

RESEARCH NOTE

Role-Switching and Thematic Reallocation in Belgian Parliamentary Committees: A Longitudinal Research Note

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Abstract

Do parties change what they discuss when they move between government and opposition? This research note compares French-language interventions by francophone parties in the Belgian federal Interior and Justice committees across four matched first-year government windows between 2011 and 2026. It examines whether changes in institutional role coincide with recurring shifts in thematic attention, focusing on the Parti Socialiste's (PS) emphasis on budget and finance while comparing six parties across five themes. PS used about 2.7 times as many budget- and finance-related terms in opposition as in government, averaging 7.65 rather than 2.82 relevant terms per 1,000 words. Across the latest change of government, eight party-theme combinations showed statistically reliable shifts after correction for multiple comparisons, most involving parties whose institutional role changed. The findings suggest that moving between government and opposition does not transform parties' agendas across the board. Instead, it selectively increases attention to themes that fit a party's established profile and can be used for scrutiny in the relevant committee arena.

Keywords: Parliamentary committees, Role theory, Issue competition, Belgian politics, Text-as-data, Thematic salience

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1. Introduction

When parliamentary parties move between government and opposition, do they shift their thematic emphasis in committee debates, and does the same shift recur each time the role alternates?

That parties allocate attention strategically is well established. Party issue attention responds to the agenda set by competitors (Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2010), concentrates on the issues a party durably owns (Green-Pedersen, 2007; Petrocik, 1996), and varies with institutional position: opposition parties use parliamentary scrutiny more intensively and more adversarially than governing parties, which are bound to defend collective cabinet output (André et al., 2016; Dandoy, 2011; De Giorgi & Ilonszki, 2018; Proksch & Slapin, 2015). What this body of work largely documents, however, is either a cross-sectional association (at a given moment, governing and opposition parties emphasise different things) or the aftermath of a single transition. Neither design separates a strategic repertoire attached to the role itself from a one-off response to a particular coalition agreement, economic climate, or sequence of crises. If emphasis is genuinely role-linked, it should be reversible: a party should return to approximately the same profile whenever it returns to the same role, and that profile should recede again when it governs. Recurrence across repeated alternations, rather than the size of the shift at any one transition, is what distinguishes a role effect from a period effect.

What we stand to learn from this bears on how the reallocation of political attention is understood. Saliency and issue-competition accounts treat emphasis as a quantity parties adjust to their competitive situation (Budge, 2015; Green-Pedersen, 2007); ownership accounts treat the underlying issue repertoire as comparatively durable (Petrocik et al., 2003; Seeberg, 2017). If role-linked emphasis recurs, then what changes with role is the volume at which a party plays its established themes rather than the set of themes it plays—a distinction that is invisible in single-transition designs, where a change in emphasis and a change in repertoire look alike. Establishing recurrence would thus separate the flexible from the anchored component of a party's agenda, and would locate role change among the sources of attention reallocation that are strategic and reversible rather than developmental.

Two traditions frame why role should matter at all. The spatial tradition following Downs (1957) treats competition as positional: parties contest the same issues from opposing sides on shared dimensions. Saliency theory (Budge & Farlie, 1983; Robertson, 1976) holds instead that parties often compete less by opposing one another on the same issues than by *selectively emphasising* those on which they are advantaged, making the distribution of attention across issues the strategic variable (Budge, 2015; Dolezal et al., 2014). Committee discourse is a natural setting for the saliency mechanism: what varies across speeches and parties is primarily which themes are foregrounded, not fine-grained policy coordinates. Our dependent variable, thematic salience measured as lexical emphasis, therefore sits in the saliency tradition.

Role alters the strategic returns to emphasis. Governing parties must defend collective cabinet output and manage intra-coalition constraints (Moury & Timmermans, 2013); foregrounding contested themes can expose internal disagreement or invite accountability for outcomes they now own. Opposition parties face the opposite structure, gaining from scrutiny and from foregrounding issues that expose government vulnerability (De Giorgi & Ilonszki, 2018; Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2010; Hix & Noury, 2016). In policy-specialised, minister-facing committees, these incentive differences have a direct channel to thematic salience (Dandoy, 2011; Strøm, 1998); committee debate is also less directly vote-seeking than campaigning, leaving more room for institutional-position incentives (Meijers & van der Veer, 2019). Role change is thus expected to operate not as a positional shift but as a reallocation of issue emphasis.

Issue ownership specifies where that reallocation should be strongest. Parties hold durable reputations for competence and attention on particular issues (Petrocik, 1996; Petrocik et al., 2003), anchored in voters' issue associations (Walgrave et al., 2012) and comparatively stable over time (Seeberg, 2017); selective emphasis concentrates on owned issues because that is where it yields the highest reputational and electoral returns (Baumann et al., 2021; Green-Pedersen, 2007). Ownership and emphasis are distinct, however: what recurs across role changes is a party's durable advantage on a theme, while the emphasis placed on it varies strategically (Budge, 2015; Green-Pedersen, 2007). Combining ownership with role yields a conditional expectation: a role switch should amplify emphasis most on the themes a party already owns and that the committee makes contestable, and leave emphasis roughly unchanged where ownership or opportunity is absent.

Testing recurrence requires a party that alternates roles more than once under comparable conditions. Belgian coalition politics offers a comparatively rare instance: the Parti Socialiste (PS), historically the largest francophone party, follows a GOV–OPP–GOV–OPP sequence across four matched first-year government windows (Di Rupo I, Michel I, De Croo I, De Wever I), yielding repeated within-party role-state evidence spanning 14 years. Mouvement Réformateur (MR) governs across all four windows, providing a continuity benchmark rather than a clean control: a pure time-trend or external-shock account would predict comparable movement in MR, but MR's movement is muted rather than absent (Section 3). Les Engagés (cdH) follows a GOV–OPP–OPP–GOV trajectory and, in the latest transition, mirrors PS by moving in the opposite direction. We restrict analysis to first-year windows within each government, when initial role adaptation is most plausible and late-term electoral signalling is minimised, and to French-language interventions in the Interior and Justice committees. This institutional-linguistic scope trades breadth for measurement comparability across legislatures. Given turnover across four legislatures, the design targets party-delegation discourse profiles rather than repeated individual-level adaptation. Closely related Belgian parliamentary-oversight studies do not offer this matched, repeated-alternation structure (Dandoy, 2011; De Vet & Devroe, 2023).

Expectations

The saliency-and-ownership logic yields graded, party-specific expectations rather than a uniform role effect. The strongest prediction concerns PS budget/finances. As the principal social-democratic actor in the francophone subsystem, PS holds a durable ownership reputation on socioeconomic and redistributive questions (Deschouwer, 2012; Petrocik, 1996; Seeberg, 2017), and budget/finances is the committee-level channel through which such contestation enters Interior and Justice debate, rather than a direct survey measure of ownership: police staffing, prison and court resources, and the cost of asylum reception all carry budgetary framings. Testing this channel in committees that are *not* PS's core socioeconomic arena is a conservative design: if role-linked budgetary emphasis appears even here, that is stronger evidence of a portable opposition strategy than finding it on PS's home terrain. The role mechanism then predicts a two-level pattern: in opposition PS should amplify budgetary contestation, while in government collective responsibility for fiscal outcomes dampens the same emphasis. Because ownership is comparatively stable (Seeberg, 2017), this pattern should recur at each alternation, which is what the four-window design is built to detect. For the remaining parties, expectations are weaker and more conditional. Les Engagés lacks a comparable socioeconomic ownership but treats security/police as a salient contestation theme, so adversarial security signalling should weaken on entering government. Ecolo's core ownership lies outside the Interior-Justice theme set, so its movement should track role and committee opportunity rather than ownership (Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2010). MR, which never leaves government, and DéFI, which never leaves opposition, serve as continuity baselines; PVDA-PTB, also always in opposition, combines a strong redistributive emphasis with no role switch, so any budget increase there should reflect coalition-driven opportunity rather than role.

The central finding matches these expectations: PS budget/finances emphasis is low during both government phases and substantially elevated during both opposition phases, across different coalition compositions, parliamentary cohorts, and external contexts—a pattern difficult to attribute to any single coalition's agenda or to a monotonic time trend, which the GOV–OPP–GOV–OPP sequence would require to reverse direction twice. In the De Croo–De Wever transition, which serves as the formal inferential check, eight party-theme shifts survive correction for multiple testing, concentrated in a few cells and mostly involving role-switching parties. We therefore read the evidence as consistent with role-linked reallocation under specific scope conditions rather than as clean identification of role alone.

Section 2 presents the design, data, and measurement; Section 3 reports the four-window recurrence and the formal De Croo–De Wever check; Section 4 discusses interpretation and limits.

2. Design, Data, and Measurement

Four matched windows

The design compares first-year windows in Belgian federal committees for the first majority coalition formed in each of four consecutive legislatures: Di Rupo I (2011-12-06 to 2012-12-05), Michel I (2014-10-11 to 2015-10-10), De Croo I (2020-10-01 to 2021-09-30), and De Wever I (2025-02-03 to 2026-02-02). Matching on first-year phase aligns stages of cabinet formation and early parliamentary adaptation, reducing contamination from late-term signalling effects. The 14-year span generates the alternating role structure reported in Figure 1, with the three features critical for inference introduced above: PS's GOV-OPP-GOV-OPP sequence, MR's continuous incumbency as continuity benchmark, and Les Engagés' mirrored GOV-OPP-OPP-GOV pattern.

	Di Rupo Y1 (2011-12)	Michel Y1 (2014-15)	De Croo Y1 (2020-21)	De Wever Y1 (2025-26)
PS	GOV	OPP	GOV	OPP
MR	GOV	GOV	GOV	GOV
Ecolo	OPP	OPP	GOV	OPP
Les Engagés (cdH)	GOV	OPP	OPP	GOV
DéFI (FDF)	OPP	OPP	OPP	OPP
PVDA-PTB	—	OPP	OPP	OPP

Government
 Opposition
 No federal seats

Figure 1 Francophone party role trajectories across four matched first-year windows

Note: Cells show each party's institutional role (GOV = government; OPP = opposition) in each window. Di Rupo Y1 = 2011-12 (Legislature 53); Michel Y1 = 2014-15 (Legislature 54); De Croo Y1 = 2020-21 (Legislature 55); De Wever Y1 = 2025-26 (Legislature 56). PVDA-PTB held no federal seats during Legislature 53 and therefore has no committee interventions in Di Rupo Y1. DéFI appears as FDF in Di Rupo Y1 and Michel Y1; labels are harmonised. Role coding follows federal cabinet composition in each first-year window; the official citations document the two most recent cabinet formations (Belgian Official Gazette [Belgisch Staatsblad], 2020, 2025). Di Rupo I was a six-party coalition (PS, MR, sp.a, Open Vld, CD&V, cdH); Michel I was a centre-right coalition (MR, N-VA, CD&V, Open Vld); De Croo I was a seven-party coalition (PS, MR, Open Vld, Vooruit, CD&V, Ecolo, Groen); De Wever I is a five-party coalition (N-VA, MR, Vooruit, Les Engagés, CD&V).

Coalition Context

The four governments differ sharply in composition, which is what makes the role sequence informative (full coalition compositions in the note to Figure 1): the six-party Di Rupo I led by a PS prime minister; the centre-right Michel I, in which MR was the only francophone governing party; the seven-party ‘Vivaldi’ coalition De Croo I, returning PS to government with Les Engagés (the renamed cdH) in opposition; and the ‘Arizona’ coalition De Wever I, keeping MR in office, bringing Les Engagés in, and returning PS to opposition. Because these coalitions are assembled from different ideological families and language-group balances, a thematic pattern that recurs with role across them is hard to attribute to any single coalition’s agenda.

Committee Setting and Corpus

Interior and Justice were selected *ex ante* as minister-facing scrutiny arenas with repeated contestation over policing, migration, justice, and budget priorities: ministerial presence, detailed follow-up, and repeated party-minister exchange create structured opportunities for opposition parties to scrutinise ministers and foreground government vulnerabilities (André et al., 2016; Dandoy, 2011). We study committees rather than the plenary because committee scrutiny is more thematically specialised and less choreographed than floor debate, so role-linked emphasis is more likely to surface there; the trade-off is that the findings speak to high-contention scrutiny arenas and need not generalise to the plenary or to less politicised committees, a scope condition consistent with the conditional, rather than uniform, reallocation we expect. The corpus covers 293 scoped CRIV reports, the verbatim integrated record of committee proceedings (*Compte Rendu Intégral*), across all four legislatures (68 Di Rupo Y1, 71 Michel Y1, 90 De Croo Y1, 64 De Wever Y1). For joint parliamentary labels such as *Ecolo-Groen*, speaker-level party coding is resolved against date-aware Chamber member metadata, so that francophone green interventions are attributed to Ecolo while Groen MPs are excluded from the French-party corpus. The set of reports included in the corpus was fixed on 2026-03-05; De Wever Y1 rates therefore reflect a completed first-year observation window, not an ongoing process. Table 1 reports the basic corpus structure.

Table 1 Corpus Structure Across Four Matched First-Year Windows

Window	Reports	Interventions	Words	Unique speakers
Di Rupo Y1	68	861	153,205	41
Michel Y1	71	1,270	232,799	51
De Croo Y1	90	1,480	370,886	49
De Wever Y1	64	845	210,226	43

Note: Counts refer to French-language non-minister interventions used in the party analysis. Across all four windows, the corpus contains 293 reports, 4,456 interventions, 967,116 words, and 141 unique speakers; 105 speakers appear in only one window. The De Croo–De Wever formal-check pair contains 154 reports, 2,325 interventions, and 581,112 words; only 10 speakers recur across both windows.

French-Language Scope

Analysis is restricted to French-language interventions (after removing duplicated translated passages and procedural boilerplate). This is a substantive design choice rather than a convenience sample. Since the linguistic split of its traditional party families between the late 1960s and the late 1970s, Belgium has had almost no polity-wide parties: francophone and Dutch-speaking parties contest separate electoral arenas, run separate campaigns, and operate in separate media spheres, so the country effectively contains two distinct party systems (Deschouwer, 2012; Sinardet, 2012). The one genuine exception is the radical-left PVDA-PTB, the only remaining unitary party; we treat its francophone (PTB) interventions as part of the francophone arena while noting that, unlike the other parties studied here, it also competes against the Dutch-speaking parties at the ballot box. The restriction thus isolates one largely coherent party system rather than a partial sample of a larger one: the arena in which PS, MR, Ecolo, Les Engagés, DéFI, and the francophone wing of PVDA-PTB actually compete with one another. A secondary measurement consideration supports this scope: the committee record reproduces each speaker in their original language, so French-language interventions are verbatim French, and applying a single French instrument to same-language text holds lexical measurement consistent across the four windows. The cost is that the findings speak to the francophone subsystem and do not extend automatically to the Dutch-speaking system or the bilingual chamber; extending the analysis there requires an independently built and validated Dutch instrument and is left to a parallel study.

Our unit of analysis is the individual French-language committee speech. Party-theme contrasts compare the distribution of theme rates across speeches within each party-government cell, and the count models use speech-level theme counts (lexicon matches) with a log-word offset that adjusts for how much each party spoke. What we estimate is therefore the typical emphasis of a party's delegation during a given government, not the repeated behaviour of the same individuals over time. Speaker continuity is limited by design: across all four windows, 141 unique franco-phone speakers appear, of whom 105 appear in only one window; in the De Croo–De Wever pair, only 10 speakers recur across both windows. This turnover is substantively expected in a four-coalition, 14-year comparison, but it bounds interpretation to party-delegation reallocation rather than repeated individual adaptation.

Thematic Coding

We code five themes: security/police, Brussels/territory, migration/asylum, justice/rights, and budget/finances. These themes were derived *ex ante* from the policy remit of the Interior and Justice committees and from the issue-competition and ownership literature indicating where contestation should concentrate (Green-Pedersen, 2007; Petrocik et al., 2003), then refined through exploratory reading of the corpus to ensure each was lexically expressible and substantively present. The refined lexicon distinguishes *core* and *contextual* stems; contextual stems are counted only when at least one core stem of the same theme appears in the same intervention. This gating rule reduces false-positive inflation from broad administrative vocabulary; it discards 49.5% of raw contextual-stem matches for Brussels/territory and 40.3% for budget/finances, but only 16.1% for security/police. A lexicon-based instrument is a deliberate choice over supervised classification or topic models: the short, multilingual windows provide too little labelled text to train and validate a separate classifier per period, whereas a fixed dictionary keeps measurement transparent, constant across windows, and directly checkable against human coding (Grimmer & Stewart, 2013). Measurement claims should accordingly be read as evidence from a conservative lexical instrument rather than an exhaustive thematic classifier.

Table 2 Lexicon Validation Against a 300-Item Human-Coded Gold Standard

Theme	TP	FP	FN	TN	Precision	Recall	F1
Security/ Police	88	41	13	158	0.68	0.87	0.77
Brussels/ Territory	20	37	2	241	0.35	0.91	0.51
Migration/ Asylum	35	19	13	233	0.65	0.73	0.69
Justice/ Rights	85	28	29	158	0.75	0.75	0.75
Budget/ Finances	49	17	24	210	0.74	0.67	0.71
Macro average					0.64	0.79	0.68

Note: TP = true positive; FP = false positive; FN = false negative; TN = true negative; F1 = harmonic mean of precision and recall. The validated lexicon is the same instrument used for all reported results; a theme is counted as present in an intervention when it has at least two keyword matches (threshold ≥ 2). The validation sample contains 300 stratified interventions and was not used to build or refine the lexicon. Reference labels come from a single-coder human gold standard produced with the validation codebook.

Table 2 reports a held-out human validation on 300 stratified interventions, coded by hand with the validation codebook and not used to build or refine the lexicon. The lexicon performs best for security/police (F1 0.77) and justice/rights (F1 0.75), with budget/finances (0.71) and migration/asylum (0.69) close behind; macro-averaged F1 is 0.68. Budget/finances under-detects (recall 0.67 at precision 0.74), so the lexicon is conservative on this theme: it misses borderline cases rather than inventing them. Brussels/territory remains the weakest theme (F1 0.51, precision 0.35): recall is high (0.91), but generic place and institutional references inflate false positives, and true positives are intrinsically rare (22 of 300). Substantive interpretation therefore centres on the higher-signal cells and treats finer-grained cross-theme claims, especially for Brussels/territory, cautiously.

Crucially for the headline finding, lexical measurement error in budget/finances does not vary systematically across the two windows being compared (it is non-differential), so imprecision cannot have produced the contrast. In the validation sample, the human-coded budget rate rises by a factor of 1.67 from De Croo to De Wever, while the lexicon rate rises by a smaller 1.38, and within-window precision is high in the De Wever window that drives the contrast (0.89; De Croo 0.71). The lexicon thus recovers a *smaller* budget-emphasis jump than the human coding rather

than a larger one, so the residual imprecision flagged by the validation attenuates rather than manufactures the central PS result.

Analysis Strategy: Main Test and Robustness

The substantive focus is the four-window recurrence question: does a party's thematic profile move with institutional role across repeated alternations? We first trace within-party trajectories across all four governments, with particular attention to the PS GOV–OPP–GOV–OPP sequence; these contrasts show whether a pattern recurs across different coalition compositions, parliamentary cohorts, and external contexts.

The De Croo–De Wever comparison is then used as the formal inferential check. We privilege this pair because it offers the most complete coverage of the six franco-phone parties, a fully observed first-year window for both governments, and opposite role switches for PS and Les Engagés. In this pair we compare party-theme rates with non-parametric tests, correcting for multiple testing with the Benjamini–Hochberg false discovery rate (FDR) procedure (Benjamini & Hochberg, 1995) across 30 party-theme tests; adjusted significances are reported as q -values (the expected share of false positives among cells called significant). We control the FDR rather than the family-wise error rate because, for an exploratory matrix of correlated tests, it preserves power while still guarding against spurious cells.

A quasi-Poisson count model with a log-word offset and full window $\times$ party $\times$ committee interactions provides a model-based re-estimation. Plain Poisson assumes the variance of the counts equals their mean; in our data the variance is three to four times larger (dispersion $\varphi \approx 3.1$ –4.3 across themes), so we widen the standard errors accordingly (quasi-Poisson) rather than report overconfident significance levels. A stricter negative-binomial refit and speaker-clustered standard errors (checking whether results depend on a few MPs speaking repeatedly) serve as robustness checks for the formal pair, not separate main claims; the strong, low- q PS findings are invariant to these choices, while marginal cells are model-sensitive, as expected. As supplementary support for the recurrence question, we also estimate a pooled quasi-Poisson role model across all four windows, which estimates the role effect by comparing governing with opposition parties within the same period, so that period-specific shocks cannot drive it; this is corroboration, not a second identification strategy.

3 Results

We report the four-window recurrence first, then the De Croo–De Wever check that carries the full party-theme matrix inference, and finally the supplementary pooled model; robustness analyses for the formal pair are summarised at the end.

Substantive Focus: Recurring PS Budget/Finances Emphasis

The core result is the budget/finances trajectory for PS across the four matched windows (Figure 2). Rates form a two-level pattern that alternates with institutional role: low during government phases (Di Rupo Y1: 3.07; De Croo Y1: 2.57; mean 2.82 per 1,000 words) and substantially elevated during opposition phases (Michel Y1: 6.29; De Wever Y1: 9.01; mean 7.65), yielding an OPP/GOV ratio of 2.71. Two features are particularly informative. First, the two governing-period rates remain similarly low despite a nine-year gap, and the two opposition-period rates cluster similarly despite a ten-year gap. This cross-period clustering is difficult to reconcile with a monotonic time trend, because the GOV–OPP–GOV–OPP sequence would require the trend to reverse direction twice. Second, PS budget rates return to their governing baseline when the party re-enters government under De Croo I, then rise again when it returns to opposition under De Wever I, making a single external-shock account less persuasive.

MR serves as a useful continuity benchmark, but not as a clean falsification control. Governing across all four windows, MR's budget/finances rates fluctuate between 2.83 and 4.48 per 1,000 words (mean 3.75) without reproducing the PS two-level GOV–OPP recurrence. This means broader agenda movement cannot be ruled out simply by appeal to MR, but the absence of a parallel alternating pattern weakens a pure time-trend account.

Les Engagés (cdH) follows a GOV–OPP–OPP–GOV sequence and shows a broadly compatible budget trajectory: on average higher in opposition windows (Michel Y1: 6.64; De Croo Y1: 3.71; mean 5.17) than in government windows (Di Rupo Y1: 2.48; De Wever Y1: 6.64; mean 4.56), but with substantially weaker amplitude than PS (mean OPP/GOV ratio $\approx$ 1.13). The elevated De Wever Y1 governing rate (6.64) notably limits inference for this party and points to coalition-specific opportunity structure in addition to role.

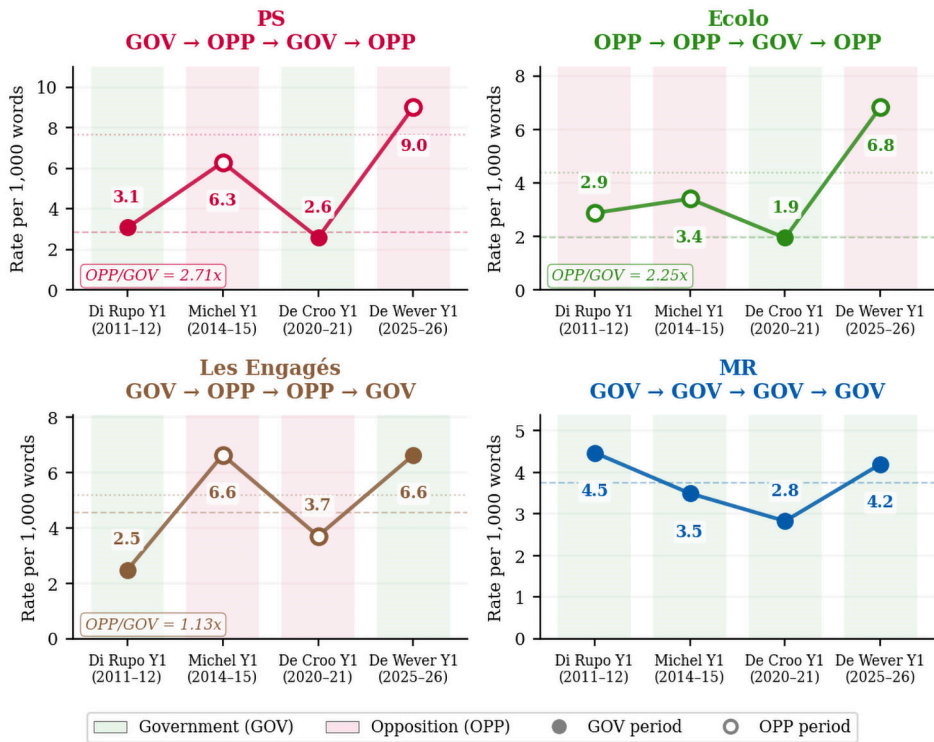


Figure 2 Budget/Finances: party trajectories across four matched first-year windows. Filled markers indicate government periods; open markers indicate opposition periods. Dashed and dotted horizontal lines mark within-party GOV and OPP means respectively. PS shows the clearest role-clustered profile. MR (always governing) serves as a continuity benchmark but does not reproduce the PS GOV-OPP recurrence; Les Engagés is directionally compatible but more coalition-conditioned.

Table 3 summarises the within-party role contrasts across all five themes for the three role-switching parties. Budget/finances is the only theme on which all three parties show a positive OPP-GOV contrast simultaneously (PS: +4.83; Ecolo: +2.42; Les Engagés: +0.62), consistent with the view that role-linked reallocation is thematically selective rather than broad. (Ecolo refers throughout to the French-speaking green party: Ecolo and Groen form a joint parliamentary fraction but are distinct parties, and the French-language scope covers Ecolo interventions only.)

Table 3. Within-Party Role Contrasts Across Four Matched Windows

Party	Theme	GOV mean	OPP mean	Contrast
PS	Budget/ Finances	2.82	7.65	+4.83
	Security/ Police	11.41	11.49	+0.08
	Migration/ Asylum	4.02	3.29	-0.73
	Justice/Rights	11.23	10.97	-0.26
	Brussels/ Territory	2.49	4.06	+1.56
Les Engagés	Budget/ Finances	4.56	5.17	+0.62
	Security/ Police	9.21	13.45	+4.24
	Migration/ Asylum	4.80	3.74	-1.06
	Justice/Rights	13.96	7.89	-6.07
	Brussels/ Territory	3.35	2.21	-1.14
Ecolo	Budget/ Finances	1.95	4.37	+2.42
	Security/ Police	12.58	7.63	-4.94
	Migration/ Asylum	5.63	6.05	+0.41
	Justice/Rights	8.30	11.08	+2.79
	Brussels/ Territory	1.77	2.05	+0.28

Note: For each role-switching party, *GOV mean* and *OPP mean* are the unweighted averages of rates per 1,000 words across government and opposition windows respectively. Contrast = OPP mean – GOV mean; positive contrasts indicate higher thematic salience in opposition. PVDA-PTB and DéFI are excluded as continuity cases (always opposition); MR is excluded as a continuity government case. PS has 2 GOV windows (Di Rupo Y1, De Croo Y1) and 2 OPP windows (Michel Y1, De Wever Y1). Les Engagés has 2 GOV windows (Di Rupo Y1, De Wever Y1) and 2 OPP windows (Michel Y1, De Croo Y1). Ecolo has 1 GOV window (De Croo Y1) and 3 OPP windows. These contrasts are descriptive summaries of the four-window trajectories and are not treated as a second formal inferential family.

The descriptive recurrence can also be tested formally. Applying the same Mann-Whitney test with FDR correction used below to the two earlier government transitions, the PS budget/finances contrast moves in the role-predicted direction at *every* transition: it rises entering opposition (Di Rupo→Michel, ratio 2.05; De Croo→De Wever, ratio 3.50) and falls entering government (Michel→De Croo, ratio 0.41). The contrast survives FDR correction at the two later transitions ($q < 0.001$ at both); at the earliest, sparsest transition it falls marginally short ($q=0.059$, unadjusted $p=0.007$). Adjacent transitions share a window, so these tests are not independent; their evidential value lies in the sign reversing with role each time, which a monotonic time trend cannot produce (Appendix Table 7). Privileging the De Croo–De Wever pair below reflects its complete party coverage and opposite PS and Les Engagés switches, not a finding that holds only there.

Formal Inferential Check: De Croo–De Wever

The 30 party-theme contrasts in the De Croo–De Wever pair test whether the latest transition shows the same structured thematic movement visible in the four-window trajectory. The pair yields 11 contrasts significant at $p < 0.05$ and 8 surviving Benjamini-Hochberg correction (Figure 3); the adjusted core is structured rather than diffuse. PS accounts for three of these shifts: budget/finances increases (2.57 to 9.01 per 1,000 words; ratio 3.50; $q < 0.001$), Brussels/territory increases (1.98 to 4.83; ratio 2.44; $q < 0.001$), and justice/rights increases (6.45 to 8.98; ratio 1.39; $q < 0.001$); a fourth PS contrast, the migration/asylum decrease (4.80 to 2.38; ratio 0.49), no longer survives correction ($q=0.079$). Les Engagés retains the expected mirror pattern, shedding security/police salience on entering government (15.43 to 11.70; $q=0.044$). Beyond the role-switching parties, the adjusted core also contains Ecolo (justice/rights, 8.30 to 14.67, ratio 1.77; and budget/finances, 1.95 to 6.83, ratio 3.51) and, despite stable opposition, PVDA-PTB on budget/finances and DéFI on justice/rights; the full party-theme matrix is shown in Figure 3.

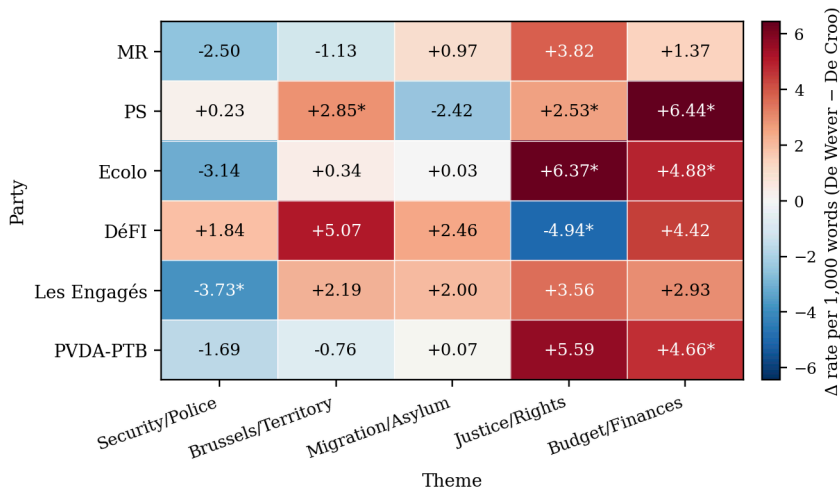


Figure 3 Party-theme salience shifts in the formal De Croo-De Wever check (De Croo Y1-De Wever Y1). Cell values are Δ rates per 1,000 words. Asterisk marks FDR-significant cells ($q < 0.05$). Signal remains clustered in a limited subset of party-theme cells, with role-switching parties still prominent but selected continuity-party movement also visible.

Because continuity parties also enter the adjusted core, the formal pair fits a pure role-only account less well, even though role-switching parties remain most prominent in the strongest cells. PVDA-PTB is the instructive exception: stable in opposition across both windows, it still shows one of the largest budget/finances increases, most likely because the De Wever Y1 fiscal agenda created a distinct opening for budgetary contestation. That agenda shift coincides with PS's move into opposition, so this single pair cannot fully separate role change from coalition-agenda effects. This is why the recurrence evidence carries the substantive weight: across the four windows, PS budget rates fall back to their governing baseline under De Croo I after rising under Michel I, a reversal no single coalition agenda can explain.

Supplementary Pooled Model

To place the descriptive recurrence on a formal footing, without treating the four-window layer as a separate identification strategy, we estimate a quasi-Poisson model at the intervention level across all four windows:

$$\text{count} \sim \text{role} + C(\text{party}) + C(\text{committee}) + C(\text{window}) + \text{offset}(\log(\text{words})) \quad (1)$$

where the response *count* is the number of theme keyword matches in an intervention and *role* is a binary indicator (1 = opposition). Party, window, and committee fixed effects absorb baseline party differences, period-specific confounders, and Interior–Justice differences; identification rests on cross-sectional role variation across parties within each window.

Appendix Table 5 presents the results alongside a negative-binomial refit. Under quasi-Poisson, two themes show a significant role effect after Benjamini-Hochberg correction: budget/finances (RR=1.39, $q=0.004$) and justice/rights (RR=0.87, $q=0.022$). The first corroborates the two-level descriptive pattern (opposition is associated with +39 % budget emphasis). The second shows that opposition is associated with a *reduced* emphasis on justice/rights (–13%), plausibly an inverse portfolio-responsibility effect: governing parties holding justice portfolios defend their reforms in committee, which sustains justice/rights vocabulary, whereas in opposition attention shifts towards more adversarial themes such as budget. Both pooled effects fall below conventional FDR significance under a negative-binomial refit (budget/finances $q\approx0.09$; justice/rights $q\approx0.35$), so we read the pooled model as supplementary corroboration rather than a robust stand-alone result; the PS-focused estimate below carries the firmer inferential weight.

A focused test on PS interventions alone (Table 4) reinforces the central finding: the role coefficient for budget/finances is substantial and highly significant (RR=2.76, $p<0.001$), indicating that PS in opposition produces approximately 2.8 times as many budget keywords as PS in government, controlling for committee. Window fixed effects are omitted here because, for PS alone, every window is also a role state (GOV–OPP–GOV–OPP), so the model cannot tell window effects and role effects apart; the pooled model above retains window effects because cross-party variation identifies the role coefficient. PS also shows a significantly higher Brussels/territory emphasis in opposition (RR=1.92, $p<0.001$). Unlike the pooled estimates, the focused estimates are robust to the count-model choice: a negative-binomial refit of the same specification yields RR=2.34 ($p<0.001$) for budget/finances and RR=1.67 ($p=0.002$) for Brussels/territory.

Table 4 Focused test: role effect on PS thematic salience (four windows). PS follows a GOV–OPP–GOV–OPP sequence, providing two independent within-party contrasts

Theme	Coef.	SE _{qp}	RR	z	p
Security/ Police	+0.0374	0.0681	1.038	0.55	0.5832
Brussels/ Territory	+0.6515	0.1381	1.918	4.72	<0.001***
Migration/ Asylum	-0.1196	0.1243	0.887	-0.96	0.3358
Justice/ Rights	+0.0156	0.0663	1.016	0.24	0.8137
Budget/ Finances	+1.0153	0.1182	2.760	8.59	<0.001***

Note: Model: count ~ role + C(committee), offset = log(words), restricted to PS interventions. Window fixed effects are omitted: for PS, every window is also a role state (GOV–OPP–GOV–OPP), so window and role effects cannot be told apart and including both would leave nothing for the role coefficient to estimate. $N = 1\,400$ PS intervention-committee observations $\times$ 5 themes. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Robustness for the Formal Pair

The De Croo–De Wever findings are stable across checks. A quasi-Poisson specification with log-word offset and full window $\times$ party $\times$ committee interactions preserves the central PS profile (budget/finances rate ratio 3.47, migration/asylum 0.53, Brussels/territory 2.66); permutation tests (reshuffling role labels across 5,000 realisations) remain significant for the four highest-signal contrasts ($p \leq 0.005$); removing any single committee report never flips the direction of any core contrast; and speaker-clustered standard errors do not materially alter the significance pattern. Movement is stronger in Interior than in Justice, a substantive scope condition rather than noise: Interior (police, migration, security) offers opposition parties structured opportunities for ministerial accountability on owned issues, whereas Justice handles more technical legislative work where partisan ministerial responsibility is less directly contestable. MR's budget rates do differ somewhat across the four periods (joint window test: $F(3,979) = 2.74$, $p = 0.042$), so some agenda-wide movement cannot be dismissed outright; but MR does not reproduce the PS two-level GOV–OPP recurrence, which tempers a pure role-only interpretation without erasing the contrastive value of the PS pattern. Finally, because the validation marks budget/finances as the noisiest headline theme, we probe its sensitivity to the lowest-precision keywords: removing the noisiest budget stems *strengthens* the PS contrast monotonically, both in the De Croo–De

Wever pair (rate ratio 3.50 to 5.18) and in the four-window PS model (role RR 2.76 to 3.45; Appendix D). The lexical noise is thus non-differential across the role switch, so the reported, un-trimmed estimate is the conservative one.

4 Discussion

This research note provides matched multi-legislature evidence that party-level discourse in Belgian Interior and Justice committees is associated with institutional role under identifiable scope conditions. The central result is not a general role effect across the full party-theme matrix, but a concentrated pattern: the clearest recurring profile is PS budget/finances, while the formal De Croo–De Wever check yields a broader FDR-significant core in which role-switching parties remain prominent but continuity-party movement is also visible. MR functions as a continuity benchmark rather than a full falsification test on budget, so the design does not isolate role from portfolio responsibility or coalition-specific opportunity.

The evidence therefore supports a conditional interpretation. Role-linked reallocation is most visible where role change, party issue profile, governing responsibility, and committee opportunity point in the same direction. PS budget/finances fits this logic most clearly; Les Engagés on security/police remains compatible with it; Ecolo's justice and budget effects show that its movement is not confined to the earlier decline in security salience; and continuity-party shifts in DéFI and PVDA-PTB show why role alone is insufficient. The contribution of the note is thus narrower but more defensible: committee discourse reallocates selectively when coalition change reshapes what is politically useful to foreground.

Theoretically, these findings suggest that role adaptation is not a uniform reorientation of the discursive profile but a selective amplification: the effect activates where adversarial incentives, party issue ownership, and committee opportunity structure converge, and remains latent where they diverge. For the reallocation of political attention, this locates the flexible component of a party's agenda in the volume at which it plays its owned themes, not in the composition of the repertoire itself: role change reallocates emphasis along existing ownership lines rather than redrawing them. This speaks directly to the gap identified in the introduction. Where saliency and issue-competition accounts treat emphasis as adjusting to the competitive situation (Budge, 2015; Green-Pedersen, 2007) and ownership accounts stress repertoire stability (Petrocik et al., 2003; Seeberg, 2017), the recurrence evidence suggests the two operate jointly: institutional role works as a switch on ownership-consistent emphasis, not as an independent source of new issue priorities. The mechanism should travel beyond PS and beyond budget/finances. Any party whose owned theme has a scrutiny channel in a given committee should show the same conditional amplification (green parties on environment in energy committees,

radical-right parties on migration in interior committees), whereas owned themes without a committee channel should stay flat. The same logic extends to other multi-party systems where parties recurrently rotate between government and opposition, as in the Netherlands or the Nordic countries; where such party-level alternation is rare, the switch has fewer occasions to operate and role-linked reallocation should be weaker. Testing these implications requires repeated-alternation designs of the kind used here, applied to other parties, themes, and chambers.

Several limits bound these findings. First, the scope is restricted to a French-language subsystem; inference does not extend automatically to the bilingual chamber or to Dutch-language committee dynamics. Second, the lexicon is now benchmarked against a 300-item human-coded validation sample, but not against multiple independent human coders. Third, the Brussels/territory theme remains too imprecise for strong stand-alone claims, even though the broader high-signal findings are not concentrated on that weakly validated category. Fourth, the four-window layer is primarily descriptive, although the headline PS budget/finances recurrence also moves in the role-predicted direction at each of the three transitions and survives FDR correction at the two later ones (Appendix Table 7); joint inference across all parties and themes still rests on the De Croo–De Wever pair. Fifth, delegation turnover across four coalitions is substantial: the estimates capture party-delegation discourse profiles under changing committee memberships rather than repeated adaptation by the same MPs; in a 14-year comparison that turnover is part of the substantive setting itself and determines the level at which claims can be made.

Within these limits, the practical lesson is that committee-level heterogeneity and delegation turnover should be modelled and interpreted directly. The fact that Interior carries most of the high-signal movement while Justice contributes little suggests that role adaptation becomes visible first in high-contention committee arenas. Future extensions should widen the committee scope, incorporate Dutch-language data, and add inter-coder reliability evidence from a second independent human coder.

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Appendix A. Pooled Four-Window Role Model: Quasi-Poisson and Negative Binomial

Table 5 reports the pooled four-window role model under both a quasi-Poisson and a negative-binomial specification. The counts are substantially over-dispersed (dispersion $\phi \approx 3.1\text{--}4.3$ across themes), so plain Poisson is inappropriate; the two specifications differ in how heavily they penalise high-count cells, the negative binomial being the more conservative. The budget/finances and justice/rights role effects are FDR-significant under quasi-Poisson but not under the negative binomial. This is why the main text treats the pooled model as supplementary corroboration of the recurrence and rests the formal weight on the PS-focused estimate (Table 4), which is robust to both specifications (budget/finances RR = 2.76 quasi-Poisson and 2.34 negative binomial, both $p < 0.001$).

Table 5 Pooled Four-Window Role Model: Quasi-Poisson and Negative-Binomial Estimates

Theme	Quasi-Poisson		Negative binomial	
	RR	q	RR	q
Security/Police	1.02	0.897	0.96	0.872
Brussels/Territory	0.93	0.860	1.02	0.872
Migration/Asylum	1.01	0.910	1.03	0.872
Justice/Rights	0.87	0.022	0.90	0.348
Budget/Finances	1.39	0.004	1.32	0.086

Note: Pooled role model count $\sim$ role + C(party) + C(committee) + C(window), offset = log(words), estimated by quasi-Poisson (Pearson scaling) and by negative binomial (NB2). RR = rate ratio (opposition vs. government); q = Benjamini–Hochberg FDR-adjusted significance across the five themes. The budget/finances and justice/rights effects are FDR-significant under quasi-Poisson but fall below significance under the more conservative negative-binomial variance assumption, illustrating that the strong, low- q findings reported in the main text rest on the PS-focused estimate rather than on these pooled marginal effects.

Appendix B. Full De Croo–De Wever Contrast Matrix

Table 6 lists all 30 party-theme contrasts in the formal De Croo–De Wever pair, ordered by FDR-adjusted significance. It provides the numerical detail behind Figure 3: eight contrasts survive Benjamini–Hochberg correction, concentrated in a limited subset of cells, with role-switching parties prominent but selected continuity-party movement also present.

Table 6 Full Party-Theme Contrast Matrix, De Croo I–De Wever I (30 Contrasts)

Party	Theme	De Croo	De Wever	Δ	Ratio	q
PS	Budget/Finances	2.57	9.01	+6.44	3.50	<0.001*
Ecolo	Justice/Rights	8.30	14.67	+6.37	1.77	<0.001*
PS	Brussels/Territory	1.98	4.83	+2.85	2.44	<0.001*
Ecolo	Budget/Finances	1.95	6.83	+4.88	3.51	<0.001*
PS	Justice/Rights	6.45	8.98	+2.53	1.39	<0.001*
DéFI	Justice/Rights	16.90	11.96	-4.94	0.71	<0.001*
PVDA-PTB	Budget/Finances	4.25	8.92	+4.66	2.10	0.023*
Les Engagés	Security/Police	15.43	11.70	-3.73	0.76	0.044*
MR	Justice/Rights	8.38	12.20	+3.82	1.46	0.079
PS	Migration/Asylum	4.80	2.38	-2.42	0.49	0.079
PVDA-PTB	Brussels/Territory	1.13	0.37	-0.76	0.33	0.117
Ecolo	Security/Police	12.58	9.44	-3.14	0.75	0.132
MR	Migration/Asylum	2.53	3.50	+0.97	1.38	0.190
PVDA-PTB	Migration/Asylum	1.59	1.66	+0.07	1.04	0.198
PVDA-PTB	Security/Police	9.32	7.62	-1.69	0.82	0.198
MR	Brussels/Territory	3.32	2.19	-1.13	0.66	0.198
Ecolo	Brussels/Territory	1.77	2.11	+0.34	1.19	0.239
DéFI	Budget/Finances	2.47	6.90	+4.42	2.79	0.262
DéFI	Migration/Asylum	2.37	4.82	+2.46	2.04	0.265
Les Engagés	Justice/Rights	6.48	10.04	+3.56	1.55	0.352

Party	Theme	De Croo	De Wever	Δ	Ratio	q
MR	Budget/Finances	2.83	4.20	+1.37	1.48	0.355
Les Engagés	Budget/Finances	3.71	6.64	+2.93	1.79	0.377
PVDA-PTB	Justice/Rights	12.37	17.96	+5.59	1.45	0.377
Les Engagés	Migration/Asylum	3.16	5.16	+2.00	1.63	0.407
Ecolo	Migration/Asylum	5.63	5.67	+0.03	1.01	0.473
DéFI	Brussels/Territory	1.95	7.02	+5.07	3.60	0.473
PS	Security/Police	12.11	12.34	+0.23	1.02	0.768
Les Engagés	Brussels/Territory	2.65	4.84	+2.19	1.83	0.830
MR	Security/Police	15.73	13.23	-2.50	0.84	0.845
DéFI	Security/Police	7.60	9.45	+1.84	1.24	0.931

Note: Rates are theme keyword matches per 1,000 words in the De Croo Y1 and De Wever Y1 first-year windows; Δ is the De Wever–De Croo difference and Ratio the De Wever / De Croo rate ratio. q is the Benjamini–Hochberg FDR-adjusted p -value from Mann–Whitney tests across all 30 party-theme contrasts; * marks $q < 0.05$. Rows are ordered by q . This is the full matrix summarised in Figure 3.

Appendix C. Alternative-Pair Robustness: PS Across All Three Transitions

Table 7 applies the primary De Croo–De Wever test design, the same Mann–Whitney contrast with Benjamini–Hochberg FDR correction, to the two earlier government transitions. PS budget/finances rises when the party enters opposition and falls when it enters government at all three transitions, surviving FDR correction at the two later ones; at the earliest, sparsest transition (Di Rupo → Michel) it falls marginally short of the threshold ($q=0.059$, unadjusted $p=0.007$). Because the transitions share adjacent windows they are not independent tests; the evidential weight comes from the sign reversing with role at each transition rather than from three separate confirmations. This shows that the recurrence is formally inferential, not merely descriptive, and that the choice of the De Croo–De Wever pair for the full matrix is one of data completeness rather than a result confined to that transition.

Table 7 PS Theme Shifts Across All Three Government–Opposition Transitions (Alternative-Pair Robustness)

	Di Rupo → Michel		Michel → De Croo		De Croo → De Wever	
	(GOV → OPP)		(OPP → GOV)		(GOV → OPP)	
Theme	Ratio	q	Ratio	q	Ratio	q
Budget/Finances	2.05	0.059	0.41	<0.001*	3.50	<0.001*
Brussels/Territory	1.09	0.909	0.60	0.422	2.44	<0.001*
Justice/Rights	0.81	0.134	0.50	<0.001*	1.39	<0.001*
Migration/Asylum	1.30	0.290	1.14	0.103	0.49	0.079
Security/Police	0.99	0.907	1.14	<0.001*	1.02	0.768

Note: Each block applies the same Mann–Whitney test with Benjamini–Hochberg FDR correction used for the primary De Croo–De Wever check, to the two earlier adjacent government transitions. The correction runs over all testable party-theme contrasts in that pair: 30 for Michel→De Croo and De Croo→De Wever, 25 for Di Rupo→Michel, where PVDA-PTB held no federal seats. Historical party labels are merged with their successors (FDF counted as DéFI, PTB-GO! as PVDA-PTB). Ratio is the rate ratio (later/earlier window); * marks $q<0.05$. PS budget/finances moves in the role-predicted direction (up entering opposition, down entering government) at every transition and survives FDR correction at the two later ones; at Di Rupo→Michel it falls marginally short ($q=0.059$, unadjusted $p=0.007$). The three transitions share windows and are therefore not statistically independent.

Appendix D. Budget/Finances Lexicon-Trimming Sensitivity

The validation flags budget/finances as the lexically noisiest of the headline themes, so we probe whether the PS budget result depends on its lowest-precision keywords. Table 8 removes the noisiest stems one group at a time and re-estimates both the De Croo–De Wever pair and the four-window PS-focused model. Trimming *strengthens* the contrast monotonically at both levels (the pair ratio rises from 3.50 to 5.18; the four-window role RR from 2.76 to 3.45), even though it does not improve validation F1. The noise stems are therefore non-differential across the role switch: they dilute rather than create the effect, so the reported un-trimmed estimate is conservative. We do not adopt a trimmed lexicon, because tuning the dictionary on the held-out validation sample would be circular; the table is a one-directional robustness check.

Table 8 Budget/Finances Lexicon-Trimming Sensitivity for the PS Finding

Budget lexicon variant	De Croo–De Wever	Four-window PS	Validation
	rate ratio	role RR	F1
Original (reported)	3.50	2.76	0.71
– econom	4.06	2.99	0.70
– coût, econom	4.44	3.25	0.65
– coût, econom, invest	5.18	3.45	0.62

Note: Each row drops the named high-frequency, low-precision stems from the budget/finances lexicon. Column 2 is the PS De Croo→De Wever rate ratio (as in the main text; all $p<10^{-9}$). Column 3 is the role rate ratio (opposition vs. government) from the four-window PS-focused model count ~ role + C(committee) (quasi-Poisson, offset log(words); all $p<10^{-10}$). Column 4 is the budget/finances F1 on the 300-item human validation (refined lexicon, threshold ≥ 2). Trimming *strengthens* the substantive contrast at both levels without improving validation F1, indicating that the omitted noise stems are non-differential across the role switch and that the reported (un-trimmed) lexicon is the conservative choice. The lexicon is not retuned on the held-out sample, which would be circular; this table is a one-directional robustness probe only.