis stood in the way of a widely supported solution.

Note: The examples of coded paragraph have been translated from the original language (Dutch/French) to English by the authors.

Notes

- 1 The debate on the support for the minority government (19 March 2020) and the debate on the plenary powers (26 March 2020) are considered the main plenary debates at the start of the COVID-19 crisis.
- 2 Cabinet Alexander De Croo was installed on 1 October 2020 as a coalition government of the Liberals, the Social Democrats, the Greens and the Flemish Christian Democrats.

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