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EDITORIAL

Parliaments in the Low Countries: Representing Divided Societies

Benjamin de Vet & Tom Louwerse[*]

1 Parliaments in the Low Countries

Parliaments do not constitute the true epicentre of policymaking in traditional consociational democracies like Belgium or the Netherlands. Historically, consensus seeking by the political elite has been a key remedy against the threat of immobilism and instability in these countries with deep-rooted cleavages based on religion, class and language (Lijphart, 1977). In Belgium, in particular, parliament has been "the victim of the subtle equilibrium that is constantly needed for governing a divided society" (Deschouwer, 2009, p. 188). Major political conflicts have typically been appeased through reforms or pacts negotiated by (extra-parliamentary) party leaders in more secluded environments rather than in the conflictual parliamentary arena (Deschouwer, 1999; Dewachter, 2002). But also in the Netherlands, consociational logic long implied a "top-down approach to politics" (Andeweg, 2019, p. 413) that included a depoliticisation of controversial issues and government's right to govern without too much interference from parliament (Koole, 2018; Lijphart, 1975).

During the past decades, moreover, both countries became characterised by comparatively high levels of party system fragmentation and electoral volatility (De Winter, Swyngedouw & Dumont, 2006; Mair, 2008), which severely complicated (and prolonged) coalition negotiations and increased the risk of governmental instability (De Winter & Dumont, 2021; Louwerse & Timmermans, 2021). Progressively elaborate coalition agreements gained importance in preventing later conflicts by outlining detailed policy intentions in an early phase of the legislative term (Timmermans & Moury, 2006). These agreements, which are much longer in the Low Countries than in most other countries with multiparty cabinets (Müller & Strøm, 2008), constrain the behaviour not only of coalition parties' ministers but also of their parliamentarians, who are expected to loyally pass these package deals into legislation – which they typically do (Depauw, 2005; Louwerse et al., 2018). Strict party unity and frequent (informal) consultations within party

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groups, between party leaders[1] and the party's ministers, and between leaders of the coalition parties, aimed at coordinating policy agendas and positions, further confine the policymaking role of parliament and blur the traditional separation of powers (Andeweg, Irwin & Louwerse, 2020; De Winter & Dumont, 2006). In the specific case of Belgium, moreover, the autonomy of parliamentary actors is further narrowed down by the constant need for multilevel coordination between the country's federal entities (each with their own coalition cabinet and elected assembly), a role that is typically taken up by extra-parliamentary party elites (De Winter & Dumont, 2006).

Even under circumstances where they play a rather reactive role as formal policy- and lawmakers, however, parliaments still fulfil many other functions that are essential to the functioning of modern democracy (e.g. Loewenberg, 2015; Norton, 1993). This is, of course, no less the case in the Low Countries. Most importantly, parliaments provide democratic linkage. Being the sole representative agents that are directly accountable to the electorate, members of parliament (MPs) provide democratic legitimacy to political decisions and to the political system as a whole, by debating, reviewing and formally approving proposed policies (Strom, Müller & Bergman, 2003). In highly proportional systems like those of the Netherlands and Belgium, parliaments are the arena where the wide array of potentially opposing societal views clash and where voters' diverse values, interests and preferences are voiced, represented and channelled into the decision-making process (Hakhverdian & Schakel, 2017; Lindeboom, 2012; Pitkin, 1967). Because of their (exclusive) direct, electoral mandate, furthermore, parliaments also bear important responsibilities in holding the executive accountable. Although parliamentary oversight mechanisms sometimes have been critiqued for being ineffective (De Winter & Dumont, 2006), it is clear that Dutch and Belgian MPs (from both opposition and majority sides) increasingly make use of the various instruments of control they have at their disposal to extract information from cabinet members, monitor their behaviour and signal personal involvement (Andeweg et al., 2020; Otjes & Louwerse, 2018; Wauters, Bouteca & de Vet, 2021). Other roles that parliaments fulfil that lie beyond the traditional core democratic functions of representation, legislation and oversight but that are still functional to the Dutch and Belgian political system, include providing a forum where new issues may reach the political agenda (e.g. Vliegenthart et al., 2016) or acting as a recruitment pool for the training and selection of members of the executive (e.g. Dumont, Fiers & Dandoy, 2008).

Over the past years, how legislatures and their individual members fulfilled their democratic tasks gave rise to a dynamic subfield of (also Dutch and Belgian) political science. This field of study will most likely continue to produce highly relevant insights in the future, given that expressions of discontent with established political processes and the success of anti-establishment parties raise questions about the degree to which parliaments still fulfil their representative functions.

2 Data and methods in legislative studies in the Low Countries

'Legislative studies' have become characterised not only by thematic diversity (with studies focusing both on the internal organisation of parliament and on its external relations with other political institutions and the public) but also by a strong methodological pluralism. Traditional methods of data collection such as elite surveys, interviews and archival research are increasingly being complemented by the statistical analysis of parliamentary behaviour as documented in digitised parliamentary records as well as experiments with elites.

There has been a long tradition of structured interviews with MPs in the Netherlands, since 1968 (Andeweg & Thomassen, 2007; Andeweg & van Vonno, 2018). In Belgium, various projects conducted MP surveys since 1967 (De Winter, 1992; Debuyst, 1967; Deschouwer & Depauw, 2014; Loewenberg & Kim, 1978). Surveys among parliamentary candidates have also been conducted in both countries (Lutz et al., 2020; Vandeleene, De Winter & Baudewyns, 2019). Elite surveys among MPs provide important longitudinal insights into their characteristics and attitudes. In-depth, semi-structured interviews have also long been a part of the study of political elites and provide insights into what happens behind closed doors and the causal mechanisms underpinning associations found in large-N studies (Bailer, 2014; Celis & Wauters, 2010; de Vet, 2019; Severs, Celis & Meier, 2014). Archival materials have been used extensively in the historical-qualitative tradition, particularly by parliamentary historians (e.g. Aerts, van Baalen, Oddens, Smit, & te Velde, 2015; Verleden, 2015).

The systematic study of parliamentary behaviour based on parliamentary records was, for a long time, very resource intensive (De Winter, 1992; Visscher, 1994). Owing to the increasing availability of parliamentary records in digital form, this type of analysis has become much more feasible, also in covering longer periods. Researchers have published data sets on parliamentary voting (Louwerse et al., 2018; Van Aelst & Louwerse, 2014), questions (Louwerse & Otjes, 2019; Walgrave, Joly & Sevenans, 2019) and speeches (Marx & Schuth, 2010; Rauh & Schwalbach, 2020) in the Netherlands and Belgium. Advances in quantitative text analysis have allowed for the large-scale analysis of the textual content of this information, even though validation of these methods remains pivotal (Grimmer & Stewart, 2013; van Atteveldt, van der Velden & Boukes, 2021).

Another relatively recent development is the increasing use of experiments with legislators. This involves both survey (Helfer, 2016, pp. 69-102; Sheffer, 2019) and field experiments (Magni & de Leon, 2020). Experiments are superior to observational research in terms of causal identification and may also mitigate problems of biased answering by politicians in regular surveys. However, they may suffer from lower levels of external validity, and the research ethics of correspondence field experiments have been a subject of debate (Zittel, Louwerse, Helboe Pedersen & Schakel, 2021).

The methodological toolbox of legislative scholars is thus filled with a wide-ranging set of tools. One potential pitfall of the increasing availability of data is a focus on the type of questions that we can answer on the basis of the available data or on an a priori preference for a particular set of research methods. Espe-

cially under these circumstances, researchers should ask important, relevant research questions first and subsequently select appropriate methods and data to answer these questions.

3 About the contributions

The four contributions in this special issue represent the diversity of functions of parliaments in the Low Countries, as well as the methodological diversity in this subfield. The collection of articles provides an overview of the diversity of research interests in legislative studies and political representation in both Belgium and the Netherlands.

The contribution by **Tim Mickler** analyses the legislative and oversight functions of the Belgium and Dutch parliaments by comparing the assignment of MPs to parliamentary committees. The author makes use of a detailed data set of MPs' committee assignment to specialised committees over the last two decades, combined with data on MPs' educational and occupational backgrounds, external ties and other institutional and personal characteristics. The comparison of the two parliaments is motivated by the fact that committees in the Belgian *Chamber of Representatives* are, at least on paper, more powerful than those in the Dutch *House of Representatives*. Contrary to expectation, Mickler does not find a difference between the two parliaments concerning the presence of stable patterns of committee assignments. In both countries, prior knowledge through education or occupation is a good predictor of being assigned to a committee. While party groups are heavily involved in the committee assignment process, no evidence is found for party leaders' putting high-ranking, ideologically close and senior MPs on important committees.

Using survey data collected from among both Belgian voters and legislators, **Awenig Marié and David Talukder** explore whether citizens' political trust may be linked to their substantive representation. The authors find that voters with a lower level of policy-opinion congruence with their party's representatives display lower levels of trust in parliament, except among those who have very high levels of political interest. As such, their article provides novel insights into how and to what extent political trust may be responsive to the representation of citizens' preferences in the legislature.

Agenda setting and parliamentary oversight are the focus of the contribution by **Simon Otjes** and **Roy Doedens**, who discuss the cancellation of proposed minority debates in the Dutch *House of Representatives*. These debates can be requested by one fifth of MPs (30 MPs), but owing to agenda constraints only 21 per cent of the requested debates are actually held – many are retracted by the proposers. On the basis of an analysis of parliamentary records, the authors find that anti-elitist parties are less likely to retract their requests for a debate while issue ownership has only limited explanatory value. While these types of debates are specific to the Dutch parties, the analysis contributes to our understanding of how different types of parties use different parliamentary tools.

Finally, in a research note, **Richard Schobess** discusses how innovative peer assessment surveys can complement other data sources, such as behavioural data, to evaluate the work of MPs. Drawing on the experience of gathering such peer assessment data among members of three Belgian parliaments, Schobess discusses how these data may provide important insights into less visible and more qualitative aspects of MPs' parliamentary performance. He also shows, however, that scholars interested in using peer assessment data should account for potentially lower response rates (among certain MPs) and control for systematic rater bias.

Note

1 Note that while in the Netherlands the leaders of the parliamentary parties are important in this regard, in Belgium, particularly, the extra-parliamentary party presidents are powerful players in aligning the policy positions and agendas of the party-in-parliament, the party-in-government and the party-in-central-office (de Vet, 2019).

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ARTICLES

The Determinants of Committee Membership in Belgium and the Netherlands

Tim Mickler[*]

Abstract

In this article I analyse whether differences in formal committee structures affect how parliamentary actors organise their work within them. I compare the allocation of members to specialised committees in the Dutch House of Representatives (Tweede Kamer) and the Belgian Chamber of Representatives (Kamer van Volksvertegenwoordigers/Chambre des Représentants) to test whether committee assignments are given more serious consideration when committees are strong. Despite many similarities, both parliaments differ in their internal institutional arrangements: committees in the Chamber of Representatives are, at least formally, considerably more powerful than those in the Dutch Lower House. The article uses the congressional theories of legislative organisation as heuristic devices to deduce several rationales of the assignment process. The role of parliamentary party groups is highlighted. The results indicate the presence of stable, reoccurring patterns in both parliaments. Even in the House of Representatives, where committees present lower opportunity structures, assignments are given due consideration.

Keywords: parliamentary committees, legislative organisation.

1 The Determinants of Committee Membership in Belgium and the Netherlands

Research on the institutional arrangements of parliaments suggests that the internal design affects legislative processes and outputs. A parliament's committee system is crucial in this regard. Parliaments around the world use committees for legislative review and to monitor government operations. It is conventional wisdom that a strong legislature is built on a strong internal committee system. There are several comparative studies on formal committee powers across parliamentary democracies (André, Depauw & Martin, 2016; Mickler, 2017; Strøm, 1998; Zubek, 2015, 2020) which describe the great range of institutional arrangements across parliaments and investigate the causes of the variation.

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These differences also raise a question regarding their consequences: do different institutional arrangements affect how actors in parliament utilise committees to pursue their goals? When committees are strong, and individual members of parliament (MPs) and parliamentary party groups (PPGs) can significantly impact parliamentary output through them, there is a greater incentive to perceive them as an important arena. Hence, actors should carefully consider the potential effects of the division of labour in committees. One of the main aspects where this should be visible is the assignment of MPs to committees. Committee seats are scarce resources that allow MPs to engage in advertising, credit claiming and position-taking (Mayhew, 1974). Suppose committee membership will enable MPs to have a powerful impact, then who sits on a committee 'matters'. Conversely, when committees are weak and ineffective, they present lower opportunity structures. The focus should then shift from committees to other venues, such as the plenum, and decisions on committee assignments should be given less consideration. Whether this holds empirically and different strategies can be observed, however, has been hardly studied.

This article addresses this question by comparing committee assignments in the Lower Houses of the two 'Low Countries': the Dutch House of Representatives *(Tweede Kamer)* and the Belgian Chamber of Representatives (*Kamer van Volksvertegenwoordigers/Chambre des Représentants*). The main research question is, *what factors explain committee assignments in the lower chambers of the Low Countries*? A comparison of these countries is well-suited for investigating the effect of different institutional arrangements. Although differences between the countries exist, such as the complex structure of interlocking competencies in Belgium (Deschouwer & Reuchamps, 2013), Belgium and the Netherlands are typical consociational or consensus democracies (Lijphart, 1977). Both countries have similar electoral systems (Nagtzaam, 2019), fragmented party systems (Arwine & Mayer, 2013; De Winter, Swyngedouw & Dumont, 2006) and similar experiences with multiparty governments (Timmermans & Moury, 2006). Yet despite their geographical proximity, common history and shared experience with social developments (Andeweg, 2019), the Lower Houses have established different internal institutional arrangements. Although both establish a system of permanent committees, the House of Representatives scores relatively low in comparative analyses of committee strength, e.g. ranking 21st out of 31 in André et al. (2016, similar in Mickler, 2017; Zubek, 2020). Committees in the Chamber of Representatives are more powerful (ranked 9th in André et al., 2016).

This article contributes to the literature that analyses how, within parliaments of parliamentary democracies, who is selected to sit on which committees and with what consequences. Previous studies have suggested a range of factors that explain the process, such as electoral rules and constituency demands, particularly in committees that allow MPs to cater to the interests of voters (Chiru, 2019; Gschwend & Zittel, 2018; Raymond & Holt, 2018; Raymond & Juárez, 2019). MPs' expertise in a committee's jurisdiction was linked to assignments in many institutional contexts (Chiru, 2019; Giannetti, Pedrazzani & Pinto, 2019; Mickler, 2018a, 2019). Female MPs were shown to be overrepresented in committees that deal with 'feminised' or low-status policy areas (Baekgaard & Kjaer,

2012; Chiru, 2019; Espírito-Santo & Sanches, 2020; Goodwin, Holden Bates & McKay, 2020; Murray & Sénac, 2018; Pansardi & Vercesi, 2017), although there is an ongoing debate on whether this is the result of self-selection or discrimination. Additionally, the 'structuring' hand of the PPG leadership was demonstrated in some studies (Giannetti et al., 2019).

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 elaborates on the committee systems of the two parliaments to clarify the distinction between weak and powerful committees. Section 3 presents the theoretical framework, which comprises the congressional theories of legislative organisation. Section 4 describes the data, followed by a summary of the main results.

2 The Cases: Committees in the Lower Houses of the Low Countries

Both Lower Houses rely on various committees in their daily operation. The Rules of Procedure (RoP) of the Chamber of Representatives distinguishes between permanent committees (*vaste commissies/commissions permanente)*, temporary, special (rules described in Chapter VIII, RoP) and advisory committees (*adviescomité/ comités d'avis*, Chapter X, RoP). Temporary committees may be set up to examine particular bills or proposals (Art. 157 RoP). The term 'special committees' refers to a wide range of committees. The RoP stipulate the establishment of some (see Arts. 2, 121, 142, 149, 150, 151, 160, 172 & 180). Additional examples include the special committee set up in 2020 to examine the structural impact of Belgium's colonial past. At all times, committees of inquiry can be established to investigate an issue (see Staelraeve, 2003 for an extended discussion). Advisory committees are a distinctive type and are used for the areas of European Affairs (see Art. 68), social emancipation (Art. 69) and technological issues (Art. 70). Each advisory committee has specific membership regulations. For example, the advisory committee on European Affairs is a joint committee with ten members of the European Parliament who are elected in Belgium. The RoP in the Dutch House of Representatives allow for the establishment of permanent (*vaste)*, temporary (*tijdelijke*) committees (established for a specific topic and have limited duration), as well as committees of inquiry (*enquêtecommissies*). Generally, the same 'housekeeping' committees, i.e. those that deal with matters pertaining to day-to-day management, are established in both parliaments, although a slightly different terminology is used.

2.1 Permanent Committees: Jurisdiction and Size

Of primary importance for the legislative work and government control is the system of permanent, topic-specific committees established in both parliaments after each election. There are some notable differences between those types of committees in the two parliaments. The first concerns committees' size. Committees in the Chamber of Representatives comprise 17 members (Art. 19(2), Rules of Procedure Chamber of Representatives, 2020). Permanent committees in the Dutch Lower House had, until the most recent election in 2021, 26 members and 26 substitute members. However, their size was increased in the legislative period

following the election: each of the 15 permanent committees now comprises 34 members and 32 substitutes, which is remarkable for a parliament of 150 members.

Committees in both Lower Houses reflect the composition of the plenum proportionally. Given that, owing to the electoral system in both countries, some parties are represented with very small numbers, special rules exist. In Belgium, if there are fewer than five MPs from a party, they are not considered a PPG (Art. 11). This restricts their right to have a seat on a committee. Often, these MPs are assigned without the right to vote. In the Dutch Lower House, even MPs elected as the only person on their list will form a 'separate faction' (*afzonderlijke fractie*) and enjoy the same rights as other PPGs. Therefore, the increase in the number of seats per committee in the House of Representatives is not surprising, given that in the 2021 Dutch general elections 17 parties entered parliament (three with 1 MP).

A second general aspect of committees refers to the policy areas that they cover. To maximise the efficiency of committees, they should correspond to ministerial portfolios as closely as possible. In the House of Representatives, each ministerial portfolio must have a counterpart in the form of a permanent committee (see § 7, Rules of Procedure House of Representatives, 2021).[1] In the past, the parliament also established a general committee (*algemeen commissie*) for ministers who do not head a particular ministry (Dutch: *Ministers zonder portefeuille*). However, these were abolished in the course of a revision of the RoP in 2021. A provision was entered that the House may set up standing committees for one session for the area of responsibility of these ministers or state secretaries.

In the Chamber of Representatives, the jurisdiction of the permanent committees is determined by the president of the House, taking into account the opinion of the conference of presidents. In recent legislative periods, committees frequently shadowed different ministerial portfolios or had overlapping policy areas. For example, the permanent committee for Business, Science Policy, Education, National Scientific and Cultural Institutions, Self-employed and Agriculture (established in the 50th-54th legislative period) shadowed (in the case of the Michel I government, starting in 2014) the Minister of the Middle Class, Small and Medium Enterprises, Self-employed and Agriculture, as well as the Minister of Employment, Economy and Consumer Affairs. It was also responsible for areas of cultural and educational policy that remain the federal government's responsibility. This less clear congruence between committees' jurisdiction and ministerial portfolios limits, ceteris paribus, their ability to fulfil their tasks efficiently.

2.2 Redrafting Abilities

Beyond size and correspondence to ministerial jurisdiction, a significant aspect of committees' 'opportunity structures' is determined by their formal powers. One aspect concerns the authority of permanent committees to rewrite bills. Committees in the Chamber of Representatives generally have more abilities than their Dutch counterparts. In Belgium, committees can alter the text of a bill by moving amendments. After the committee stage has ended, committees submit the redrafted 'clean' bill with a report to the plenary session. This makes them rela-

Table 1 Committees' 'policing power' in the Lower Houses of the Low Countries

	Belgium: Chamber of Representatives	**NL: House of Representatives**
Rights to invite/ compel witnesses? If so, whom?	Invite ministers, civil servants, external experts. Only inquiry committees can compel.	Invite government and external experts. Invitation of civil servants with permission of ministers. Only inquiry committees can compel.
Openness committee hearings	Public, but private sessions possible	Public, but private sessions possible
Rights to ask for documents	Yes, unrestricted	Yes, unrestricted
Nr own staff	Two 'level 1' officials per committee + 5 assistants (level 2)	Between 4 and 9 per committee

Source: Own data.

tively strong from a comparative perspective. Committees in the Chamber of Representatives can also initiate bills.

Committees in the Dutch House of Representatives cannot rewrite or initiate bills and can also not include amendments. During the committee stage, committee members usually provide their views on the bill in a written report, followed by a written response from the government (Bovend'Eert & Kummeling, 2010, p. 225). At the end of these exchanges, a final report is drafted for consideration in the plenary session. Of course, oral debates occur, but these are mostly reserved concerning debates about plans for future policies. If, on the basis of the discussion in the committee, an MP or groups of MPs decide to introduce a motion, then committee members themselves cannot vote on it. Instead, voting must take place in the plenary meeting. In such cases, the report of the committee consultation is placed on the plenum's agenda so that MPs can introduce and vote on motions. Votes are preceded by short debates, so-called two-minute debates (Dutch: *tweeminutendebat*[2]).

2.3 Policing Powers

A final point concerns committees' capacity to acquire information. Table 1 summarises several factors that are often connected to committees' ability to control the government. Based on this, the formal policing powers are similar (see also longitudinal analyses by Zubek (2020) and L. W. Martin & Vanberg (2020)). However, it should be noted that the dedicated staff in the House of Representatives is a more recent development. Committees had, until 2017, no own staff but were supported by a central bureau.

Despite these commonalities in policing powers, committees in the House of Representatives are, at least formally, considerably more limited in their redrafting ability than committees in the Belgian Chamber of Representatives. Recent reforms of the RoP in the Netherlands have not put committees on an equal foot-

ing with their Belgian counterparts. This gives rise to the question whether committee allocation in the two countries follows different logics. To deduce testable hypotheses, the following section elaborates on the theoretical framework for the analysis.

3 Theoretical Framework: Analysing Committee Assignments

To analyse committee allocations in the two Lower Houses, it is crucial to clarify the role of PPGs in the assignment process. Beyond studies in the US context (Congress/State legislatures), in which the influence of partisan politics is disputed, PPGs in parliamentary democracies are essential gatekeepers in the assignment process (for an overview, see S. Martin, 2014; S. Martin & Mickler, 2019). In the two analysed parliaments, similar to many other parliaments, seats in committees are assigned to PPGs, which subsequently allocate their members to committees. This implies that individual MPs cannot decide their committee assignments entirely by themselves (i.e. self-select to committees). Yet, PPG leaders do not simply 'dictate' committee assignments. The available evidence in many countries suggests that the preferences of MPs are taken into account when decisions on committee assignments are to be made. In very few countries or specific parties do PPG leaders tend to decide autonomously.

To explain committee assignments, several theoretical frameworks have been proposed. Of primary importance is a group of rational choice theories developed initially to analyse the legislative organisation of the US Congress. Given the 'special' nature of the legislature, the theories are usually not transferred directly. Instead, analyses in other parliaments have, rightfully, acknowledged the role of PPGs in the process but then used the fundamental predictions of these theories as 'rationales' to formulate expectations on what drives the differentiation processes. These suggest, respectively, that committee assignments are made to (1) serve special interests outside the parliament (distributive perspective, see Shepsle (1978)), (2) bring informational benefits to reduce uncertainty (informational perspective, see Krehbiel (1992) or (3) promote the interests of the PPG leadership (partisan perspective, see Cox & McCubbins (1993).

There are alternatives to these 'imported' perspectives, most notably the model by Hansen (2019), which builds on the literature on cabinet governance in parliamentary systems. This research demonstrated that parties use legislative instruments and allocate government portfolios strategically in coalition situations. It is argued that the same logic applies when committee seats are distributed. Results for the Danish parliament indicate that parties strategically under- and over-represent committee chairs and seats. Although this perspective is an important addition to the theoretical toolbox, the two parliaments have clear rules about committees' size and composition, limiting the model's applicability.

In the Chamber of Representatives, strategic 'stacking' is not possible because the number of seats per PPG is fixed across committees (based on proportional representation, see Art. 158 of the RoP). The Rules of Procedure of the House of Representatives do not stipulate the number of seats per PPG in committees

(Art. 7.11 states that the Speaker decides on the size of committees,[3] the House can veto). Still, in the past, the same (proportional) distribution was used across all permanent committees. Additionally, these decisions are taken before the allocation of government portfolios is clear. Changes in committee chairs are common once the government is formed, but, usually, no changes are made in the proportionality. In view of this, the article draws on the congressional theories only.

3.1 Deducing Hypotheses

The informational theory highlights the uncertainty that actors in parliament face about the consequences of policies (Gilligan & Krehbiel, 1990, p. 533). It views committees as means to ensure the efficiency of the legislative process. Applied to committee assignments, the informational rationale predicts that the expertise of MPs is a crucial factor in decisions on allocations, as MPs with expertise in an area can specialise at low cost. It is a valid strategy for PPGs to draw together MPs with relevant knowledge to aggregate information and alleviate existing uncertainty to guarantee an efficient decision-making process.

> Hypothesis 1: MPs with relevant prior knowledge in a committee's jurisdiction are more likely to be assigned to the committee.

A further prediction concerns the reassignment of incumbent MPs to committees. A positive effect suggests that MPs continue to deepen their expertise by staying on the same committee in successive legislative periods. However, the treatment of committee experience as an indicator of an informational rationale needs to be qualified. If the results show that assignments cannot be explained by MPs' relevant prior knowledge in a committee's jurisdiction but instead support factors linked to the distributive and partisan rationales, this would indicate that MPs cluster in committees not on their ability to specialise at low cost. The analysis will account for this.

> Hypothesis 2: Incumbent MPs who served on a committee in the previous legislative period are more likely to be assigned to the committee.

The distributive theory argues that re-election is the main driving force of legislative organisation and that internal structures are set up to maximise MPs' re-election goals. Committees are crucial because they allow MPs to work on issues that are important to their constituents. The distributive rationale of committee assignments suggests that MPs will join committees that allow them to serve outlying interests best. In the US Congress, this has been tested using constituency demands (e.g. MPs from rural districts seek assignments to the agriculture committee, see Adler & Lapinski, 1997). However, it is challenging to conduct similar tests in the two Lower Houses of the Low Countries. In the Netherlands, it is impossible to match constituency characteristics to MPs owing to the presence of only one single national district. In Belgian federal elections, the country is subdivided into multi-member constituencies (20 during the 1999 elections, 11 in the

elections after 2003), but these are hardly comparable to their US counterparts. MPs in Belgium are very limited to deliver pork-barrel projects or deliver federal funds to local districts.

Instead of constituency characteristics, this analysis tests a distributive rationale using MPs' connections to organisations outside parliament (see Mickler, 2018b; Yordanova, 2009). Although this is a departure from the congressional argument, the same logic applies: if, disproportionally, MPs with relevant connections to organisations outside parliament that have a stake in the committee's policy area cluster in committees, then the internal subunits of the legislature comprise MPs who are driven by external concerns.

> Hypothesis 3:MPs who have ties to outside organisations that are active in a committee's jurisdiction are more likely to be assigned to the committee.

A final set of hypotheses are based on the partisan theory of legislative organisation (Cox & McCubbins, 1993). When applied to committee allocations, hypotheses are often set up to test whether specific characteristics of MPs increase the likelihood of being assigned to committees whose jurisdiction concerns an important issue domain of the PPG. In those committees, the electoral faith of most of the MPs is affected, which is why the influence of the leadership to influence compositions will be most clear. Three factors might be important in this regard. A first strategy is to 'reserve' seats on important committees for MPs who are placed higher on the party list. The underlying logic is that assignments help candidates with a strong electoral profile to maximise their votes.

> Hypothesis 4: MPs who are placed higher on the party list are more likely to be assigned to committees whose jurisdiction concerns an important issue domain of the party.

A second partisan hypothesis tests the influence of MPs' ideological closeness to the PPG on the chances of being assigned to an important committee. Doing so implies that the PPG leadership uses assignments as a reward to extract partisan benefits for MPs who are closer to the PPG or punishes those who are not. It also corresponds to the prediction of the partisan theory that the composition of committees that are dealing with important areas for a PPG will be more moderate, rather than clustering 'extreme' MPs.

> Hypothesis 5: MPs who are ideologically closer to the PPG are more likely to be assigned to committees whose jurisdiction concerns an important issue domain of the party.

Another factor used to test the partisan rationale is whether the number of legislative periods can be linked to the assignment to important committees. If senior MPs are disproportionally assigned to committees that are important for a party, and others are withheld from serving on them, this would imply a 'structuring' hand of the PPG leadership.

> Hypothesis 6: More senior MPs are more likely to be assigned to committees whose jurisdiction concerns an important issue domain of the party.

These hypotheses disentangle various factors that might structure the assignment process. As suggested in the introduction, the comparison of the two countries is made to investigate whether committee assignments in a formally weak system (the Netherlands) are given less consideration than assignments in a strong committee system. Time is a scarce resource within parliaments. When committees do not 'matter' (formally), they present lower opportunity structures for individual MPs and PPGs. In these cases, it might be rational to shift the focus to other venues and treat committee assignments with less attention. This leads to the formulation of the following hypothesis:

> Hypothesis 7: The effect of factors concerning committee assignments will be weaker in the House of Representatives than in the Chamber of Representatives.

3.2 Operationalisation

Committee membership (full and substitute members): The dependent variable measures membership of a committee and is split into being assigned as a full member or substitute member. Arguably, full members are of primary interest for this article. However, analysing substitute members can test whether the same allocation principles are applied across the two groups. In both chambers, changes to the membership of committees are listed in the minutes of each plenary sitting. The minutes of the Chamber of Representatives were obtained from www.dekamer.be. For the House of Representatives, minutes were obtained from www.officielebekendmakingen.nl, the central access point to all information about government organisations. For both full and substitute members, the final variables measure initial assignments at the beginning of the legislative period, including transfers during the legislative period.

In the Netherlands, I include all legislative periods from 1998 to 2017. All committee assignments from the 50th (1999-2003) to the 54th (2014-2019) legislative period are included for Belgium. I include only specialised committees, i.e. those who work on specific policy areas and usually have a ministerial counterpart (or cluster policy areas from several ministries). In the case of the Chamber of Representatives, the same committees were consistently established in the analysed legislative periods.[4] In the Netherlands, reshuffling of policy areas occurred more frequently after elections. Appendix 1 and 2 contain an overview of all included committees.

Prior education/occupation: The informational logic of committee assignments predicts that MPs will be allocated to committees if they can specialise at a low cost in a policy area. MPs' prior education and occupation are essential sources of knowledge in this regard. Information on MPs' educational and occupational backgrounds was obtained from the personal profiles on the parliamentary websites (BE: www.dekamer.be; NL: www.tweedekamer.nl and the Parliamentary Documentation Centre). For the analysis, prior education and occupation are

treated as two variables. The split into two variables has an analytical advantage: while educational backgrounds are often broader (e.g. many MPs have a background in the social sciences), previously held occupations are usually more specialised.

All available prior education and occupation data were coded using the ISCO-08 classification scheme (International Labour Office, 2012). ISCO codes were then matched to policy areas of committees. The general guideline was whether a background allows an MP to specialise in a policy area at a lower cost than an MP who does not have a similar background. To illustrate, teaching professionals (ISCO-08 group 2300) were treated as having relevant knowledge for committees dealing with education policy, those who worked in farming (ISCO-08 group 6100) for committees that deal with agriculture, etc. No distinctions were made between skill levels; e.g. managers, professionals or associate professionals were treated equally.

Some ISCO groups deserve special attention, in particular those with a legal background. While one could argue that those MPs can specialise in all policy areas, I opted to code these MPs only for those committees that deal specifically with legal issues (e.g. legal affairs or constitutional reform). This was done to treat all MPs equally and to prevent an abundance of positive codes that would make it difficult to disentangle the effect of specialisation.

Committee experience: Data on committee membership in previous legislative periods is based on this article's data set of committee assignments. In the case of the Chamber of Representatives, this was straightforward given that the same committees were established throughout the analysed period. In the House of Representatives, reshuffling and merging committees are more common. MPs were coded as having committee experience if a committee was split into different committees or merged into one committee. Only the immediately preceding legislative period was used for this variable. I exclude committee experience in the 50th legislative period in Belgium owing to missing data.

External interests: To indicate ties to outside groups, I coded official functions (e.g. board membership) of all MPs. The information for Belgian MPs is available online (Belgian Court of Audit, 2020). Unfortunately, no data are available for the 50th legislative period. For the Netherlands, data for the 2012 legislative period are available online (Tweede Kamer, 2021). For previous legislative periods, data were obtained from the secretariate of the parliament. Official functions were then matched to the committees' jurisdiction. Examples of relevant additional functions include board members of the Belgian Road Safety Institute (committee dealing with traffic) or, in the case of the committee of agriculture, the Regional Centre for the Valorisation of Agricultural Production (*Centre Régional de Valorisation de l'Agroalimentaire*).

Relative list position: The first partisan hypothesis predicts that higher placed candidates are disproportionally assigned to more important committees. Both countries use a list system. For the election of the Chamber of Representatives, the country is divided into 11 districts with varying district magnitude. For the House of Representatives, the country is, effectively, treated as a single district when it comes to the distribution of seats to parties[5] (see for an extended discus-

sion Nagtzaam, 2019, p. 10ff). The list position of Dutch MPs was based on the official records of the Dutch Electoral Council (1998, 2002, 2003, 2006, 2010, 2012). Data on the list position of Belgian MPs were obtained from Nagtzaam (2019).[6] Data for the 50th legislative period are not available online[7] and are missing from the analysis. To consider the size of the PPG, the relative list position value was calculated as follows: (list position of MP - 1)/(total number of seats of PPG-1)

Ideological distance to PPG mean: An additional hypothesis tests the effect of ideological proximity. MPs' positions are usually measured via voting behaviour, surveys or by inferring positions using speeches. Although research in the USA suggested a relationship between committee assignments and party-loyal voting (see, e.g., Leighton & Lopez, 2002), the high level of voting unity in the two analysed countries and the generally rare use of roll-call votes make this variable unsuitable. Relying on surveys requiring MPs to place themselves on an ideological scale is also impossible owing to low response rates and missing surveys for several legislative periods. Instead, I estimate MPs' positions on the basis of their speeches using the computerised content analysis method *Wordscores* (Laver, Benoit & Garry, 2003). Speeches from all MPs in the analysed legislative periods were obtained from the minutes of the plenary sessions.

The situation in Belgium is more complicated because of the multi-language nature of the parliament and the fact that the parliament's minutes list a speech in the language in which it was given. All speeches were translated into the same language using a Python script that relies on the Google Translation API to allow for a meaningful analysis. Although the occurrence of minor translation errors cannot be ruled out, grammatical errors that change the sentence structure will not affect the estimates, given that *Wordscores* analyses word frequencies. However, the variable should, in any case, be interpreted with these limitations in mind.

After translating the speeches, I calculated reference files that contain all speeches by MPs of a PPG in a legislative period. For government parties, this includes speeches by ministers and state secretaries. Subsequently, all MPs were scored against these reference files. The estimations were done using the *quanteda* package in R (Benoit et al., 2018). The final score for each MP is the difference between the PPG mean and their estimated *Wordscores* score, thus providing a sense of how much an MP deviates from their PPG in speeches.

Seniority: The number of legislative periods was based on MPs' profiles.

Importance of committees' jurisdiction: To test whether a difference exists in assignments to committees whose areas concern a central issue domain of the party, an indicator of the relative importance of a committee is required. Following the literature on issue saliency, which highlights the strategic choice of parties to emphasise topics in election campaigns (Wagner & Meyer, 2014), I measure the importance of a committee in terms of saliency. For each committee, I added the score of relevant codes from the Manifesto Project (Volkens et al., 2020) data for each election. This indicates how much emphasis a party places on topics that are connected to a committee's jurisdiction. A special case was committees that deal with the budget. Owing to their role as the public spending watchdog, those

committees received the highest ranking in terms of saliency. The overview of all committees and their respective Manifesto Project codes are available from the author on request. After calculating the relevant emphasis per policy area, all committees were ranked from '1' to the maximum number of committees in the analysed legislative period (highest value = highest saliency). The face validity of this approach is high. Highly salient topics across all parties include economic issues as well as internal affairs, but notable differences occur; for example, environmental issues score higher for Green parties than for other parties.

Gender: I include gender as a control variable to test whether female MPs are less likely to serve on highly salient committees. The gender of all MPs was obtained from their profiles.

4 Results

A multiple membership multilevel model was used to analyse the data (Beretvas, 2011; Browne, Goldstein & Rasbash, 2001). These models are appropriate given the nested hierarchical structure (i.e. MPs clustered in committees). Random intercepts were entered for MPs, parties, committees and legislative periods if multiple legislative periods were analysed.[8] Given that the same committees were established during the five analysed legislative periods in Belgium, all legislative periods were analysed in the same model by including a random intercept for the legislative period. A separate model was estimated for the 50th legislative period because data for external interests and list positions were unavailable. Each legislative period in the House of Representatives is analysed separately because of the reshuffling of committees' jurisdictions.

Per analysed parliament/legislative period, four models were estimated: full members (including transfers) without committee experience (Model 1) and with committee experience (Model 2), as well as substitute members (including transfers) without committee experience (Model 3) and with committee experience (Model 4). The models were estimated using the lme4 package in R (Bates, Maechler, Bolker & Walker, 2015). The detailed results are presented in the appendix (Table 2, 3, 4 and 5). For the discussion, I will elaborate on the effects of the main variables using odds ratios (exponentiated coefficients) to demonstrate the strength of association between the factors and being assigned to a committee. Figure 1 shows the odds ratios of all variables, including 95% confidence intervals for full members. Figure 2 presents results for substitute members. I include a vertical line at 1 to facilitate the interpretation of significance.

One of the main aims of the comparison was to test whether assignments in a formally weaker committee system are given less consideration (Hypothesis 7) than assignments in a 'stronger' committee system. If so, the results for the House of Representatives should be less stable or indicate weaker effects. This prediction is not supported concerning full members (Figure 1). In both parliaments and across all analysed legislative periods, clear patterns are visible. The results suggest that relevant prior education or prior occupation increases the chances of being assigned to a committee. If a matching prior occupation is pres-

ent, the odds of being assigned to a matching committee increase, on average, with 1.96 in the Netherlands and 1.76 in Belgium (Model 1). Even though at least formally, committees in the House of Representatives were considered weak in comparative studies, the informational rationale of committee assignment for full members is supported. The strong effect of this variable is noteworthy in combination with the result for committee experience (Model 2, see the right plot in Figure 1). Across the 20 years of analysed committees, the odds of being reassigned to a committee are much greater for those who have served on a committee in the previous legislative period, suggesting that MPs further deepen their expertise.

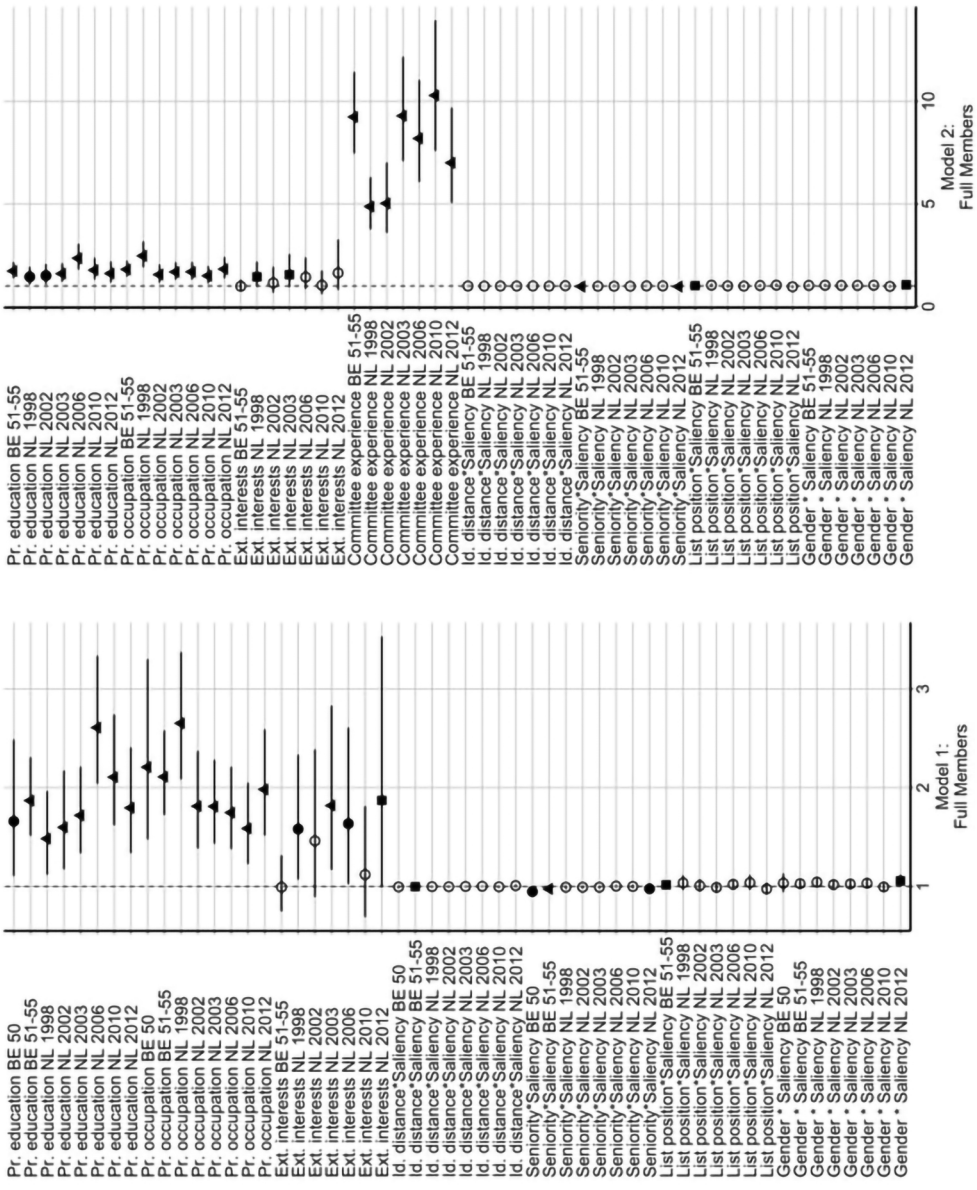
Interestingly, while a clear assignment logic supporting the informational rationale is also present for substitute members in the Chamber of Representatives, no consistent effect exists for the House of Representatives (see Figure 2). Earlier research on the Dutch parliament has highlighted the special nature of substitute members. In the Dutch parliament, substitute members and full members are 'paired' (a full member can only be substituted with a particular substitute member). The main task of substitutes is to be present during meetings that schedule the agenda for the upcoming weeks (Dutch: *procedurevergadering*). During interview rounds in the past, several interviewed MPs were even unsure which committee they belong to as a substitute (Mickler, 2017). In the Chamber of Representatives, the evidence suggests that substitute membership is given more consideration. The same factors matter for the assignment of full and substitute members.

The evidence for a distributive rationale of committee assignments, tested via connections to outside organisations, is mixed. The variable passes the 10% and 5% significance threshold in some legislative periods for the House of Representatives, but the effect is weaker and less consistent compared with prior education and occupation. In the Chamber of Representatives, connections to outside organisations do not increase the odds of being assigned to a corresponding committee. Looking more closely into the data indicates great variation between committees. There are some committees (most notably Defence, Foreign Affairs, Justice) in which very few MPs have relevant connections. Across all committees, looking at those MPs who have a link to an organisation, only around 1/5 of MPs serve on the corresponding committee. It is, however, difficult to conclude whether PPGs actively avoid such connections or whether MPs themselves do not seek such assignments. Further qualitative research is needed to investigate the causal mechanism in depth.

None of the factors that relate to the PPG leadership's 'structuring' hand consistently increase the odds of being assigned to highly salient committees, either for substitute members or for full members. Although earlier interviews with MPs in the House of Representatives suggested that a higher list position sometimes solves intra-PPG conflicts, there are no general patterns of those being closer to the top of the list being disproportionally assigned to more salient committees. Likewise, no clear pattern is visible concerning parliamentary seniority or ideological closeness. Relatively high turnover rates characterise both parliaments. In their study on parliamentary careers of Belgian MPs since 1831, Verle-

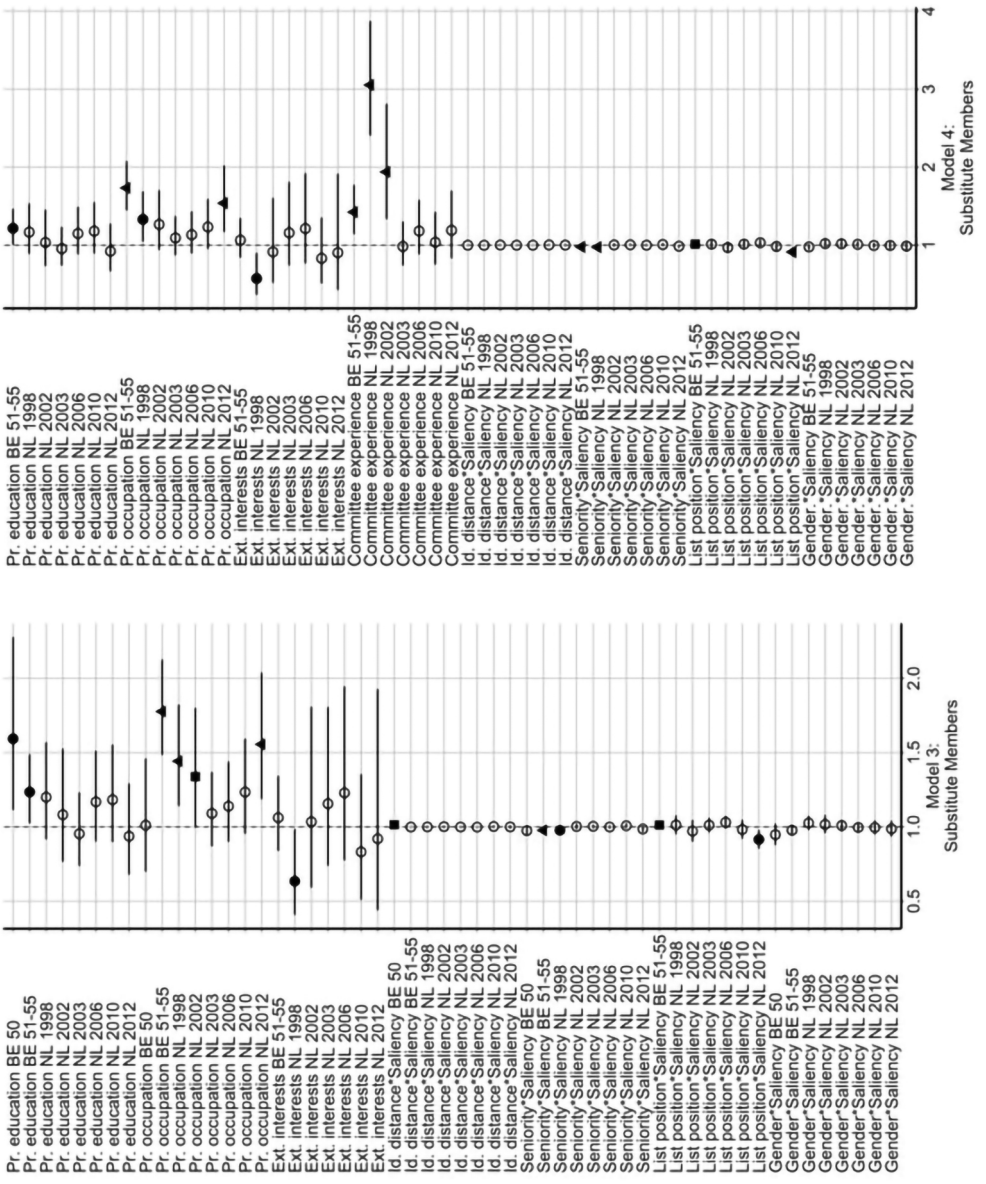
den and Heyneman (2008) show a decline in parliamentary experience since the middle of the previous century. This decline was further exacerbated after 1995 (Verleden & Heyneman, 2008, p. 390). Similar developments have also been described for the Dutch parliament (Trouw Online, 2017).

Lastly, the analysis tested an effect of gender on being assigned to low-saliency committees, as was shown by several studies from diverse settings (Chiru, 2019; Espírito-Santo & Sanches, 2020; Goodwin et al., 2020). Such patterns are not visible in the results of the two analysed parliaments. Although female MPs are still under-represented (after the 2021 election, 59 women and 91 men entered the House of Representatives; in the Chamber of Representatives, 41.3% of MPs are female), disproportionate clustering of female MPs in low-saliency areas is not visible. Of course, it might be that an analysis of other types of committees, e.g. those that deal with 'feminised' areas (Bolzendahl, 2014), can identify such patterns.



Symbols: empty circle = p > 0.1; black square= p<0.1; black circle = p<0.05; black triangle = p<0.01.

Figure 1 ***Odds ratios and confidence intervals of multiple membership, multilevel models Kamer van Volksvertegenwoordigers (1999-2019) and Dutch Tweede Kamer (1998-2017). Full members (including transfers). Left: Model 1 (without committee experience). Right: Model 2 (including committee experience).***



Symbols: empty circle = p > 0.1; black square= p<0.1; black circle = p<0.05; black triangle = p<0.01.

Figure 2 ***Odds ratios and confidence intervals of multiple membership, multilevel models, Kamer van Volksvertegenwoordigers (1999-2019) and Dutch Tweede Kamer (1998-2017). Substitutes (including transfers). Left: Model 3 (without committee experience). Right: Model 4 (including committee experience).***

5 Conclusion

Parliaments around the world rely on committees, but the strength of committee systems varies greatly across parliaments. The question that guided the analysis was whether 'weaker' committees affect how parliamentary actors treat them. If committee work can meaningfully impact legislative proceedings, do PPGs and individual MPs give more consideration to assignments compared with weak committees? This article investigated this question by analysing the determinants of committee assignments in the Lower Houses of the two 'Low Countries': the Dutch House of Representatives (formally weak committees) and the Belgian Chamber of Representatives (formally strong committees). The article utilised congressional theories of legislative organisation to deduce hypotheses about factors that structure the assignment process. The analysis also tested the effect of gender on assignments to committees that deal with highly salient topics. The overarching question was whether these predictors would better explain assignments in the Belgian Chamber of Representatives than the House of Representatives.

The results indicate no difference concerning the presence of stable, reoccurring patterns between the two parliaments. Prior knowledge in a policy area, via MPs' educational or occupational background, greatly increases the likelihood of being assigned to a committee. Additionally, MPs often remain on the same committee in subsequent legislative periods. These findings are robust across legislative terms in both parliaments. In general, the analysis does not indicate a distributive or partisan logic of committee assignments. However, this conclusion does not imply a sidelining of the influence of PPGs. It is clear that even though the analysis stresses the role of MPs' knowledge in a subject area for their committee assignments, PPGs remain crucial actors. A striking difference was that committee assignments as substitute members in a stronger committee system are given due consideration. This provides some support for the argument that lower opportunity structures might lead actors to 'care less', but this only applies to the group of substitute members. However, more comparative research is needed from different institutional contexts.

Notwithstanding the difference regarding full and substitute members, the results suggest that committees, regardless of their comparative strength, are perceived by PPGs and individual MPs as important venues. Decisions on how to structure the workload in them are given careful consideration. It also serves as a reminder that the focus of 'formal' powers can misjudge the influence of committees. Committees in the House of Representatives may not have substantial redrafting rights but are active players in government control. Additionally, they can still exert 'passive' influence; research has suggested that bills are frequently amended or changed by the initiator (Visscher, 1994) during the committee stage, even though the committee members themselves cannot change them.

Notes

1 The Rules of Procedure also prescribe the establishment of additional permanent committees for Digital Affairs, European Affairs and Kingdom Relations.
2 The two-minute debate was already laid down in the Rules of Procedure in 1998 (since 2021: Art. 7.31), but until 2021 the term *verslag van een algemeen overleg* (VAO) was used. In addition, there were reports of written (committee) meetings.
3 In practice, the proposal for the distribution is made in accordance with the PPG leaders.
4 In the current 55th legislative period, starting in 2019, this trend was discontinued.
5 There are also electoral districts in the Netherlands, but these have primarily an administrative function.
6 I would like to thank Marijn Nagtzaam for sharing his data with me.
7 An official website containing the results is available (http://www.ibzdgip.fgov.be/result/nl/main.html), but it does not contain the list positions.
8 Treating all parties equally runs the risk of missing eventual theoretically interesting effects about distinctions of governing/opposition PPG or large PPGs. I estimated additional models for full members that include only opposition PPGs or large PPGs (here defined as PPGs whose size is greater than the number of committees). The results are available from the author on request. The results are fairly identical with the ones presented here in the article.

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Appendices

Appendix 1

List of analysed committees: Belgium

Legislative period 50 (1999-2003), 51 (2003-2007), 52 (2007-2010), 53 (2010-2014) and 54 (2014-2019)

- Commission des Affaires sociales/Commissie voor de Sociale Zaken
- Commission de la Défense nationale/Commissie voor de Landsverdediging
- Commission chargée des Problèmes de Droit commercial et économique/Commissie belast met de problemen inzake Handels- en Economisch Recht
- Commission de l'Economie, de la Politique scientifique, de l'Education, des Institutions scientifiques et culturelles nationales, des Classes moyennes et de l'Agriculture/Commissie voor het Bedrijfsleven, het Wetenschapsbeleid, het Onderwijs, de Nationale Wetenschappelijke en Culturele Instellingen, de Middenstand en de Landbouw

- Commission des Finances et du Budget/Commissie voor de Financiën en de Begroting
- Commission de l'Infrastructure, des Communications et des Entreprises publiques Commissie voor de Infrastructuur, het Verkeer en de Overheidsbedrijven
- Commission de l'Intérieur, des Affaires générales et de la Fonction publique/ Commissie voor de Binnenlandse Zaken, de Algemene Zaken en het Openbaar Ambt
- Commission de la Justice/Commissie voor de Justitie
- Commission des Relations extérieures/Commissie voor de Buitenlandse Betrekkingen
- Commission de Révision de la Constitution et de la Réforme des Institutions/ Commissie voor de Herziening van de Grondwet en de Hervorming van de Instellingen
- Commission de la Santé publique, de l'Environnement et du Renouveau de la Société/Commissie voor de Volksgezondheid, het Leefmilieu en de Maatschappelijke Hernieuwing

Appendix 2

List of analysed committees: the Netherlands

1998/2002

- Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties
- Buitenlandse Zaken
- Defensie
- Economische Zaken
- Europese Zaken
- Landbouw, Natuurbeheer en Visserij
- Financiën
- Justitie
- Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschappen
- Nederlands-Antilliaanse en Arubaanse Zaken
- Rijksuitgaven
- Sociale Zaken en Werkgelegenheid
- Volksgezondheid, Welzijn en Sport
- Volkshuisvesting, Ruimtelijke Ordening en Milieubeheer
- Verkeer en Waterstaat

2003

- Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties
- Buitenlandse Zaken
- Defensie
- Economische Zaken
- Europese Zaken
- Landbouw, Natuurbeheer en Visserij

- Financiën
- Justitie
- Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschappen
- Nederlands-Antilliaanse en Arubaanse Zaken
- Rijksuitgaven
- Sociale Zaken en Werkgelegenheid
- Volksgezondheid, Welzijn en Sport
- Volkshuisvesting, Ruimtelijke Ordening en Milieubeheer
- Verkeer en Waterstaat
- Integratiebeleid (AC)

2006
- Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties
- Buitenlandse Zaken
- Defensie
- Economische Zaken
- Europese Zaken
- Landbouw, Natuurbeheer en Visserij
- Financiën
- Justitie
- Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschappen
- Nederlands-Antilliaanse en Arubaanse Zaken
- Rijksuitgaven
- Sociale Zaken en Werkgelegenheid
- Volksgezondheid, Welzijn en Sport
- Volkshuisvesting, Ruimtelijke Ordening en Milieubeheer
- Verkeer en Waterstaat
- Jeugdzorg (AC)
- Wonen, Wijken en Integratie (AC)

2010
- Binnenlandse Zaken
- Buitenlandse Zaken
- Defensie
- Economische Zaken, Landbouw en Innovatie
- Europese Zaken
- Financiën
- Infrastructuur en Milieu
- Koninkrijkrelaties
- Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschappen
- Rijksuitgaven
- Sociale Zaken en Werkgelegenheid
- Veiligheid en Justitie
- Verkeer en Waterstaat
- Volksgezondheid, Welzijn en Sport
- Jeugdzorg (AC)

– Immigratie en Asiel (AC)

2012
– Binnenlandse Zaken
– Buitenlandse Zaken
– Defensie
– Economische Zaken
– Europese Zaken
– Financien
– Infrastructuur en Milieu
– Koninkrijkrelaties
– Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschappen
– Rijksuitgaven
– Sociale Zaken en Werkgelegenheid
– Veiligheid en Justitie
– Volksgezondheid, Welzijn en Sport
– Wonen en Rijksdienst (AC)
– Buitenlandsehandel en Ontwikkelingssamenwerking (AC)

Table 2 ***Model Summaries Committee Assignments (Including Transfers) in the Belgian Kamer van Volksvertegenwoordigers 1999-2019, Full Members***

	50th ('99-'03)	**51st to 54th ('03-'19)**	
	Model 1	**Model 1**	**Model 2**
Prior education	0.506**	0.625***	0.547***
	(0.207)	(0.108)	(0.113)
Prior occupation	0.792***	0.746***	0.590***
	(0.205)	(0.103)	(0.108)
External interest		−0.009	−0.017
		(0.144)	(0.150)
Committee experience			2.223***
			(0.109)
High importance committee (CMP rank)	0.088	0.024	0.016
	(0.060)	(0.029)	(0.029)
Ideological distance to PPG (WS)	0.047	0.011	0.008
	(0.058)	(0.011)	(0.012)
Number LPs.	0.222	0.156***	0.047
	(0.151)	(0.048)	(0.053)
Relative list position		−0.128*	−0.146**
		(0.067)	(0.070)
Gender	−0.118	−0.167	−0.176
	(0.315)	(0.157)	(0.165)

Table 2 (Continued)

	50th ('99-'03)	51st to 54th ('03-'19)	
	Model 1	**Model 1**	**Model 2**
Ideological distance * HICs	−0.006	−0.003*	−0.002
	(0.009)	(0.002)	(0.002)
Number LPs. * HICs	−0.055**	−0.026***	−0.028***
	(0.023)	(0.007)	(0.008)
Rel. list pos. * HIC		0.016*	0.017*
		(0.009)	(0.010)
Gender * HIC	0.032	0.027	0.022
	(0.046)	(0.023)	(0.024)
Constant	−2.548***	−2.302***	−2.193***
	(0.402)	(0.212)	(0.219)
Random effects (Std. Dev.)			
Individual MPs	0.000	0.000	0.000
Committees	0.000	0.159	0.135
Parties	0.000	0.223	0.262
Legislative periods		0.045	0.087
Observations	1,716	7,227	7,227
Log Likelihood	−644.752	−2,764.308	−2,562.144
Akaike Inf. Crit.	1,315.505	5,562.615	5,160.287

Note: *p < 0.1; **p < 0.05; *** p < 0.01. Standard errors in parentheses. Model 1 excluding committee experience; Model 2 including committee experience

Table 3 *Model Summaries Committee Assignments (Including Transfers) Dutch Tweede Kamer 1998-2017, Full Members*

	1998-2002		2002-2003		2003-2006		2006-2010		2010-2012		2012-2017	
	Model 1	**Model 2**	**Model 1**	**Model 2**	**Model 1**	**Model 2**	**Model 1**	**Model 2**	**Model 1**	**Model 2**	**Model 1**	**Model 2**
Prior education	0.394***	0.366**	0.468***	0.408**	0.541***	0.470***	0.958***	0.855***	0.745***	0.571***	0.585***	0.473***
	(0.144)	(0.150)	(0.157)	(0.164)	(0.129)	(0.139)	(0.126)	(0.134)	(0.134)	(0.150)	(0.150)	(0.159)
Prior occupation	0.975***	0.902***	0.594***	0.440***	0.592***	0.521***	0.557***	0.522***	0.461***	0.402***	0.684***	0.598***
	(0.123)	(0.128)	(0.137)	(0.143)	(0.119)	(0.128)	(0.120)	(0.128)	(0.131)	(0.142)	(0.137)	(0.144)
External interest	0.458**	0.371*	0.378	0.138	0.598***	0.442*	0.491**	0.358	0.112	0.032	0.626*	0.491
	(0.199)	(0.210)	(0.251)	(0.267)	(0.226)	(0.253)	(0.238)	(0.262)	(0.246)	(0.269)	(0.324)	(0.353)
Committee experience		1.583***		1.614***		2.229***		2.103***		2.331***		1.946***
		(0.132)		(0.171)		(0.138)		(0.153)		(0.156)		(0.166)
High importance committee (CMP rank)	−0.019	−0.003	0.031	0.050	0.021	0.021	−0.039	−0.041	0.007	0.015	0.029	0.049
	(0.041)	(0.043)	(0.041)	(0.043)	(0.036)	(0.039)	(0.030)	(0.032)	(0.043)	(0.046)	(0.040)	(0.042)
Ideological distance to PPG (WS)	−0.018	0.019	0.023	0.027	0.0005	−0.0002	−0.005	−0.013	−0.023	−0.020	−0.176***	−0.177***
	(0.034)	(0.034)	(0.027)	(0.027)	(0.021)	(0.021)	(0.024)	(0.025)	(0.044)	(0.048)	(0.058)	(0.061)
Number LPs.	0.044	−0.080	0.044	0.039	0.078	−0.016	−0.004	−0.149*	−0.028	−0.182*	0.274***	0.209**
	(0.084)	(0.093)	(0.076)	(0.080)	(0.074)	(0.083)	(0.073)	(0.082)	(0.095)	(0.104)	(0.096)	(0.105)

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Table 3 (Continued)

	1998-2002		2002-2003		2003-2006		2006-2010		2010-2012		2012-2017	
	Model 1	**Model 2**	**Model 1**	**Model 2**	**Model 1**	**Model 2**	**Model 1**	**Model 2**	**Model 1**	**Model 2**	**Model 1**	**Model 2**
Relative list position	−0.495	−0.373	−0.279	−0.171	0.055	0.197	−0.250	−0.179	−0.643*	−0.318	0.252	0.491
	(0.330)	(0.340)	(0.311)	(0.319)	(0.273)	(0.289)	(0.261)	(0.272)	(0.359)	(0.368)	(0.299)	(0.310)
Gender	−0.370	−0.275	−0.192	−0.201	−0.211	−0.207	−0.260	−0.303	−0.074	0.001	−0.388	−0.448
	(0.252)	(0.259)	(0.248)	(0.255)	(0.223)	(0.236)	(0.214)	(0.224)	(0.246)	(0.260)	(0.273)	(0.293)
Ideological distance * HICs	−0.004	−0.006	−0.005	−0.005	−0.002	−0.002	0.001	0.002	−0.005	−0.007	0.007	0.008
	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.005)	(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.006)
Number LPs. * HICs	−0.009	−0.014	−0.009	−0.012	−0.008	−0.011	0.002	0.002	−0.002	0.002	−0.025**	−0.031***
	(0.010)	(0.011)	(0.008)	(0.008)	(0.008)	(0.009)	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.010)	(0.011)	(0.011)	(0.012)
Rel. list pos. * HIC	0.034	0.034	0.007	0.002	−0.011	−0.009	0.020	0.018	0.037	0.035	−0.026	−0.041
	(0.036)	(0.037)	(0.033)	(0.033)	(0.028)	(0.030)	(0.024)	(0.025)	(0.037)	(0.039)	(0.032)	(0.033)
Gender * HIC	0.041	0.034	0.017	0.021	0.024	0.021	0.031	0.031	−0.006	−0.020	0.056*	0.057*
	(0.027)	(0.028)	(0.026)	(0.027)	(0.023)	(0.024)	(0.020)	(0.020)	(0.026)	(0.028)	(0.029)	(0.031)
Constant	−1.508***	−1.791***	−1.767***	−2.060***	−1.913***	−2.061***	−1.346***	−1.271***	−1.300***	−1.773***	−2.096***	−2.411***
	(0.362)	(0.382)	(0.424)	(0.447)	(0.361)	(0.393)	(0.385)	(0.405)	(0.439)	(0.428)	(0.426)	(0.440)
Individual MPs	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.071	0.000	0.000	0.292	0.352

Table 3 (Continued)

	1998-2002		2002-2003		2003-2006		2006-2010		2010-2012		2012-2017	
	Model 1	**Model 2**	**Model 1**	**Model 2**	**Model 1**	**Model 2**	**Model 1**	**Model 2**	**Model 1**	**Model 2**	**Model 1**	**Model 2**
Committees	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.570	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.040	0.000	0.000
Parties	0.000	0.000	0.570	0.424	0.141	0.209	0.580	0.605	0.377	0.000	0.552	0.492
Observations	2,670	2,670	2,400	2,400	2,928	2,928	3,096	3,096	2,460	2,460	2,595	2,595
Log Likelihood	−1,126.603	−1,055.579	−1,090.201	−1,046.976	−1,286.365	−1,154.775	−1,331.837	−1,230.657	−1,053.376	−938.344	−963.074	−894.084
Akaike Inf. Crit.	2,285.205	2,145.158	2,212.402	2,127.952	2,604.729	2,343.549	2,695.674	2,495.313	2,138.751	1,910.689	1,958.148	1,822.168

Note: *p < 0.1; **p < 0.05; ***p < 0.01. Standard errors in parentheses.

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Table 4 *Model Summaries Committee Assignments (Including Transfers) in the Belgian Kamer van Volksvertegenwoordigers 1999-2019, Substitute Members*

	50th ('99-'03)	51st to 54th ('03-'19)	
	Model 3	**Model 3**	**Model 4**
Prior education	0.466**	0.211**	0.195**
	(0.183)	(0.096)	(0.096)
Prior occupation	0.011	0.575***	0.550***
	(0.188)	(0.092)	(0.092)
External interest		0.060	0.062
		(0.120)	(0.120)
Committee experience			0.353***
			(0.112)
High importance committee (CMP rank)	0.067	0.045**	0.044*
	(0.049)	(0.023)	(0.023)
Ideological distance to PPG (WS)	−0.115**	0.002	0.001
	(0.058)	(0.010)	(0.010)
Number LPs.	0.027	0.071	0.057
	(0.132)	(0.044)	(0.044)
Relative list position		−0.030	−0.030
		(0.053)	(0.054)
Gender	0.131	0.208	0.210
	(0.270)	(0.134)	(0.134)
Ideological distance * HICs	0.015*	−0.001	−0.001
	(0.008)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Number LPs. * HICs	−0.026	−0.023***	−0.023***
	(0.019)	(0.007)	(0.007)
Rel. list pos. * HIC		0.013*	0.013*
		(0.008)	(0.008)
Gender * HIC	−0.054	−0.023	−0.024
	(0.039)	(0.020)	(0.020)
Constant	−1.448***	−1.790***	−1.776***
	(0.340)	(0.169)	(0.168)
Random effects (Std. Dev.)			
Individual MPs	0.000	0.000	0.000
Committees	0.000	0.124	0.095
Parties	0.000	0.218	0.265
Legislative periods		0.059	0.107
Observations	1,716	7,227	7,227

Table 4 (Continued)

	50th ('99-'03)	51st to 54th ('03-'19)	
	Model 3	**Model 3**	**Model 4**
Log Likelihood	−868.481	−3,545.434	−3,540.685
Akaike Inf. Crit.	1,762.962	7,124.868	7,117.369

Note: *p < 0.1; **p < 0.05; ***p < 0.01. Standard errors in parentheses.

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Table 5 *Model Summaries Committee Assignments (Including Transfers) Dutch Tweede Kamer 1998-2017, Substitute Members*

	1998-2002		2002-2003		2003-2006		2006-2010		2010-2012		2012-2017	
	Model 3	**Model 4**	**Model 3**	**Model 4**	**Model 3**	**Model 4**	**Model 3**	**Model 4**	**Model 3**	**Model 4**	**Model 3**	**Model 4**
Prior education	0.182	0.155	0.079	0.032	−0.047	−0.047	0.156	0.139	0.168	0.164	−0.065	−0.081
	(0.137)	(0.140)	(0.176)	(0.175)	(0.131)	(0.131)	(0.132)	(0.133)	(0.140)	(0.140)	(0.164)	(0.166)
Prior occupation	0.366***	0.285**	0.292*	0.235	0.087	0.088	0.130	0.124	0.210	0.209	0.442***	0.430***
	(0.119)	(0.122)	(0.151)	(0.152)	(0.116)	(0.116)	(0.120)	(0.120)	(0.131)	(0.131)	(0.138)	(0.140)
External interest	−0.455**	−0.557**	0.034	−0.090	0.145	0.146	0.206	0.193	−0.184	−0.185	−0.083	−0.102
	(0.225)	(0.230)	(0.285)	(0.288)	(0.228)	(0.229)	(0.235)	(0.235)	(0.249)	(0.249)	(0.377)	(0.383)
Committee experience		1.116***		0.662***		−0.018		0.166		0.035		0.173
		(0.122)		(0.190)		(0.145)		(0.149)		(0.164)		(0.182)
High importance committee (CMP rank)	0.034	0.047	−0.020	−0.013	−0.019	−0.019	0.0005	0.001	0.009	0.009	0.090**	0.091**
	(0.036)	(0.038)	(0.045)	(0.045)	(0.032)	(0.032)	(0.027)	(0.027)	(0.040)	(0.040)	(0.041)	(0.042)
Ideological distance to PPG (WS)	−0.037	−0.016	0.009	0.011	−0.016	−0.016	0.008	0.008	−0.024	−0.024	−0.133**	−0.142***
	(0.030)	(0.031)	(0.027)	(0.026)	(0.019)	(0.019)	(0.022)	(0.022)	(0.037)	(0.037)	(0.052)	(0.054)
Number LPs.	0.113	0.035	−0.070	−0.064	−0.043	−0.043	0.090	0.084	0.003	0.002	0.158	0.138
	(0.076)	(0.081)	(0.090)	(0.086)	(0.069)	(0.069)	(0.067)	(0.067)	(0.088)	(0.088)	(0.096)	(0.098)

Table 5 *(Continued)*

	1998-2002		2002-2003		2003-2006		2006-2010		2010-2012		2012-2017	
	Model 3	**Model 4**	**Model 3**	**Model 4**	**Model 3**	**Model 4**	**Model 3**	**Model 4**	**Model 3**	**Model 4**	**Model 3**	**Model 4**
Relative list position	−0.086	0.006	0.035	0.100	−0.422*	−0.424*	−0.441*	−0.435*	0.119	0.124	0.423	0.449
	(0.290)	(0.294)	(0.335)	(0.332)	(0.250)	(0.250)	(0.250)	(0.250)	(0.324)	(0.325)	(0.299)	(0.310)
Gender	−0.190	−0.128	−0.266	−0.287	0.055	0.054	0.180	0.179	0.329	0.330	0.133	0.128
	(0.219)	(0.223)	(0.276)	(0.272)	(0.200)	(0.200)	(0.199)	(0.199)	(0.228)	(0.228)	(0.262)	(0.268)
Ideological distance* HICs	−0.0003	−0.002	0.002	0.002	−0.0004	−0.0004	−0.001	−0.001	0.003	0.003	0.0001	0.0001
	(0.003)	(0.004)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.006)	(0.006)
Number LPs.* HICs	−0.023**	−0.026***	0.003	0.003	0.004	0.004	−0.0004	−0.001	0.008	0.008	−0.015	−0.014
	(0.009)	(0.010)	(0.009)	(0.010)	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.009)	(0.009)	(0.010)	(0.010)
Rel. list pos* HIC	0.013	0.012	−0.029	−0.032	0.012	0.012	0.030	0.030	−0.017	−0.017	−0.089**	−0.092***
	(0.032)	(0.032)	(0.038)	(0.038)	(0.025)	(0.025)	(0.022)	(0.022)	(0.033)	(0.033)	(0.035)	(0.035)
Gender.* HIC	0.026	0.020	0.016	0.017	0.009	0.009	−0.004	−0.004	−0.004	−0.004	−0.013	−0.013
	(0.024)	(0.024)	(0.031)	(0.031)	(0.020)	(0.020)	(0.017)	(0.017)	(0.024)	(0.024)	(0.028)	(0.028)
Constant	−1.431***	−1.609***	−1.406***	−1.618***	−0.734**	−0.731**	−1.526***	−1.524***	−1.594***	−1.600***	−2.065***	−2.218***
	(0.327)	(0.338)	(0.474)	(0.425)	(0.326)	(0.326)	(0.313)	(0.313)	(0.426)	(0.426)	(0.410)	(0.386)
Individual MPs	0.000	0.000	0.172	0.286	0.286	0.286	0.343	0.341	0.270	0.269	0.389	0.501

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Table 5 (Continued)

	1998-2002		2002-2003		2003-2006		2006-2010		2010-2012		2012-2017	
	Model 3	**Model 4**	**Model 3**	**Model 4**	**Model 3**	**Model 4**	**Model 3**	**Model 4**	**Model 3**	**Model 4**	**Model 3**	**Model 4**
Committees	0.000	0.000	0.286	0.578	0.001	0.000	0.030	0.035	0.088	0.088	0.001	0.002
Parties	0.000	0.000	0.578	0.000	0.189	0.189	0.001	0.000	0.424	0.420	0.416	0.003
Observations	2,670	2,670	2,400	2,400	2,928	2,928	3,096	3,096	2,460	2,460	2,595	2,595
Log Likelihood	−1,371.108	−1,330.146	−1,035.234	−1,029.166	−1,574.690	−1,574.683	−1,608.487	−1,607.880	−1,222.537	−1,222.514	−1,022.544	−1,022.539
Akaike Inf. Crit.	2,774.216	2,694.292	2,102.468	2,092.332	3,181.380	3,183.365	3,248.973	3,249.760	2,477.074	2,479.028	2,077.088	2,079.078

Note: *p < 0.1; **p < 0.05; ***p < 0.01. Standard errors in parentheses.

‘Think Like Me, and I Will Trust You’

The Effects of Policy Opinion Congruence on Citizens’ Trust in the Parliament*

*Awenig Marié & David Talukder***

Abstract

Do citizens with a lower level of political representation evaluate political actors more negatively? While the literature has documented inequalities in political representation, less attention has been given to the extent to which different levels of representation affect citizens’ levels of political trust. We aimed to fill this gap by analysing whether Belgian citizens with a lower level of policy opinion congruence with their party’s legislators have lower levels of trust in the parliament. Our results show that policy opinion congruence has a positive impact on citizens’ political attitudes. Indeed, citizens with policy preferences closer to those of their political representatives tend to have higher levels of trust in the parliament. This relationship depends on political sophistication: policy opinion congruence affects political trust for most citizens except those who consider themselves to be ‘very interested’ in politics. Citizens with a very high level of interest in politics trust the parliament regardless of policy opinion congruence with their party’s legislators.

Keywords: political representation, parliaments, opinion congruence, political trust, public opinion.

1 Introduction

The existence of a ‘democratic deficit’ as a global phenomenon has been widely documented in a number of recent studies (Foa et al., 2020; Norris, 2011). Citizens tend to be more dissatisfied with democracy and have lower levels of support for and trust in the government, political elites and representative institutions (Bedock, 2017; Dalton, 2004; Norris, 2011). And yet, a high level of political trust among the public is often considered to be crucial for the long-term stability of democratic systems (Marien & Hooghe, 2011). This is even more true for trust in the parliament, an institution through which citizens can exercise their power

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over public decisions and which, therefore, plays a crucial role in the process of political representation (Holmberg, Lindberg & Svensson, 2017).

This article aims to determine whether citizens' level of trust in the parliament depends on the quality of the representative linkage. Much of the literature has studied political representation as a dependent variable and overlooked the extent to which different levels of representation produce different outcomes, especially in terms of citizens' political trust. The focus of this research is all the more crucial because of the inequalities in representation highlighted by a growing body of literature. Political representation is not uniform and homogenous, and some citizens, especially the most affluent and educated ones, tend to enjoy better representation (e.g. Bartels, 2008; Gilens, 2005).

Do citizens respond to different levels of political representation? In this article, building on Belgian survey data collected by scholars from Universiteit Antwerpen (UA) and Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB), we measure the quality of representation as policy opinion congruence, that is, the degree of ideological proximity between citizens and their political representatives (Golder & Stramski, 2010) on a set of specific policy statements. Opinion congruence is a structuring element of political representation, as it helps to translate citizens' policy preferences into political decisions (e.g. Miller & Stokes, 1963), especially when legislators take their own preferences into account when undertaking legislative activities (Levitt, 1996). In other words, the congruence between the policy preferences of citizens and those of their representatives is considered to be a relevant indicator in measuring the extent to which citizens' opinions are 'made present' in the legislature (Pitkin, 1967).

The analysis presented in this article is innovative for two main reasons. First, it is worth noting that the vast majority of studies analysing the attitudinal effects of congruence focus on satisfaction with democracy (e.g. Dahlberg & Holmberg, 2014; Ezrow & Xezonakis, 2011; Mayne & Hakhverdian, 2017). These studies found that citizens evaluate democracy more positively when the political system is more congruent with or responsive to their views. In contrast, we focus here on another measure of political support: trust in the parliament. Trust is a subjective evaluation of a relationship (Van der Meer, 2010) and is, in that regard, directly related to the representative relationship between citizens and legislators. Second, whereas most studies measure opinion congruence on the left–right scale (e.g. Ezrow & Xezonakis, 2011; Kirkland & Banda, 2019; Mayne & Hakhverdian, 2017), we present an analysis based on opinion congruence measured on specific policy statements. Our measure of policy opinion congruence takes the multidimensionality of the political space into better account (e.g. Kriesi et al., 2006; Lesschaeve, 2017; Lutz, Kissau & Rosset, 2012).

We find clear evidence that policy opinion congruence is positively associated with citizens' political attitudes. More specifically, citizens whose policy preferences are closer to those of their party's legislators tend to have higher levels of trust in the parliament than citizens whose preferences are completely at odds with those of their representatives. We also find that the effect of opinion congruence on trust is not moderated by education but rather by political interest.

Unexpectedly, citizens who consider themselves to be very politically interested trust the parliament independently of their level of policy opinion congruence.

2 Theoretical Background

Decades of studies have shown that advanced industrial democracies are facing an erosion of political support (Dalton, 2004). Citizens tend to be more distant from political parties, more critical toward institutions, and less positive regarding governments (Dalton, 2004; Norris, 2011).

Academic literature generally assumes that political support is a necessary element for the legitimacy and stability of political systems. This idea goes back to the 1970s, when it was thought that democratic regimes might not survive high levels of political distrust (Crozier, Huntington & Watanuki, 1975). However, more recent studies have shifted the focus by considering that political distrust or dissatisfaction is a reflection and not a cause of democratic malaise (Pharr, Putnam & Dalton, 2000; Van der Meer, 2010; Van der Meer & Zmerli, 2017).

According to these works, low levels of political support are related to the actual functioning of democracy. Political support is thus considered to be endogenous to the political context and is dependent on the way citizens evaluate the functioning of the political system (Martini & Quaranta, 2019). Although citizens continue to be attached to democratic values and principles (Dalton, 2004), and to the mere existence of representative institutions, they have been increasingly dissatisfied with the political performance of these institutions (Pharr et al., 2000). While a large body of research has investigated the connection between political support and the outputs of political systems (e.g. Dahlberg & Holmberg, 2014; Hobolt, 2012; Wagner, Schneider & Halla, 2009), this article focuses its attention on the way the quality of representative linkage affects political support.

In representative democracies, the quality of representation can be operationalised as opinion congruence (Martini & Quaranta, 2019, p. 7), that is, the ideological proximity between citizens and representatives (Golder & Stramski, 2010). Theories of democratic representation presume that there should be some level of congruence between the policy preferences of the represented and those of the representatives (Miller & Stokes, 1963). Previous research studying the connection between opinion congruence and political attitudes has found that citizens who are more congruent with political elites tend to have higher levels of political support (Ezrow & Xezonakis, 2011; Ferland, 2021; Kim, 2009; Mayne & Hakhverdian, 2017; Stecker & Tausendpfund, 2016).

2.1 The Effects of Policy Opinion Congruence on Political Trust

The extant literature on the attitudinal impacts of opinion congruence has been "limited almost exclusively to satisfaction with democracy" (Martini & Quaranta, 2019, p. 61). Despite being widely used in comparative research (Kriesi, 2013), this indicator has been criticised for being interpreted differently by respondents

and for capturing both specific and diffuse support (Kriesi, 2013; Linde & Ekman, 2003). A conceptually more specific indicator of political support is political trust. Indeed, *political trust* systematically refers to a very specific set of political actors whereas democratic satisfaction is rather broad and is likely to refer to different dimensions of democracy (Kriesi, 2013).

In this article we suggest that, conceptually, political trust is a better indicator to relate to opinion congruence. Indeed, trust always involves an interpersonal relationship between a truster and a trustee (Hardin, 1999). Whereas it is possible for citizens to have various institutions or democratic processes in mind when sharing their level of satisfaction with democracy, the indicator of *political trust* asks them to evaluate a very precise relationship with specific political objects (Van der Meer, 2010). Trust is, in that regard, the product of citizens' subjective assessment of the nature of their relationship with various institutions or political actors, and of how these actors behave (Norris, 2011). Conceptualising trust as a relational concept supports the claim that citizens' trust in representative institutions is related to the nature of the relationship between them and their political representatives.

Moreover, previous research has found that political trust is a more volatile indicator than satisfaction with democracy (Martini & Quaranta, 2019; Norris, 2011), suggesting that it is more susceptible to be affected by external factors and variations, such as congruence.

While political trust can be conceptualised in multiple ways (i.e. trust in the government, parties, parliament, politicians), our focus here is on trust in the parliament (Grönlund & Setälä, 2007; Holmberg et al., 2017; Van der Meer, 2010). Indeed, parliaments are a critical body in the functioning of representative democracies and are central institutions in charge of policymaking. The indicator of *trust in the parliament* is expected to be associated with the way citizens' policy preferences are represented in the parliament, an institution whose primary function is to link citizens' preferences to policy decisions.

2.2 Conceptualising Policy Opinion Congruence

This article studies the relationship between opinion congruence and trust in the parliament. Opinion congruence between citizens and political representatives can be operationalised and measured in very different ways (see Golder & Stramski, 2010). Political representatives' preferences can be operationalised as the preferences of the government (Curini & Jou, 2016; Mayne & Hakhverdian, 2017), those of the median party in the parliament (Kim, 2009) or those of individual legislators (Miller & Stokes, 1963). In this article we adopt a meso-level approach: we measure the proximity between citizens' opinions and those of legislators belonging to the political party they voted for (see Dahlberg & Holmberg, 2014). This approach better accounts for the crucial role of political parties (Dalton, Farrell & McAllister, 2011), especially in Belgium, a country often described as a partitocracy (Van Haute, Amjahad, Borriello, Close & Sandri, 2013).

On the citizen side, opinion congruence can be operationalised as the proximity between the position of the median voter and the mean position of elected representatives (e.g. Dassonneville & McAllister, 2020; Martini & Quaranta,

2019, p. 107). Although this median citizen and many-to-one measure has been widely adopted in the literature on political representation (e.g. Dalton et al., 2011), it does not consider the diversity of policy preferences within a constituency. In contrast to this, congruence can be operationalised at the individual level as the ideological distance between every citizen and their political representatives (one-to-one measure). This allows the study of different individual levels of political representation and, therefore, the assessment of their attitudinal impacts.

Most of the studies on the relationship between political support and congruence rely on a measure of congruence constrained to the general left–right axis (Ezrow & Xezonakis, 2011; Kim, 2010; Mayne & Hakhverdian, 2017). Although the left–right dimension remains dominant and structuring in established democracies, extensive research has shown that it does not encapsulate all the dimensions of the political space (Stecker & Tausendpfund, 2016). Whereas the left–right scale captures the positions of citizens on socio-economic issues rather well, it overlooks issues such as European integration, the environment or migration. As it reduces the political space to a single dimension, a congruence measure focused solely on the left–right axis may be biased. One might miss what Thomassen (2012) named the 'blind corner of political representation', consisting of voters with inconsistent preferences (Otjes, 2016), or cross-pressured voters holding conservative positions on cultural issues and liberal ones on socio-economic questions (Lefkofridi et al., 2012; Van der Brug & Van Spanje, 2009).

Therefore, it is crucial to move beyond the unidimensional focus of the left–right axis and use a measure of policy opinion congruence based on different policy issues (Lesschaeve, 2017). Previous studies on the relationship between democratic satisfaction and congruence have noted that including specific policy issues is highly relevant (e.g. Hall & Evans, 2019; van Egmond, Johns & Brandenburg, 2020). For instance, measuring congruence on five issue dimensions, Stecker and Tausendpfund (2016) found that citizens who are more distant from their government are more dissatisfied with democracy. To the best of our knowledge, there has been no study on how different levels of congruence on specific policy issues affect citizens' levels of political trust.

2.3 Explaining the Effect of Policy Opinion Congruence on Trust in the Parliament

We expect citizens' trust in the parliament to be affected by their levels of policy opinion congruence with the political party they voted for in the last elections. The policy proximity between voters and political parties is a crucial element of the responsible party model of representation (see Dalton et al., 2011), which holds that parties play a crucial role in articulating and translating citizens' policy preferences in the policymaking process. We expect citizens to trust the parliament more if their opinions are represented in the legislature (Dunn, 2015; Grönlund & Setälä, 2007; Martini & Quaranta, 2019). More precisely, individuals are expected to have an "intrinsic satisfaction" derived from the feeling that their views are shared by their party's representatives (van Egmond et al., 2020, p. 2), regardless of whether that party is in charge. While the extant literature reported a significant positive effect of opinion congruence on satisfaction with democ-

racy, we expect congruence to also affect trust in a parliament, which is a more precise indicator capturing citizens' evaluation of the performance of their political representatives.

The relation between policy opinion congruence and political trust can be explained by the role played by citizens' perceptions of their own level of policy proximity. However, doubts can be raised as to the extent to which citizens accurately know their representatives' positions on specific policy issues. Previous research has indeed noted that the quality of the political information citizens have at their disposal is poor (Lau & Redlawsk, 1997; Miller & Stokes, 1963; Talukder, Uyttendaele, Jennart & Rihoux, 2021) and that the cost for gathering extensive political information is quite high given the fact that "neither the media nor political elites produce or report on measures of ideological congruence" (Mayne & Hakhverdian, 2017, p. 827). Although we do not expect citizens to know their representatives' position on every policy, we expect them to use cognitive heuristics or available information on a few policies to estimate their overall level of proximity with representatives. On the one hand, cognitive heuristics, and more specifically partisan and ideological cues, allow citizens to infer parties' positions on the basis of a party label or of a left–right ideological placement (Foos & De Rooij, 2017; Lau & Redlawsk, 2001), and on the other hand, citizens are likely to use the information on salient issues received through social media, the media or discussions with peers to estimate their overall level of proximity with a party. In sum, we expect citizens to use cognitive heuristics and limited information about parties' positions in order to estimate their overall level of policy opinion congruence, which, in turn, will affect their level of political trust.

> *Hypothesis 1* – The policy opinion congruence between citizens and their party's legislators is positively associated with trust in the parliament.

Furthermore, we expect the relationship between policy opinion congruence and political trust to be contingent upon some characteristics that are specific to the individuals. Previous research has emphasised the impact of education levels in moderating the effect of the quality of democracy on political trust (Kolczynska & Bürkner, 2021) or satisfaction with democracy (Mayne & Hakhverdian, 2017). For instance, Mayne and Hakhverdian (2017) found that the effect of congruence on democratic satisfaction is larger for citizens with higher levels of education.

The conditioning effect of education can be theoretically explained by two elements. First, it can be related to the cognitive mobilisation theory (Dalton, 2007). Indeed, a higher level of education is likely to affect the way citizens receive and process information about their representatives' policy preferences. If citizens do not receive accurate information, or do not process it well, we cannot expect policy opinion congruence to influence political trust. According to this explanation, education impacts the cognitive capacities of individuals to identify levels of policy opinion congruence and, by extension, the relationship between congruence and trust in the parliament. Second, the conditioning effects of education can also be related to the level of support of democratic values attached to the different levels of education (Mayne & Hakhverdian, 2017). Indeed, as citi-

zens with higher levels of educational attainment tend to support democratic principles more (see Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002; Verba, Schlozman & Brady, 1995), they should pay greater attention to their level of policy opinion congruence.

> *Hypothesis 2* – The effect of policy opinion congruence on trust in the parliament is larger for citizens with higher levels of education.

Education can be used as a proxy for political sophistication (e.g. Mayne & Hakhverdian, 2017). Political sophistication is a construct capturing the extent of citizens' knowledge about politics and is composed of elements such as interest, motivation, awareness or expertise (Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Gallina, Baudewyns & Lefevere, 2020; Luskin, 1990). Although education and political sophistication tend to be associated (Mayne & Hakhverdian, 2017), having a high level of education does not necessarily mean that you are systematically interested, knowledgeable or aware of political issues. Put differently, although education may impact citizens' cognitive skills and, therefore, their ability to understand politics, it does not mean that all educated citizens are willing to spend time gathering information about politics. Thus, we contend that education and political sophistication must be analysed as two distinct variables.

In this article we rely on *political interest*, which is an important component of political sophistication (Gallina et al., 2020). Politically interested citizens are likely to spend more time following politics and, as a consequence, might be better able to perceive their level of policy opinion congruence. Therefore, we expect the level of political interest to moderate the relationship between congruence and trust in the parliament. The more citizens are politically interested, the more their level of trust will depend on their level of policy opinion congruence (Stecker & Tausendpfund, 2016).

> *Hypothesis 3* – The positive effect of policy opinion congruence on trust in the parliament is larger for citizens with higher levels of political interest.

3 Data and Operationalisation

These hypotheses were tested by data from Belgium. The Belgian political system is of particular interest when it comes to political representation. Indeed, the consociational system (Van Haute & Wauters, 2019), combined with its proportional representation, gives smaller parties larger opportunities to access the parliament and, therefore, a higher probability for citizens to find a congruent political party (Lijphart, 2012). However, while we acknowledge the specificities of the Belgian case, we do not expect a different effect between policy opinion congruence and political trust in other countries.

We used a Belgian data set collected in the framework of the POLPOP project,[1] which conducted both a citizen and a political elite survey. The elite survey targeted federal and regional Members of Parliament between March and

June 2018. MPs filled the questionnaire during a face-to-face meeting. The response rate was 76.8% among all Dutch-speaking legislators, and 74.8% among all French-speaking ones. The citizen survey was conducted online with the help of a survey company (Survey Sampling International). The survey population consisted of Dutch- and French-speaking citizens over the age of 18 with access to the internet. The sample size was 2,389 observations for Dutch-speaking citizens and 2,371 observations for French-speaking citizens. The survey sample aimed to be representative of the population with regard to age, gender and education.[2]

Our dependent variable was *trust in the parliament*. We measured the level of trust in the Belgian federal parliament in order to match this variable with our measure of policy opinion congruence between citizens and their federal legislators. The question read as follows:

> Can you indicate on a scale from 0 to 10 how much you personally trust the Belgian federal parliament? 0 means you do not trust the institution at all, and 10 means you have complete trust.

The first hypothesis was tested using a measure of citizen–legislator policy opinion congruence. In the POLPOP project, both citizens and political representatives were asked to give their opinion on eight policy statements.[3] Citizens and political elites had five answer options: totally disagree, rather disagree, rather agree, totally agree or undecided (neutral or no opinion). This strategy provided a unique opportunity to measure opinion congruence on the basis of specific policy issues, instead of the left–right dimension. We measured policy opinion congruence as the policy proximity between each citizen and legislators from the party they voted for in the last elections.

More specifically, we compared the position of an individual citizen (whether the respondent agreed or disagreed with a statement) with the position of their party. Parties' positions equal the majority position of their federal legislators.[4] For each citizen*issue dyad, respondents received the value 1 if their position was similar to that of their party's legislators and 0 otherwise. The final opinion congruence variable was the average score of the eight policy statements and ranges from 0 (complete incongruence) to 1 (complete congruence). More precisely, the citizen–legislator opinion congruence variable was calculated as follows:

$$Congruence_i = \frac{1}{N} \sum_{\square} \Pi_{ik\ in\ which}\ \Pi_{ik}$$
$$= \begin{cases} 1\ if\ citizen's\ position_k = Position\ of\ the\ party_k \\ 0\ if\ citizen's\ position_k \neq Position\ of\ the\ party_k \end{cases}$$

where *i* refers to a respondent, *Citizen's position* is the position (1 = agree; 0 = disagree) of citizen *i* on the policy proposal *k* and *Position of the party* is the position (1 = agree; 0 = disagree) of citizen *I*'s political party on the policy proposal *k*.

For the second and third hypotheses, we included an interaction effect between our measure of policy opinion congruence and the citizens' level of edu-

cation (H2) and political interest (H3). The *education* binary variable captured whether the citizens' highest level of education was secondary education at best (0), or whether they had a higher non-university or a university degree (1). The *political interest* variable was measured as a categorical variable with the following levels: not at all interested, not interested, somewhat interested, interested and very interested.

Beyond these variables, several control variables expected to affect the citizens' level of trust in the parliament were included in the models. The first was the electoral success of political parties. Anderson, Blais, Bowler, Donovan and Listhaug (2005) showed that citizens who perceive that their political party won the election tend to express a higher level of political support. To operationalise the *electoral winner* variable, respondents who voted for a political party that joined the governing coalition (N-VA, CD&V, Open VLD and MR) were coded as 1 and 0 otherwise. The second set of control variables were socio-demographic variables. Although the direction of the effects is not consistent throughout all studies, it is widely recognised that political trust is likely to be affected by gender (Glaeser, Laibson, Scheinkman & Soutter, 2000), age (Brewer, Gross, Aday & Willnat, 2004) and social status (Schoon, Cheng, Gale, Batty & Deary, 2010). Therefore, we included the *income* of individuals (whether citizens belonged to the bottom third, to the middle category or to the upper third of the income distribution), their *gender* (women were coded 1 and men 0) and their *age*.[5] Moreover, we controlled for respondents' political extremism. Previous research in social psychology found that extreme ideological left and right positions correspond to lower levels of trust (Krouwel, Kutiyski, Van Prooijen, Martinsson & Markstedt, 2017). The *political extremism* measure is the citizens' absolute distance between their own position on the left–right dimension (0-10 scale) and the mean left–right position of our sample (5.11). Lastly, we controlled for the language group of the respondent, a crucial variable in the case of Belgium. Indeed, the country has two distinct media landscapes and party systems, as well as different public opinions, which are often distinguished empirically (Hooghe & Dassonneville, 2018; Uyttendaele, Jennart, Talukder & Rihoux, 2020). We present an overview of all variables in Appendix 1.

Finally, it is worth noting that some of these control variables might also have had an effect on our main independent variables. Previous research has found that the preferences of elected representatives tend to be closer to those of richer and more educated citizens (Gilens, Phillips & Lax, 2011; Rosset, Giger & Bernauer, 2013), including in Belgium (Lesschaeve, 2017). This created a risk of endogeneity, as the values on our congruence variable were likely to be related to both income and education, along with our measure of political trust. The inclusion in the models of the potentially confounding variables *income* and *education* allowed us to take this into account and to predict the independent effect of congruence on political trust.

4 Results

To test the hypotheses developed in the theoretical section of this article, our analysis consists of a set of linear regression models predicting citizens' level of trust in the parliament. The results are presented in Table 1. Model 1 tests for the direct and independent effects of policy opinion congruence on citizens' trust in the parliament. Model 2 includes the different control variables. Model 3 tests for the interaction effect between education and policy opinion congruence whereas Model 4 tests for the interaction effect between political interest and policy opinion congruence.

Table 1 Models Predicting the Level of Political Trust Among Belgian Citizens

	Trust in the Parliament			
	Model 1	**Model 2**	**Model 3**	**Model 4**
Congruence	0.779***	1.335***	1.405***	2.080***
	(0.209)	(0.227)	(0.302)	(0.705)
Age		−0.003	0.004	−0.003
		(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)
Female		0.057	−0.097	0.072
		(0.093)	(0.093)	(0.092)
Income (middle)		0.163	0.185	0.186*
		(0.112)	(0.115)	(0.111)
Income (high)		0.190	0.280**	0.259**
		(0.121)	(0.124)	(0.119)
Electoral winner		1.092***	1.133***	1.105***
		(0.099)	(0.101)	(0.098)
Extremism		−0.081***	−0.032	−0.085***
		(0.030)	(0.030)	(0.030)
Flanders		−0.012	0.034	−0.043
		(0.094)	(0.096)	(0.094)
Higher education		0.246***	0.272	
		(0.093)	(0.313)	
Political interest (Not interested)		0.968***		0.921
		(0.196)		(0.637)
Political interest (Somewhat interested)		1.662***		1.987***
		(0.161)		(0.523)
Political interest (Interested)		1.893***		2.253***
		(0.172)		(0.554)

Table 1 (Continued)

	Trust in the Parliament			
	Model 1	**Model 2**	**Model 3**	**Model 4**
Political interest (Very interested)		1.851***		4.099***
		(0.214)		(0.685)
Congruence × Higher education			0.121	
			(0.447)	
Congruence × Political interest (Not interested)				0.092
				(0.947)
Congruence × Political interest (Somewhat interested)				−0.488
				(0.780)
Congruence × Political interest (Interested)				−0.505
				(0.815)
Congruence × Political interest (Very interested)				−3.122***
				(0.967)
Constant	3.630***	1.288***	2.272***	0.892*
	(0.146)	(0.268)	(0.280)	(0.502)
N	3120	2630	2630	2637
R-squared	0.004	0.123	0.074	0.126
Adj. R-squared	0.004	0.118	0.071	0.121
Residual Std. Error	2.410 (df = 3118)	2.277 (df = 2616)	2.337 (df = 2619)	2.277 (df = 2620)
F Statistic	13.905*** (df = 1; 3118)	28.144*** (df = 13; 2616)	21.037*** (df = 10; 2619)	23.604*** (df = 16; 2620)

***p < 0.01; **p < 0.05; *p < 0.1; Standard errors in parentheses.

With regard to our first hypothesis, we expect political trust to be related to citizens' level of policy opinion congruence with their party's legislators. The results in Table 1 confirm this hypothesis. Models 1 and 2 display a positive and statistically significant main effect for policy opinion congruence. In line with our hypothesis, a higher level of policy opinion congruence between citizens and legislators is associated with an increase in trust in the parliament. This finding is consistent throughout all models, indicating that policy opinion congruence is a significant predictor of political trust. The effect of congruence on trust remains statistically significant even after controlling for socio-demographic variables, as well as for the effect of having voted for a winning political party. Moreover, policy opinion congruence continues to have a significant impact on trust even when we control for citizens' level of political interest.

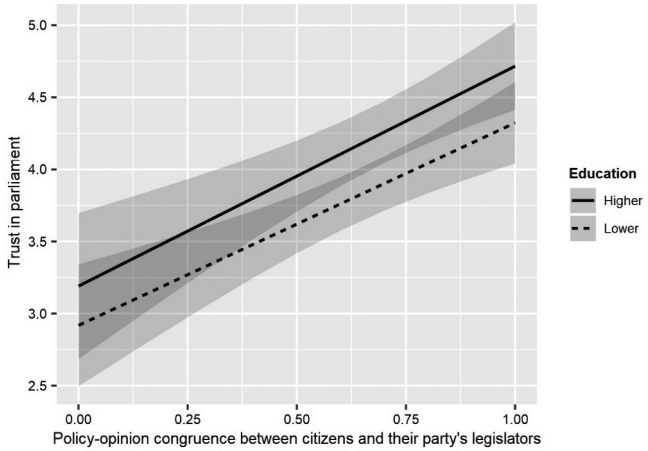

Figure 1 ***Citizens' predicted values for trust in the parliament at different levels of policy opinion congruence, depending on their level of education.***

However, although we found a significant and positive effect of congruence on trust in the parliament, it is worth mentioning that it was smaller than the effect of political interest or the effect of having voted for a winning political party, two factors often considered to be important predictors of citizens' political support (e.g. Anderson et al., 2005; Holmberg et al., 2017). Indeed, a shift from one standard deviation in policy opinion congruence is associated with a 0.54-point increase in political trust. By contrast, a shift from one standard deviation in political interest is associated with a 1.09-point increase in trust in the parliament, and a shift from one standard deviation in the electoral winner variable is tied to a 1.04-point increase in political trust.

Models 3 and 4 explore the moderating effect of education and political interest, respectively. We expected the effect of policy opinion congruence to be larger for highly educated and politically interested citizens. In Model 3, a high-education dummy was interacted with our measure of policy opinion congruence. The coefficient for our measure of opinion congruence remained positive and statistically significant, indicating that, contrary to our expectation, attitudes of respondents with a lower level of education were affected by their level of opinion policy congruence. The non-significant interaction term further rejected our hypothesis. To facilitate the interpretation of this interaction term, Figure 1 displays citizens' predicted values for trust in the parliament at different levels of policy opinion congruence, depending on their level of education. Our results suggest that the effect of congruence between citizens and their party's legislators on trust is not larger for citizens with higher levels of education. The implication of these results will be further discussed in the final section.

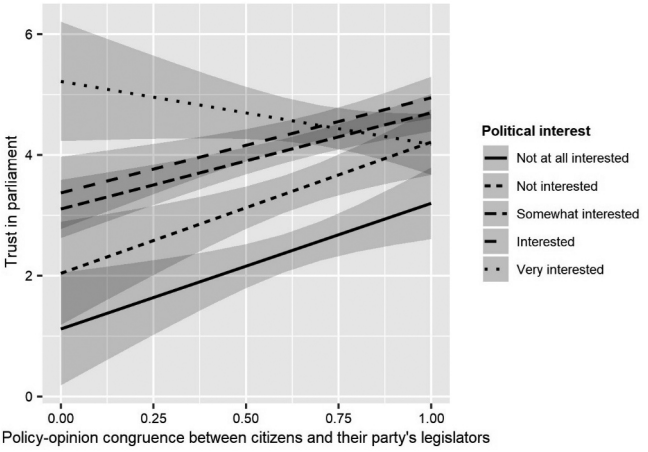

Figure 2 ***Citizens' predicted values for trust in parliament at different levels of policy opinion congruence, depending on citizens' levels of political interest.***

In Model 4, the political interest variable was interacted with our measure of congruence. We hypothesised that the effect of congruence on trust would be larger among citizens with a high level of political interest. The results of Model 4 rejected this hypothesis. First, the coefficient for our measure of policy opinion congruence was positive and statistically significant. This indicates that among citizens who have no interest in politics (i.e. citizens who declare that they are not at all interested in politics), policy opinion congruence continues to have a significant and large effect on trust in the parliament.

More importantly, the effect of policy opinion congruence on trust is different depending on the citizens' level of political interest. We found an important distinction between respondents with a very high level of political interest (those who declared being 'very interested' in politics) and all the other respondents. Indeed, the interaction coefficients in Model 4 were not statistically different from one another for all levels of political interest, except for the 'very interested' citizens. By contrast, for highly politically interested citizens, the interaction coefficient was significantly different, and negative. This suggests that, for citizens who declared they were very interested in politics, the effect of policy opinion congruence on trust in the parliament is smaller than for all other citizens.

The nature and magnitude of the moderating effect of political interest are illustrated by Figure 2, which displays the citizens' predicted values for trust in the parliament at different levels of policy opinion congruence, depending on their levels of political interest. It confirms that, contrary to our expectations, policy opinion congruence has a large effect on trust for all respondents expect for very politically interested ones. Moreover, Figure 2 shows that the effect of congruence on political trust is no longer statistically significant for the very politically interested citizens. In other words, regardless of whether their policy

preferences are congruent with those of their party's legislators, the level of trust for very politically interested citizens remains stable. Therefore, our third hypothesis was rejected by the data. The implications of this finding will be discussed further in the following section.

Finally, we conducted a series of robustness checks. We first re-estimated the parameters of each model using a new operationalisation for our dependent variable, which is the proximity between a citizen's position and the majority preference in the parliament. We expected trust to be positively related to that collectivist measure of congruence (Kim, 2009). The results continue to support our previous findings: citizens whose positions match the majority position in the parliament have a higher level of trust, except for very politically interested citizens (Appendix 3). We then replicated our models with a continuous measure of congruence instead of a dichotomous one. For each statement we compared citizens' positions with the percentage of MPs from their party who agreed with the statement in question.[6] That measurement allowed us to account for political party division. The results are presented in Appendices 4 (citizen–party congruence) and 5 (citizen–parliament congruence) and lead to a similar conclusion.

5 Discussion and Conclusion

Following a recent stream of literature on the attitudinal effects of political representation, our research aimed at investigating the linkage between policy opinion congruence and citizens' level of trust in parliament. This article, therefore, contributes to the literature that studies parliamentary representation from citizens' perspective (Mayne & Hakhverdian, 2017; Stecker & Tausendpfund, 2016). However, contrary to much of the work on citizens' satisfaction with democracy, we focused our attention on trust in the parliament, which can be considered as a more specific measure of support towards one crucial institution of modern representative democracies. Our article further contributes to the literature by measuring opinion congruence on specific policy issues. To that end, we used a data set collected in Belgium in which both citizens and legislators gave their opinion on eight different policy statements.

In our research we investigated the extent to which a lack of policy opinion congruence for citizens is associated with their level of trust in the parliament. In that regard, we found that policy opinion congruence matters. The more citizens' policy preferences are congruent with those of their party's legislators, the more they tend to trust the parliament. In that regard, the growing levels of inequalities in representation documented both in the United States and in Europe (e.g. Bartels, 2008; Rosset et al., 2013) cannot be analysed in a black box. They are likely to have a direct and important effect on how much citizens trust representative institutions and, therefore, on the extent to which they will find policy decisions legitimate (Marien & Hooghe, 2011).

We further expected the relationship between policy opinion congruence and trust in the parliament to be moderated by certain individual characteristics.

Because a higher level of education may increase an individual's capacity to identify levels of congruence, we expected the effect of policy opinion congruence on trust to be larger for highly educated citizens. This hypothesis was rejected by the data. Indeed, our analyses provided no evidence that education is a moderator of the relationship between congruence and trust in the parliament. This finding contradicts that of Mayne and Hakhverdian (2017, p. 836), who showed that there is "evidence that ideological congruence has a larger effect on the higher educated than on the less educated".

We suggest three potential explanations for these divergent findings, all of them related to the operationalisation of our variables. First, we measured opinion congruence on specific policy issues instead of on the more abstract left–right axis. It is possible that citizens with higher levels of education are indeed cognitively more capable of gauging their congruence on an abstract left–right scale (see e.g. Lesschaeve, 2017), which thus affects their level of political support more significantly. However, our findings suggest that all citizens, regardless of their education level, are likely to have some knowledge of their representatives' position on specific policy issues. Second, we operationalised political support as trust in the parliament and not as satisfaction with democracy. One cannot rule out that the highly educated, who often report higher levels of support for democratic principles (Dalton, 2004), are 'even more' satisfied with democracy when they are congruent with their representatives. By contrast, when looking at a more specific indicator of support, we found that trust in the parliament is affected by policy opinion congruence for all citizens, independently of their educational level.

Finally, while Mayne and Hakhverdian (2017) used education as a proxy for political sophistication, we argue that education may capture cognitive abilities but not necessarily political sophistication. For that reason, we also tested the moderating effect of political interest, a well-established indicator of political sophistication[7] (Gallina et al., 2020). We expected the effect of policy opinion congruence on trust in the parliament to be larger for politically interested citizens. However, we found no evidence of this. On the contrary, the individual level of policy opinion congruence had no effect on political trust for citizens who are very interested in politics, while it had a significant effect for all the other respondents.[8]

Previous research has found that politically interested citizens are more likely to have higher levels of trust in the parliament (Holmberg et al., 2017). Our results led us to distinguish further between citizens who are 'interested' and those who are 'very interested'. Although both groups have quite similar levels of trust in the parliament, only very politically interested citizens have a level of trust that is not affected by their level of congruence. Put differently, citizens with a very high level of interest in politics have a 'stock' of political trust that, according to our analysis, continues to be significantly high, regardless of the quality of representation. We propose two main explanations for this finding, but further research is needed to back up these claims. First, it may be related to the fact that highly interested citizens, compared with all other respondents, are more likely to understand the constraints of multidimensional representative politics. Therefore, although they may perceive the incongruence between their

views and those of their representatives on a specific set of policy statements, they simultaneously acknowledge that perfect opinion congruence in a multidimensional political environment is extremely rare. Second, it may be that highly interested citizens have a bias 'in favour of' representative institutions and, therefore, their level of trust does not necessarily result from an evaluation of the quality of representation.

Our results are reassuring as well as worrying. On the one hand, trust in the parliament for less politically interested citizens is affected by the extent to which their party's political representatives share their views. Although our study did not test a direct causal mechanism between low levels of representation and political distrust, it nevertheless shows that trust in the parliament is responsive to the way citizens' policy preferences are reflected in the legislature. By contrast, very politically interested citizens do not have different attitudes depending upon their level of policy opinion congruence.

Our findings have implications for further research. First, the unexpected findings regarding the moderating effect of education signal the need for additional studies. In that regard, further research should draw on both measures of political support (satisfaction with democracy and political trust) and use several indicators of congruence (left–right axis and specific issues) in order to better disentangle the different effects of education. Second, the moderating effect of political interest should also be further investigated. In that regard, future studies should focus on distinguishing objective and subjective congruence. Indeed, integrating both perceived congruence and objective congruence in a single research design would help determine whether the very politically interested have a more accurate knowledge of their congruence and, therefore, whether they continue to trust political representatives even though they know their legislators are incongruent. Finally, policy opinion congruence was measured on a limited number of statements, and we acknowledge that our study would benefit from including more of them. This would provide more robust results and allow us to test issue-level characteristics, such as salience.

Notes

1 The POLPOP project is a collaboration examining politicians' perceptions initiated by Stefaan Walgrave from the University of Antwerp and funded by the Flemish national science foundation (FWO: grant number G012517N). In Francophone Belgium, it is led by Jean-Benoit Pilet and Nathalie Brack (ULB).

2 There is a small bias in favour of older and higher educated citizens, something that we account for in our analysis. More information about the representativeness of the sample is presented in Appendix 1.

3 The eight statements were as follows: 'National armies should be replaced by one European army'; 'Voting should remain compulsory'; 'The most polluting cars should be forbidden in cities'; 'Company cars should be more heavily taxed'; 'The right to strike should be restricted'; 'Belgium should never expel someone to a country where

human rights are violated'; 'The full income of all parliamentarians should be published yearly'; 'The retirement age may not exceed 67 years'.

4 Except for the party PTB, as only regional MPs responded to the survey. However, we are confident about the reliability of this measure as the average majority positions of federal and regional MPs are identical most of the time in our data set. Regional and federal legislators disagreed in only 5 out of 104 party issue dyads (4.8%).

5 Including the variables of *age* as well as *education* in our models allowed us to control for a potential overrepresentation of these groups in the sample.

6 The score for each statement has been computed as follows: congruence = 1 - | c - p |, where c is the position of the citizen (1 if agrees and 0 otherwise), and p is the percentage of MPs (from the party the respondent voter for) who agree. The final variable is, for each citizen, the average of the citizen's scores on the eight policy statements.

7 Descriptive statistics from our sample confirm that, although political interest and education are positively correlated, it is still the case that 42.77% of highly politically interested citizens have a low level of education.

8 This finding is robust as it holds when testing with citizens' declared level of political information, another key component of political sophistication (see Appendix 2).

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Appendix

Appendix 1 Representativity of the Sample and Descriptive Statistics of the Variables of the Model

Flanders			**Wallonia**		
Gender	Population	Sample	Gender	Population	Sample
Male	0.4946	0.4991	Male	0.4946	0.4612
Female	0.5054	0.5009	Female	0.5054	0.5388
Education	Population	Sample	Education	Population	Sample
None or primary school	0.2317	0.0636	None or primary school	0.3050	0.0853
Secondary school	0.4008	0.5210	Secondary school	0.3455	0.4759
Age category	Population	Sample	Age category	Population	Sample
18-24	0.1317	0.0921	18-24	0.1470	0.0912
25-34	0.1472	0.1286	25-34	0.1687	0.1648
35-44	0.1520	0.1408	35-44	0.1645	0.1580
45-54	0.1704	0.1735	45-54	0.1685	0.1775
55-64	0.1616	0.2460	55-64	0.1514	0.2116
65-74	0.1238	0.1871	65-74	0.1132	0.1706
75-84	0.0797	0.0295	75-84	0.0640	0.0234
85-94	0.0336	0.0023	85-94	0.0226	0.0029
Party	Population	Sample	Party	Population	Sample
Groen	0.0742	0.0795	PS	0.2481	0.2243
Spa	0.1211	0.1197	MR	0.2050	0.2238
CD&V	0.1602	0.1034	Ecolo	0.0701	0.0922
Open VLD	0.1336	0.0833	cdH	0.1060	0.0692
N-VA	0.2798	0.3391	PTB-GO	0.0419	0.0741
Vlaams Belang	0.0502	0.0879	DéFI	0.0334	0.0273
PvdA	0.0245	0.0327	PP	0.0323	0.0190
Other	0.0190	0.0187	Other	0.0585	0.0614
Did not vote	0.0938	0.1356	Did not vote	0.1253	0.2087

Descriptive Statistics: Variables of the Models

Statistic	N	Mean	St. Dev.	Min	Pctl(25)	Pctl(75)	Max
Congruence	3,125	0.665	0.206	0.000	0.500	0.833	1.000
Female	4,745	0.539	0.499	0.000	0.000	1.000	1.000
Age	4,760	48.872	16.279	18	35	62	107
Extremism	4,746	1.725	1.601	0.108	0.108	2.892	5.108
Flanders	4,760	0.502	0.500	0	0	1	1
Electoral winner	4,760	0.335	0.472	0	0	1	1

Descriptive Statistics: Distribution of Political Interest

	Freq	% Valid	% Valid Cum.	% Total	% Total Cum.
Not at all interested	778	16.393	16.393	16.345	16.345
Not interested	656	13.822	30.215	13.782	30.126
Somewhat interested	1,861	39.212	69.427	39.097	69.223
Interested	1,118	23.557	92.984	23.487	92.710
Very interested	333	7.016	100	6.996	99.706
<NA>	14			0.294	100
Total	4,760	100	100	100	100

Appendix 2 Models Predicting the Level of Political Trust Among Belgian Citizens – Main Independent Variable: Political Information

The political information item in the Belgian POLPOP reads as follows: "To what extent are you, in general, informed about politics? Where would you place yourself on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means that you are not at all aware of politics, and 10 that you are fully aware of politics?" We treat the variable as a continuous variable.

			Trust in Parliament	
	Model 1	**Model 2**	**Model 3**	**Model 4**
Congruence	0.779***	1.278***	1.405***	3.371***
	(0.209)	(0.227)	(0.302)	(0.606)
Ageo		−0.003	0.004	−0.004
		(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)
Female		0.147	−0.097	0.153*
		(0.093)	(0.093)	(0.092)
Income (middle)		0.133	0.185	0.143
		(0.112)	(0.115)	(0.111)
Income (high)		0.132	0.280**	0.191
		(0.122)	(0.124)	(0.119)
Electoral winner		1.069***	1.133***	1.075***
		(0.099)	(0.101)	(0.098)
Extremism		−0.108***	−0.032	−0.108***
		(0.030)	(0.030)	(0.030)
Flanders		0.099	0.034	0.068
		(0.094)	(0.096)	(0.094)
Congruence × Education (high)			0.121	
			(0.447)	
Education (high)		0.227**	0.272	
		(0.093)	(0.313)	
Congruence × Political_information				−0.348***
				(0.098)
Political information		0.270***		0.507***
		(0.023)		(0.068)
Constant	3.630***	1.305***	2.272***	0.003
	(0.146)	(0.257)	(0.280)	(0.444)
N	3,120	2,624	2,630	2,631
R-squared	0.004	0.123	0.074	0.126
Adj. R-squared	0.004	0.119	0.071	0.122

(Continued)

	Trust in Parliament			
	Model 1	**Model 2**	**Model 3**	**Model 4**
Residual Std. Error	2.410 (df = 3,118)	2.277 (df = 2,613)	2.337 (df = 2,619)	2.276 (df = 2,620)
F Statistic	13.905*** (df = 1; 3,118)	36.523*** (df = 10; 2,613)	21.037*** (df = 10; 2,619)	37.607*** (df = 10; 2,620)

***p < 0.01; **p < 0.05; *p < 0.1

Appendix 3 Models Predicting the Level of Political Trust Among Belgian Citizens – Citizen–Parliament Collective Congruence

	Trust in Parliament			
	Model 1	**Model 2**	**Model 3**	**Model 4**
Congruence	1.440***	1.295***	1.775***	1.182***
	(0.186)	(0.201)	(0.266)	(0.445)
Age		−0.010***	−0.004	−0.010***
		(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)
Female		−0.067	−0.232***	−0.045
		(0.079)	(0.080)	(0.079)
Income (middle)		0.114	0.157	0.125
		(0.093)	(0.096)	(0.093)
Income (high)		0.160	0.264**	0.222**
		(0.103)	(0.106)	(0.102)
Electoral winner		0.977***	1.115***	0.989***
		(0.087)	(0.089)	(0.087)
Extremism		−0.073***	−0.026	−0.076***
		(0.025)	(0.025)	(0.025)
Flanders		0.092	0.136	0.060
		(0.081)	(0.084)	(0.081)
Higher education		0.240***	0.761***	
		(0.081)	(0.289)	
Political interest (Not interested)		1.117***		0.833*
		(0.145)		(0.448)
Political interest (Somewhat interested)		1.677***		1.481***
		(0.118)		(0.367)
Political interest (Interested)		1.911***		1.700***
		(0.132)		(0.415)
Political interest (Very interested)		1.843***		3.142***
		(0.178)		(0.589)
Congruence × Education (high)			−0.596	
			(0.421)	
Congruence × Political interest (Not interested)				0.490
				(0.680)
Congruence × Political interest (Somewhat interested)				0.330

(Continued)

	Trust in Parliament			
	Model 1	**Model 2**	**Model 3**	**Model 4**
				(0.557)
Congruence × Political interest (Interested)				0.395
				(0.616)
Congruence × Political interest (Very interested)				−1.780**
				(0.845)
Constant	2.984***	1.716***	2.379***	1.849***
	(0.127)	(0.204)	(0.223)	(0.316)
N	4,520	3,631	3,631	3,647
R-squared	0.013	0.143	0.084	0.142
Adj. R-squared	0.013	0.140	0.081	0.138
Residual Std. Error	2.460 (df = 4,518)	2.304 (df = 3,617)	2.382 (df = 3,620)	2.309 (df = 3,630)
F Statistic	59.721*** (df = 1; 4,518)	46.551*** (df = 13; 3,617)	33.112*** (df = 10; 3,620)	37.612*** (df = 16; 3,630)

***p < 0.01; **p < 0.05; *p < 0.1; Standard errors in parentheses.

Appendix 4 Models Predicting the Level of Political Trust Among Belgian Citizens – Citizen–Party Congruence (Scale)

			Trust in the Parliament	
	Model 1	**Model 2**	**Model 3**	**Model 4**
Congruence	1.284***	2.177***	2.180***	3.910***
	(0.285)	(0.318)	(0.416)	(0.997)
Age		−0.002	0.004	−0.003
		(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)
Female		0.041	−0.114	0.058
		(0.095)	(0.095)	(0.095)
Income (middle)		0.156	0.164	0.178
		(0.115)	(0.118)	(0.114)
Income (high)		0.169	0.247*	0.242**
		(0.124)	(0.127)	(0.122)
Electoral winner		1.118***	1.167***	1.134***
		(0.104)	(0.107)	(0.104)
Extremism		−0.064**	−0.017	−0.064**
		(0.031)	(0.031)	(0.031)
Flanders		−0.144	−0.122	−0.187*
		(0.096)	(0.099)	(0.096)
Education (high)		0.255***	0.020	
		(0.095)	(0.400)	
Political interest (Not interested)		1.047***		1.383*
		(0.205)		(0.822)
Political interest (Somewhat interested)		1.681***		2.684***
		(0.167)		(0.683)
Political interest (Interested)		1.924***		2.967***
		(0.179)		(0.721)
Political interest (Very interested)		1.855***		4.614***
		(0.223)		(0.895)
Congruence × Higher education			0.525	
			(0.611)	
Congruence × Political interest (Not interested)				−0.549
				(1.316)
Congruence × Political interest (Somewhat interested)				−1.637

(Continued)

	Trust in the Parliament			
	Model 1	**Model 2**	**Model 3**	**Model 4**
				(1.092)
Congruence × Political interest (Interested)				−1.663
				(1.142)
Congruence × Political interest (Very interested)				−4.184***
				(1.367)
Constant	3.421***	0.820***	1.922***	−0.133
	(0.186)	(0.300)	(0.327)	(0.643)
N	2,934	2,466	2,466	2,472
R-squared	0.007	0.123	0.075	0.124
Adj. R-squared	0.007	0.118	0.071	0.118
Residual Std. Error	2.386 (df = 2,932)	2.258 (df = 2,452)	2.317 (df = 2,455)	2.260 (df = 2,455)
F Statistic	20.289*** (df = 1; 2,932)	26.371*** (df = 13; 2,452)	19.945*** (df = 10; 2,455)	21.721*** (df = 16; 2,455)

***p < 0.01; **p < 0.05; *p < 0.1; Standard errors in parentheses.

Appendix 5 Models Predicting the Level of Political Trust Among Belgian Citizens – Citizen–Parliament Collective Congruence (Scale)

			Trust in the Parliament	
	Model 1	**Model 2**	**Model 3**	**Model 4**
Congruence	1.284***	2.177***	2.180***	3.910***
	(0.285)	(0.318)	(0.416)	(0.997)
Age		−0.002	0.004	−0.003
		(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)
Female		0.041	−0.114	0.058
		(0.095)	(0.095)	(0.095)
Income (middle)		0.156	0.164	0.178
		(0.115)	(0.118)	(0.114)
Income (high)		0.169	0.247*	0.242**
		(0.124)	(0.127)	(0.122)
Electoral winner		1.118***	1.167***	1.134***
		(0.104)	(0.107)	(0.104)
Extremism		−0.064**	−0.017	−0.064**
		(0.031)	(0.031)	(0.031)
Flanders		−0.144	−0.122	−0.187*
		(0.096)	(0.099)	(0.096)
Education (high)		0.255***	0.020	
		(0.095)	(0.400)	
Political interest (Not interested)		1.047***		1.383*
		(0.205)		(0.822)
Political interest (Somewhat interested)		1.681***		2.684***
		(0.167)		(0.683)
Political interest (Interested)		1.924***		2.967***
		(0.179)		(0.721)
Political interest (Very interested)		1.855***		4.614***
		(0.223)		(0.895)
Congruence × Higher education			0.525	
			(0.611)	
Congruence × Political interest (Not interested)				−0.549
				(1.316)
Congruence × Political interest (Somewhat interested)				−1.637

(Continued)

	Trust in the Parliament			
	Model 1	**Model 2**	**Model 3**	**Model 4**
				(1.092)
Congruence × Political interest (Interested)				−1.663
				(1.142)
Congruence × Political interest (Very interested)				−4.184***
				(1.367)
Constant	3.421***	0.820***	1.922***	−0.133
	(0.186)	(0.300)	(0.327)	(0.643)
N	2,934	2,466	2,466	2,472
R-squared	0.007	0.123	0.075	0.124
Adj. R-squared	0.007	0.118	0.071	0.118
Residual Std. Error	2.386 (df = 2,932)	2.258 (df = 2,452)	2.317 (df = 2,455)	2.260 (df = 2,455)
F Statistic	20.289*** (df = 1; 2,932)	26.371*** (df = 13; 2,452)	19.945*** (df = 10; 2,455)	21.721*** (df = 16; 2,455)

***p < 0.01; **p < 0.05; *p < 0.1; Standard errors in parentheses.

Cancelling proposed debates

Agenda Setting, Issue Ownership and Anti-elitist Parliamentary Style[*]

Simon Otjes & Roy Doedens[**]

Abstract

The Dutch Tweede Kamer is unique among parliaments because here the agenda is actually determined in a public, plenary meeting of all MPs. In the Dutch Tweede Kamer 30 members of parliament (MPs) can request a plenary debate. Many opposition parties request these debates, but only 23% of these are actually held. We examine the question 'under what conditions do political party groups cancel or maintain proposals for minority debates?' as a way to gain insight into the black box of parliamentary agenda setting. We examine two complementary explanations: issue competition and parliamentary style. We trace all 687 minority debates that were proposed between 2012 and 2021 in the Netherlands. This allows us to see what proposals for debates MPs make and when they are retracted. We find strong evidence that anti-elitist parties maintain more debate proposals than do other parties

Keywords: agenda-setting, parliaments, anti-elitism, issue-ownership.

You could also have withdrawn the debate, because it is no longer relevant. Or am I mistaken? (Handelingen van de Tweede Kamer der Staten Generaal II 2013/14, no.9, item 16, p. 1).

1 Introduction

One of the least noteworthy moments in the career of a member of parliament (MP) is perhaps the announcement that a 30-member debate they have requested has been withdrawn. This decision is announced pro forma by the Speaker during

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the agenda-setting meeting. The insignificance of this moment is further emphasised by the fact that the MP does not need to be present at that moment, does not need to justify their choice and that a withdrawal rarely leads to discussion.

For political scientists, however, these moments offer unique insight into agenda setting – a crucial but often unobserved element of politics. The Dutch parliament is the only European parliament where decisions about the agenda are made in public. In other parliaments these decisions are made behind the closed doors of the Speaker's office. This Dutch exception allows us to directly see politicians exercising their agenda-setting power (Döring, 1995). Furthermore, withdrawals provide insight into the decision to ultimately keep something of the parliamentary agenda: a kind of non-decision-making that is often even less visible (Lukes, 2004). Yet this is a crucial expression of power. If an issue is not discussed it is impossible to consider or discuss alternatives to the status quo (Otjes, 2019).

Because in most European parliaments the agenda is decided behind closed doors (Döring, 1995), studies on parliamentary agenda setting are often based on oral or written questions from MPs to the executive (Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2010; Green-Pedersen & Stubager, 2010; Meijers & Van der Veer, 2019; Thesen, 2013; Van de Wardt, 2015; Vliegenthart & Walgrave, 2011). There are two key limitations to this kind of study. First, they do not examine how the plenary agenda is actually determined. In essence, they focus on a sideshow: MPs ask oral and written questions on issues that do not make it into the plenary. If an issue makes it onto the plenary floor, there is no need to ask written questions. Written questions rarely receive direct attention from actors outside of parliament (Green-Pedersen, 2010), and they do not have tangible consequences (Walgrave et al., 2007). Secondly, one cannot see how political parties interact with and respond to each other in the agenda-setting process (Otjes, 2019). Parliamentary questions allow us to see what issues parties focus on without any formal constraints. But it is precisely dealing with these constraints that makes agenda-setting research challenging: you can only see a party's true priorities when they are making decisions under constraints, in particular when time is a scarce resource (Döring, 1995).

The agenda-setting meeting of the *Tweede Kamer* therefore offers a unique possibility to study parliamentary agenda setting. However, this opportunity has been used remarkably rarely. Otjes (2019) is the only study that has analysed the agenda-setting meetings in detail. This study has two key limitations. First, it ignores the fact that agenda setting is a two-stage process, in which debates are requested and actually held. While Otjes (2019) studies the former in detail, it does not study which debates are actually held. It therefore cannot make definitive statements about control over the agenda, since 77% of the successfully requested 30-member debates are withdrawn before they are held. Understanding the conditions under which MPs cancel debates is crucial to understanding who effectively controls the plenary agenda. Secondly, that study approached agenda setting from the perspective of issue competition (e.g. Green-Pedersen, 2007). It neglects other complementary insights from the broader field of political science, in particular the relation between anti-elitism and the use of parliamentary instruments (Louwerse & Otjes, 2019; Otjes & Louwerse, 2021a). It is

therefore relevant to inquire into the link between political style and the use of 30-member debates. Therefore, our central research question is, *when do parliamentary groups cancel thirty-member debates?*

The rest of this article has the following structure: first, we discuss the existing literature on agenda setting focusing on issue competition and look into lessons we can learn from anti-elitism. We then look at the Dutch case and discuss the possibilities of and limitations to generalisation from this case. On the basis of the theoretical and case-specific discussion, we formulate two hypotheses. Next, we discuss our research design. We then look at the result of the analysis. In the conclusion, we discuss the broader theoretical relevance of our results.

2 Theory

This study examines whether parties actually hold the debates that they request. This is part of a two-stage agenda-setting process. The first stage of this process, requesting (30-member) debates, has been studied in depth in Otjes (2019). The present study examines the second stage: actually holding these debates. We assume that some of the mechanisms behind requesting and holding debates are the same, specifically, our two key explanations: issue ownership and anti-elitism.

2.1 Issue Ownership

Most research studying parliamentary agenda setting focuses on issue competition. Issue competition understands politics as a struggle between political actors on the question of which policy issues should dominate the political agenda (Budge, 2015; Green-Pedersen, 2007; Inglehart & Klingemann, 1976; Petrocik, 1996; Robertson, 1976). In this view, political competition concerns the question of which issue is emphasised, rather than the direct confrontation on those issues. Issues on the political agenda are hierarchically ordered, with some issues receiving more attention than others. Once policy issues are on the political agenda, political actors are constrained, since political parties and MPs sense that they have to address the issues that are on the agenda (Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2010).

Political parties compete to place particular issues higher on the political agenda. This motivation can be intrinsic or strategic: a radical right-wing populist party may truly believe that immigration is the greatest crisis facing a country and therefore focus all its parliamentary activity on this issue. It may also be persuaded that this issue benefits them strategically. Politicians have an almost intuitive understanding of which issues benefit them and their party and which do not (Carmines, 1991). Political parties want to draw attention to issues that show themselves as most competent to handle them (Petrocik, 1996) and prefer to make other parties speak on issues on which those parties are not competent (Walgrave et al., 2015).

Political scientists mostly understand this from an electoral perspective (but see Green-Pedersen & Otjes, 2019). The crucial concept here is issue ownership (Walgrave et al., 2012): issue ownership is often understood as the association

voters make between political parties and political issues. For example, most voters associate the environment with green parties and immigration with radical right-wing populist parties. This association partially entails the expectation of voters that specific parties offer the best solutions to specific issues or are most competent to deal with them (Walgrave et al., 2015). Therefore, if a policy issue is particularly salient during an election (e.g. climate), voters are more inclined to vote for the owner of this issue (e.g. a green party). Election results throughout recent decades can be explained increasingly by this process (Green-Pedersen, 2007, 2019).

Political parties work to obtain and maintain issue ownership in their parliamentary work (Otjes & Louwerse, 2018). Parties reinforce the association between themselves and 'their' issues by taking visible initiatives on the issues they own (Green-Pedersen, 2010). They thereby signal to other political parties that those issues are 'theirs', marking their territory. They can also be used by parties to signal to other actors such as interest groups, party activists, journalists and voters that their MPs are 'working' on those issues (Otjes & Louwerse, 2018). A party risks losing issue ownership if it temporarily neglects an issue while another party takes initiatives on it (Holian, 2004). In this sense, the work in parliament is part of a 'permanent election campaign between parties' (Otjes & Louwerse, 2018). Parties are more likely to request parliamentary debates on issues that they own (Otjes, 2019).

2.2 Anti-elitist Parliamentary Style

In their analysis of parliamentary behaviour, Louwerse and Otjes (2019) distinguish between two styles of opposition parties. On the one hand, they see a constructive style where MPs use tools to influence policy: MPs submit amendments to legislation and write private members' bills. On the other hand, they see a critical style where MPs use oversight tools to criticise the government and its policies. This is focused on the assessment of the appropriateness of government action (Auel, 2007, p. 500). This can be done through written and oral questions but also by requesting debates. The extent to which parties use these oversight tools is, in part, a function of the parties' anti-elitism (Louwerse & Otjes, 2019; Otjes & Louwerse, 2021a). We follow Otjes and Louwerse (2021a) in focusing on anti-elitism rather than populism.[1]

To understand the link between anti-elitism and the use of scrutiny tools, we can build on the difference between responsive and responsible politics developed by Mair (2011). Parties can act as responsible actors focused on changing policies through compromise and cooperation, cognisant of the 'small margins' of democratic politics. Parties can also focus on responsive politics. Central to responsive politics is the link between citizens and politicians. Louwerse and Otjes (2019) have applied this distinction to parliamentary politics. Politicians can use parliament as a platform to express public discontent with policies, and scrutiny tools lend themselves particularly well to this responsive style: parliamentary debates can put a spotlight on mistakes made by government actors. Anti-elitism and responsive politics go hand in hand: anti-elitist opposition parties see it as their role to express public discontent with government policies and therefore use their

scrutiny tools more often: to voice their opposition to the parties in power, to direct attention to issues that the current government ignores or to expose incompetence and corruption of governing elites. This makes anti-elitist parties more likely to request parliamentary debates as it allows them to use the plenary floor as their bully pulpit.

3 Case Selection and Description

This article studies 30-member debates in the lower house of the Dutch parliament. In the following section, we explain why we study the Netherlands and what exactly these 30-member debates entail.

3.1 Tweede Kamer

This study examines the *Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal*, the only lower house in Western Europe that has full control over its own agenda (Döring, 1995). In most parliaments the agenda is set by the presidium or the Speaker (Döring, 1995; Yamamoto, 2007, p. 63), in only rare cases does the plenary majority or even a plenary minority decide the agenda. The *Tweede Kamer* is therefore an exceptional case that allows us to gain insight into the agenda-setting process, which usually occurs behind closed doors. The fact that in the *Tweede Kamer* agenda setting occurs in the open makes it likely that the process is different from other countries. For one, requesting a debate is a public activity that in itself signals to other MPs, journalists and the wider public that the party 'owns' that issue. Still, the factors shaping the agenda are likely to transfer to other systems where MPs have to work through more opaque parliamentary decision-making processes to have their debate planned. The incentives of the parties (e.g. to schedule debates on issues that they own) are the same, although the procedures may be more likely to benefit majorities over minorities. Patterns are likely to be similar in the Finnish, Swedish, Danish and Norwegian parliaments and the German and Belgian lower houses because in these multiparty systems the parliamentary majority can overrule the Speaker or presidium (Döring, 1995).

3.2 Thirty-member Debates

We focus on 30-member debates. These are debates that can be put on the agenda with the approval of only 30 of 150 MPs. There are many different types of parliamentary debates, the most prominent ones being legislative debates, majority debates, reports on committee meetings and 30-member debates (Otjes & Louwerse, 2021b). Legislative debate concerns legislation, while the other three kinds of debate concern policy in more general terms. The first three debates require a majority to plan, the last a minority.[2] Plenary debates are important not only because they allow parties to voice their opinion, but also for parties to propose motions that can then be voted on. Reports on committee meetings are short follow-ups to committee meetings meant specifically to allow for the introduction of motions.

These 30-member debates are riddled with contradictions. They were originally called 'urgent debates' (*spoeddebatten*) as they would allow MPs and ministers to discuss urgent issues that sprang up in society. The low threshold set for requesting these debates brought forth many requests for them. Yet because of the large number of requests, it was often long before these debates were held.[3] The urgency of the request often disappeared by the time the issue came up on the agenda, and opportunities to discuss the matter in other plenary or committee debates may have come up. Therefore, many debates were cancelled. As we will see in greater detail later, about 23% of these debates are held and 77% cancelled. On average, a debate is cancelled 180 days (almost 6 months) after requesting it. Since 2011, these debates have been called 30-member debates. This reflects the new consensus that these debates rank low in importance when compared with majority debates and therefore are not scheduled soon. Plenary debates are requested during the agenda-setting meeting, which is held every day at the start of the plenary meeting. A major agenda-setting meeting is held on Tuesday at the beginning of the parliamentary week. The Speaker also uses these planning meetings to announce which debates are cancelled by the MPs who requested them. The debate request we study here may share some similarity with urgent questions and interpellations that many parliaments have (Yamamoto, 2007, pp. 52, 59-61): here a minority of the parliament can ask a minister for information or clarification on government policy.[4]

We focus on two parliamentary terms to look at the withdrawal of these requests: 2012-2017 and 2017-2021. Thirty-member debates were introduced in May 2004, and since then only these two parliamentary terms have been completed. If the parliamentary term ends prematurely, debates scheduled to be held later in the parliamentary terms are likely to be cancelled. During these terms the Netherlands had a centrist Liberal-Labor coalition and a centre-right cabinet of the Liberal Party, the social-liberal Democrats '66, the Christian Union and Christian-Democratic Appeal. The parties in parliament are listed in Table 2.

4 Hypotheses

We base our hypotheses on both our preceding theoretical discussion and the specific characteristics of the Dutch systems and the 30-member debates. First, given the strong link between issue ownership and debate requests (Otjes, 2019), we can conclude that MPs request debates in order to signal to other political players (other parties, interest groups, media, citizens) that they are working on a specific issue. They are a way to build and maintain issue ownership (Otjes & Louwerse, 2018). Requesting a debate is a way of attracting attention,[5] and once they are requested, parties are also more likely to actually hold debates on issues that they own. These are more important to the parties both intrinsically and strategically. Therefore, we expect that:

1. Issue-ownership hypothesis: the more salient an issue is to a political party, the more likely the party is to maintain a minority debate on that topic.

Second, as we saw previously, anti-elitist parties have an incentive to use scrutiny tools. Thirty-member debates, in particular, tend to revolve around democratic scrutiny rather than policymaking. The key question in these debates often is 'is the position of the minister tenable?' (Van der Heiden, 2006). This makes them important tools for opposition parties that focus on scrutiny. As Socialist Party MP Paul Ulenbelt said:

> It is important to discuss laws, but opposing the government by means of [thirty-member debates] is as important … It is our job to increase pressure. If we don't poke and prod the coalition, they will become complacent.[6]

This also makes these 'responsive' opposition parties less likely to cancel debates; they are less likely to abandon the tools that allow them to voice discontent. Moreover, given the pressure on the plenary agenda, unfulfilled debate requests serve as currency when bargaining with the Speaker. In the plenary we can see some of this wheeling and dealing; removing a 30-member debate from the ever-growing list may be a reason for the Speaker to extend speaking times in another debate or to schedule that debate sooner. A large part of this wheeling and dealing, however, occurs outside of the plenary floor and cannot be studied systematically. If an earlier opportunity to propose the motion comes along, constructive parties may be more likely to withdraw their debate request. Therefore, we expect that:

2. Anti-elitism hypothesis: the more anti-elitist a political party is, the more likely it is to maintain a minority debate.

5 Methods

We coded all requests made for 30-member debates between the start of the parliamentary term in 2012 (20 September 2012) and the start of the election recess in 2021 (12 February 2021). Each 30-member debate was requested during an agenda-setting meeting. For each one we traced whether the debate was held or not: we checked whether a debate with the name that was entered in the long-term agenda after the request was part of the floor proceedings using the search engine of officielebekendmakingen.nl. At the end of both parliamentary terms all debate requests for 30-members were cancelled. This binary variable is our dependent variable.[7] Table 1 lists the descriptives of variables used in the analyses.

We employ a number of independent variables: our first hypothesis is that the more a party prioritises the issue for debate, the less likely it is to retract the debate. To measure issue ownership, we used the election manifestos of parties. The share of a party's manifesto that concerns a particular issue is a good predictor of the extent to which voters consider a party an issue owner (Walgrave & de Swert, 2007). The subjects of the debate requests and party election manifestos were all coded in the same scheme (the Comparative Agenda Project scheme, see

Table 1 Descriptive Table

Variable	Mean	Median	S.D.	Min.	Max.	Low	High
Debate held	0.23	–	–	0	1	Not held	Held
Seats	12.42	14.00	5.64	2	41	2 Seats	41 Seats
Coalition	0.05	–	–	0	1	Opposition	Coalition
Left-right distance	3.21	3.39	1.65	0.21	5.26	Close to coalition mean	Far from coalition mean
CHES anti-elitism	4.91	5.92	2.89	1.00	9.91	Anti-elitism not important at all	Anti-elitism extremely important
PopuList populism	0.43	–	–	0.00	1.00	Not populist	Populist
Pauwels anti-elitism	0.16	0.12	0.12	0.04	0.48	No anti-elitist rhetoric	High anti-elitist rhetoric
Share of manifesto	0.08	0.07	0.05	0.00	0.40	Low priority	High priority
Number of debates on the list	56.04	48	31.58	0	120	No debates	Many debates
Years into term	1.80	1.65	0.94	0.17	4.24	Early in term	Late in term
Period = 2017	0.54	–	–	0.00	1.00	2012-2017	2017-2021

N = 687.

Appendix 1). For the manifestos we relied on Green-Pedersen and Otjes (2019), and for the debate requests we coded these ourselves.[8] This coding allowed us to link each debate request to the extent to which the requesting party prioritised the issue. We used the election manifestos from the start of the parliamentary term (2012 for 2012-2017 and 2017 for 2017-2021).

Our second hypothesis is that parties that use more anti-elite rhetoric are more likely to maintain their debate requests. We measure this using the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) (Polk et al., 2017), which includes a variable that measures the extent to which anti-elite rhetoric is salient for the parties. This goes from 0 (not important at all) to 10 (extremely important). We assigned parties the level of anti-elite rhetoric from the CHES closest to the start of the parliamentary terms (2014 for the 2012-2017 and 2019 for 2017-2021). We checked the reliability of these results by using two alternative measures: the first is whether the party was classified as populist by the PopuList team (Rooduijn et al., 2019), and the second was whether the party used anti-elite rhetoric in their election manifestos using the list of Pauwels (2011).[9]

In addition to issue competition and anti-elitism, other factors also affect parliamentary behaviour. Here we present six control variables. First, government participation. Opposition parties have to use their parliamentary tools to reach their strategic and policy goals, while coalition parties have access to the

tools and benefits of the executive to attain their goals. Their ministers can take executive actions to enact policy change and have easier access to the media that allows them to direct attention to an issue. Moreover, coalition parties have an interest in maintaining cohesion within the coalition internally (while fighting out policy disagreements behind closed doors). This ensures the stability of the coalition and the image of cohesion and competence in the eyes of voters (Boston & Bullock, 2012). Parliamentary debates highlight and politicise disagreements within the coalition. Opposition parties are therefore more likely to request debates than coalition parties (Otjes, 2019). We also expect that *opposition parties are more likely to maintain minority debate requests than coalition parties*. Therefore, we include whether or not parties are in the coalition (as a binary variable).

Second, the ideology of parties may also play a role. Policy-driven opposition parties are less likely to propose policy change when the coalition is ideologically close to them. The greater the ideological difference between a party and the coalition, the more likely that they will disagree with actions of the coalition and therefore request debates to challenge their decisions or point out the consequences of their policies. This explains why parties that are further from the coalition request more debates (Otjes, 2019). We also expect that *parties whose preferences are further from the coalition mean are more likely to maintain minority debate requests than parties whose preferences are closer to the coalition mean*. We include distance from the government in the model. To this end we look at the absolute distance between the party and the coalition in terms of the left-right distance variable from the CHES (Polk et al., 2017). We compare the party position with the seat-weighted coalition mean (at the beginning of the period).

The capacity of parliamentary party groups also differs. A parliamentary party group with more MPs will have more time to prepare and participate in debates than parties with fewer MPs. A smaller parliamentary party group may therefore choose to participate in fewer debates than a larger parliamentary party group. Given the agenda pressure that members of these smaller groups experience, *smaller parliamentary party groups are less likely to maintain minority debate requests*. Therefore, we include party size in the models (in terms of the number of seats they have in parliament when the debate was requested),

We also include three controls related to the timing of the debate request. These are mechanisms specific to the second stage of agenda setting, because a key condition of holding a debate is the availability of time in the plenary. We expect that *minority debates requested when there are fewer minority debates on the list of minority debates are more likely to be held than minority debates requested when there are more minority debates on the list of minority debates*. In that case the parliamentary calendar simply offers more possibilities to hold debates. We therefore include the number of days in between the debate request and the start of the parliamentary term, the number of debates that were requested before the debate was requested and that were not cancelled or held yet. We can expect that *minority debates requested earlier in the parliamentary term are more likely to be held than minority debates requested later in the parliamentary term*. It simply is the case that there are opportunities to actually hold the debate if it is requested earlier. We also include a dummy for the parliamentary period in which the debate was

Table 2 Debate Requests by Party by Period

Period		2012-2017			2017-2021		
Abb.	**Full Name (English)**	**Seats**	**Requests**	**Share Held (%)**	**Seats**	**Requests**	**Share Held (%)**
50PLUS		2	6	50.0	4	14	28.6
CDA	Christian-Democratic Appeal	13	65	20.0	**19**	9	11.1
CU	ChristianUnion	5	11	9.1	**5**	2	0.0
D66	Democrats 66	12	42	7.1	**19**	8	12.5
DENK	Think/Equal	–	–	–	3	11	63.6
FvD	Forum for Democracy	–	–	–	2	4	25.0
GL	GreenLeft	4	16	0.0	14	62	9.7
PVV	Freedom Party	15	62	58.1	20	27	18.5
PvdA	Labor Party	**38**	4	25.0	9	45	20.0
PvdD	Party for the Animals	2	12	41.7	5	42	23.8
SGP	Political Reformed Party	3	2	0.0	3	0	–
SP	Socialist Party	15	95	26.3	14	86	18.6
VVD	Liberal Party	**41**	4	0.0	**33**	1	0.0
Total		150	319	27.3	150	311	19.3

Seats at the start of the term; government parties have their seats in bold; 2017-2021 period excludes debates that were not yet held at the end of the term;
[a] 'Denk' means 'think' in Dutch and 'equal' in Turkish.

requested. We expect that *minority debates requested in the 2017-2021 parliamentary term are less likely to be held than minority debates requested in the 2012-2017 term*. The last year of the 2017-2021 term saw the coronavirus crisis. In response to this, the parliamentary agenda was cleared, and many parties cancelled their debate requests.

Since the dependent variable is binary, the hypotheses are tested by means of a logistic regression. The observations are not truly independent of each other but vary by party in different terms: for example, D66 in the 2017-2021 term has the same coalition status, distance to the government and anti-elitism scores for each of their debate requests. Therefore, we ran the analysis using standard errors clustered at the party-period level.

Table 3 CAP Themes and Debate Requests

#	Theme	2012-2017		2017-2021	
		Share of Proposals (%)	Share of Debates Held (%)	Share of Proposals (%)	Share of Debates Held (%)
1	Macroeconomics	4.4	35.7	2.9	22.2
2	Civil Rights & Migration	9.1	13.8	6.1	26.3
3	Health	19.7	44.4	18.3	10.5
4	Agriculture	4.4	42.9	3.5	27.3
5	Labour	4.7	20.0	5.5	23.5
6	Education	4.4	7.1	4.8	20.0
7	Environment	5.0	12.5	13.8	27.9
8	Energy	2.5	25.0	4.8	20.0
9	Transportation	2.5	25.0	3.5	9.1
10	Law & Crime	10.7	20.6	7.4	17.4
11	Social Welfare	11.0	31.4	4.5	21.4
12	Housing	2.2	28.6	5.5	17.6
13	Domestic Commerce	1.9	16.7	4.5	14.3
14	Defence	2.2	28.6	2.6	12.5
15	Technology	0.0	–	0.0	–
16	Foreign Trade	0.9	33.3	1.0	0.0
17	International Affairs	4.4	35.7	3.9	33.3
18	Government Operations	8.8	14.3	6.8	14.3
19	Nature	1.3	25.0	0.6	50.0
	Total	100.0	27.3	100.0	19.3

The 2017-2021 period excludes debates that were not yet held at the end of the term.

6 Results

Before we turn to our regression results, it may be useful to look at some more descriptive patterns to understand which parties keep and which cancel their debate requests. Table 2 shows the pattern per party, and Table 3 shows the patterns per issue. Table 2 clearly shows that debate requests scale with party size and government status: coalition parties request only a handful of debates (28% or 5% of the total). Smaller parties also request fewer debates than larger parties. We can see that most parties abandon more than 75% of their debate requests: the only exceptions are the pensioners' party, 50PLUS; the party of, by and for bicultural Dutch people, DENK; the radical right-wing populist PVV; and the animal advocacy party, PvdD. The parties that maintain their debates score relatively high on anti-elite rhetoric (mean of 6.6 on the CHES anti-elitism score compared with 3.0 of those who maintain less than 25%). Many other parties (GL, SGP, VVD, CU) cancel *all* their debate requests in one or both periods. This makes it

likely that anti-elitism plays a major role here, although the regression analysis provided further on will allow us to get a better grasp of the underlying patterns.

Table 3 shows the pattern per issue. It shows that most debates are requested on health, the environment, law and crime and social welfare. The share of debates held fluctuates strongly per issue and period. The highest share of debates held can be found for nature during 2017-2021. Here, one of the two requested debates was held. We also see a high share of debates held for healthcare (in 2012-2017), where four out of nine debates are actually held, but this falls to less than one in nine during 2017-2021. The lowest score of debates held is for foreign trade in 2017-2021, where none of the three debates actually requested was held.

Table 4 reports the logistic regressions. We run three models to test the robustness of the anti-elitism variable. We look at three operationalisations of this variable: the CHES anti-elitism scale, the binary PopuList populism scale and the percentage of manifesto devoted to anti-elite words (Pauwels anti-elitism). In the Appendix 1 and 2, we test the robustness further by looking at some analyses without outliers and some interactions.

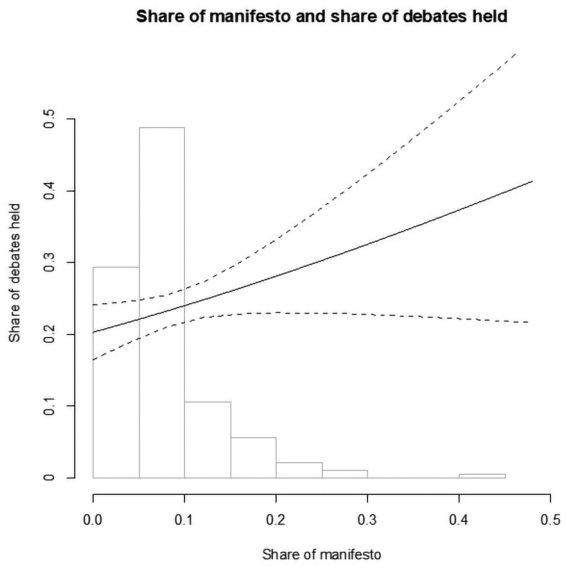
The *issue-ownership hypothesis* proposed that the choice to hold a requested debate reflects issue ownership. Parties are more likely to maintain debates if they 'own' the issue that the debate concerns. All three models point in the same direction, but the effect in Model 2 is stronger than in Models 1 and 3. Figure 1 visualises the results from Model 1. It shows that as parties prioritise an issue more, they are more likely to keep it on the parliamentary agenda. The percentage increases from just below 20% for issues parties do not mention at all in their manifesto to 40% for issues that are half a party's manifesto. The uncertainty also increases strongly in the second half of Figure 1. This means that parties are more likely to maintain a debate on issues that comprise quarter of their manifesto compared with an issue that they do not mention in their manifesto at all. But beyond that there are too few cases to say anything with certainty.

The question is why the results are stronger in Model 2 than in the other models. The reason for this is that we use a binary measure of populism that puts the PvdD in the non-populist category. The PvdD, however, maintained quite a high share of debates, in particular on agriculture, when this was almost a third of their manifesto. In Model 2 this is captured by the share of manifesto variable, while in Models 1 and 3 this is captured by the anti-elitism measures. This does show, however, that an important part of the result for the share of manifesto variable is driven by a limited number of cases. The cases that drive this effect appear to be PvdD and PVV, which devote a larger share of their manifesto to specific issues (agriculture and civil rights and migration). If we drop all the debates requested on issues that encompass more than 20% of the requesting party's election manifesto (26 debates all requested by the PVV and PvdD), the coefficient for party priority is no longer significant in two out of three models (see Appendix 1). This clearly shows that the effect we see in Table 2 and Figure 1 is driven mainly by these outliers. All in all, the *issue-ownership hypothesis* finds only limited support.

Table 4 Logistic Regressions

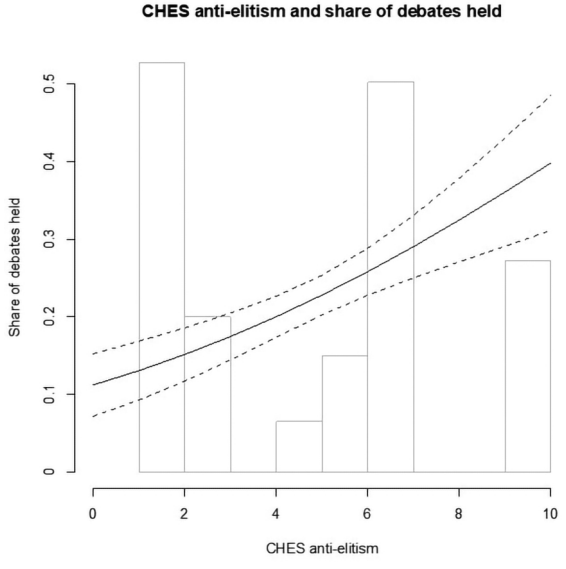
Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Seats	−0.06**	−0.09**	−0.07**
	(0.02)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Coalition	1.09*	0.89	1.07*
	(0.55)	(0.59)	(0.57)
Left-Right Distance	−0.01	−0.04	0.14**
	(0.08)	(0.09)	(0.07)
CHES Anti-elitism	0.19***		
	(0.04)		
PopuList Populism		1.09***	
		(0.37)	
Pauwels Anti-elitism			3.51***
			(0.82)
Share of manifesto	2.68**	4.27***	3.46**
	(1.37)	(1.35)	(1.51)
Years into term	−0.69***	−0.76***	−0.71***
	(0.16)	(0.17)	(0.18)
Number of debates on the list	−0.02***	−0.02***	−0.02***
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.00)
Period = 2017-2021	−0.01	−0.01	−0.07
	(0.05)	(0.07)	(0.05)
Constant	30.35	12.48	139.24
	(109.81)	(138.46)	(96.18)
Log pseudolikelihood	−279.83	−284.23	−282.85
Pseudo *R*-squared	0.18	0.17	0.17
N	630	630	630

Standard errors clustered by party * period; 0.1 < * < 0.05 < ** < 0.01 < ***.



Based on Model 1 with 95% confidence interval and bar reflecting the share of manifesto.

Figure 1 Share of manifesto and share of debates held



Based on Model 1 with 95% confidence interval and bar reflecting the distribution of CHES anti-elitism.

Figure 2 CHES anti-elitism and share of debates held

The *anti-elitism hypothesis* proposed that anti-elitist parties are more likely to keep debates on the books and that this reflects their political style, which

emphasises scrutiny of the government instead of making policy. Figure 2 shows the relationship between anti-elitism and the share of debates. This increases from 10% of the debates for the least anti-elitist parties to 40% for the most anti-elitist parties. The robustness tests reflect the same patterns. If we use the PopuList binary populism measure, we see that the share of debates that were actually held increases from 17% for the non-populist parties to 33% for the populist parties. If we use the Pauwels dictionary-based measure of populism, we see an increase in the share of debates that were actually held, from 16% for the parties that do not use any anti-elitist words to 45% for the parties that use the most anti-elitist words (0.5% of the manifesto devoted to anti-elitist words). This provides strong and consistent evidence for the *anti-elitism hypothesis*. The evidence clearly shows that anti-elitist parties are more likely to keep their debates on the agenda.[10]

We included a number of control variables in the model. A number of them concerned the party that made the request. Here we find only one persistent pattern: smaller parties tend to keep their debates on the agenda, while larger parties are more likely to cancel them. This runs counter to our expectation. Holding a debate that actually got on the agenda might be more important for smaller parties that are less visible, in general, and have less access to traditional media than for larger parties. For these parties getting 30-member debates on the books might also be more difficult because they need the support of other parties. The smallest parties hold 33% of the requested debates, while the largest parties hold only 6%. For coalition participation the results are not consistently significant: government parties maintain more debates than opposition parties, although this result is significant only in Models 1 and 3 and only at the 0.1 level. This suggests that if coalition parties propose a debate, they intend to hold it. For left-right distance the results are not even consistent in terms of the direction or significance. The poor results for ideological distance may be illustrated by the fact that the two parties that were furthest away from the government (SP and GL) behave in opposite ways. The SP maintains a fair share of their debates (more than 23%), while GL cancels most of the debates (92%).

The two of three timing-related controls show more persistent patterns. The more debates that are already on the roll when a debate is requested, the more likely a debate is cancelled: a debate that is requested when the roll is clean has a 43% chance of being held; a debate that is requested when there are 120 debates on the list has a 7% chance of being held. Likewise, a debate that was requested on the first day of the new term has a 41% chance of being held compared with a debate that was requested 4 years into the term, which has only a 5% chance of being held. We find no difference for the two periods.

7 Conclusion

We examined the conditions under which parties maintain or withdraw 30-member debate requests. We proposed two possible explanations: issue competition and an anti-elitist political style. We find that the choice to maintain a 30-mem-

ber debate reflects the style of a political party. Anti-elitist parties tend to maintain these debates. These are the same parties that are more likely to vote against legislation and ask parliamentary questions. For them a 30-member debate has the same purpose: to direct attention to the failures of the sitting government. The results for issue competition are much weaker: we find that this pattern is driven mainly by two opposition parties (Party for the Animals and Freedom Party) with a very clear issue focus on requesting and holding debates on their 'own' issues.

These results allow us to draw three conclusions: about the parliamentary agenda in the Netherlands, about the political styles of opposition parties and about the process of agenda setting. Previous research showed that between 1998 and 2017 opposition parties became more successful in making proposals for the agenda (Otjes, 2019). This study nuances those results in two ways: first, it shows that a large majority of successfully proposed debates are never held, namely four out of five 30-member debates. Debate requests show only part of reality. Yet the parties that actually hold 30-member debates are among the most vocal, anti-elitist opposition parties. This still means that 30-member debates give the opposition, and even relatively small, anti-elitist opposition parties, considerable agenda-setting power. This power is greater than that which they held before the introduction of 30-member debates and greater than that held in other countries. The keys to the plenary are held by the opposition. However, their enthusiasm has caused a lag between proposed and actual debate for as long as a year, thereby undermining the actual agenda control they give.

Our results show that anti-elitist opposition parties are more likely to hold the debates they request. This adds to earlier research that shows a difference in political style between anti-elitist and other parties (Otjes & Louwerse, 2019, 2021a). These parties tend to use their parliamentary votes and their right to ask questions as means to criticise the government. Proposing to hold and actually holding 30-member debates fits with this strategy, which sees parliament as a bully pulpit to voice opposition rather than a marketplace to create majorities for policy change. If anything, the conundrum of this study is why 'responsible' opposition parties retract so many of their debates. Why do some parties ask for 30-member debates but never actually hold them? While we believe that anti-elitism clearly plays a role in the incentives, that opposition parties have to poke, prod and politicise issues, the behaviour of opposition parties willing to play ball is still obscured. It seems likely that some parties cancel 30-member debates in backroom negotiations with the Speaker and committee chairs about other plenary debates: in exchange for giving up a 30-member debate, a committee debate on the same issue may be planned earlier. Future research may consider delving deeper into the negotiations between parliamentary party groups and the Speaker by means of a qualitative study.

The extent to which the results of this study can be extended to other countries is limited. The openness of the Dutch agenda-setting process, in terms of both its public nature and the rights that minorities have to set the agenda is unparalleled. Still, they may suggest patterns of agenda setting that are likely to occur in other countries. Anti-elitism is associated with the use of oversight tools

in other parliaments, in particular with voting against government bills (Otjes & Louwerse, 2021a). These results make it likely that when more anti-elitist opposition parties in other countries have a chance to set the parliamentary agenda, they will be more likely to actually exploit that opportunity than less anti-elitist opposition parties. In addition to taking into account government-opposition dynamics and issue competition in agenda setting, future research into this subject may consider taking into account the oversight-oriented political style of 'responsive' anti-elitist parties.

Notes

1 A brief note about populism is therefore warranted. We understand populism from the perspective of Mudde's (2007) ideational approach. It is a thin ideology based on three claims: (1) That this people are virtuous and homogeneous. (2) That the current elite is corrupt and acts as one. And (3) that when populist politicians gain power the will of the people will become the basis of government policy. The thin nature of populism means that it can be combined with different ideologies that can fill in the terms 'people' and 'elite' differently. In our view, it is the anti-elitism of populist parties (i.e. point 3) that drives them to request parliamentary debates; that is, they use parliament to expose the mistakes of the government. Opposition parties that are anti-elitist but not necessarily populist (such as communist parties that are critical of the current 'bourgeois' elites but that, owing to their Marxist societal analysis, does not see the people as homogeneous).

2 Reports on committee meetings require a single MP to request it, but they also require a committee meeting, which requires a majority in the committee.

3 It takes, on average, 204 days (nearly 7 months) before a debate is held (data between 2012 and 2021).

4 The Tweede Kamer still has a separate procedure for interpellations, which also requires 30 members but is placed on the agenda with high urgency, and here the requesting MP has a special role. In 2012-2017 three interpellations were held, and in 2017-2021 two were held.

5 In the recent trend towards filming snippets of debates and spreading them through social media, even a debate request that is not fulfilled can be used to show voters that established parties are trying to keep specific issues off the plenary agenda.

6 Peeperkorn, M. & Sitalsing, S. (11 October 2007) Spoeddebat omdat het op tv komt. *Volkskrant* . Translation by the authors.

7 At the end of the 2017-2021 term, 56 debates were still on the roll. We ignore these debates in the following discussion as it is unclear whether these were held or not.

8 To check the intercoder reliability we coded 60 requests (10%) twice. The Krippendorf's alpha was 0.67, indicating 'substantial' agreement between the coders and low but acceptable reliability.

9 bedrieg*, *bedrog*, *verraad*, *verrad*, absurd*, arrogant*, belof*, beloof*, belov*, capitul*, kapitul*, consensus*, corrupt*, direct, elite*, establishm*, heersend*, kaste, klasse, leugen*, lieg*, maffia, meningsuit*, ondemocratisch*, ondemokratisch*, oneer-

lijk*, particrat*, politic*, propaganda*, regime*, schaam*, schand*, toegeven, traditio*, volk, waarheid*.

10 In the Appendix 2, we look at an interaction relationship between the anti-elitism of the proposing party and the share of the manifesto devoted to an issue. This shows that anti-elitist parties will actually hold a debate on an issue independent of how important it is for them, for parties that score low on anti-elitism, the relationship between the importance of an issue and the likelihood of holding the debate is present. But do note that among these parties the uncertainty is substantial among high levels of priority.

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Appendix 1 Logistic Regressions Without Outliers

Variable	Model A1	Model A2	Model A3
Seats	−0.06**	−0.08**	−0.07**
	(0.03)	(0.04)	(0.03)
Coalition	1.03*	0.83	1.01*
	(0.56)	(0.60)	(0.58)
Left-Right Distance	−0.02	−0.05	0.14**
	(0.08)	(0.09)	(0.07)
CHES Anti-elitism	0.19***		
	(0.04)		
PopuList Populism		1.10***	
		(0.36)	
Pauwels Anti-elitism			3.54***
			(0.80)
Share of manifesto	3.15	4.45	4.01
	(3.42)	(3.35)	(3.49)
Years into term	−0.68***	−0.75***	−0.71***
	(0.17)	(0.18)	(0.18)
Number of debates on the list	−0.02***	−0.02***	−0.02***
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Period = 2017-2021	−0.00	0.01	−0.06
	(0.06)	(0.07)	(0.05)
Constant	10.05	−9.25	119.89
	(124.04)	(148.44)	(107.65)
Log pseudolikelihood	−266.77	−271.13	−269.83
Pseudo *R*-squared	0.18	0.17	0.17
N	607	607	607

Without debate requests on issues that encompass more than 20% of the requesting party's election manifesto. Standard errors clustered by party * period; 0.1 < * < 0.05 < ** < 0.01 < ***.

Appendix 2 Logistic Regressions With Interactions

Variable	Model A4	Model A5	Model A6
Seats	−0.06***	−0.08**	−0.07**
	(0.02)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Coalition	1.03*	0.83	1.02*
	(0.56)	(0.59)	(0.58)
Left-Right Distance	−0.02	−0.06	0.14**
	(0.08)	(0.10)	(0.07)
CHES Anti-elitism	0.24***		
	(0.07)		
PopuList Populism		1.43***	
		(0.52)	
Pauwels Anti-elitism			4.17***
			(1.34)
Share of manifesto	6.17*	5.82***	5.10**
	(3.16)	(1.67)	(2.11)
CHES Anti-elitism * Share of manifesto	−0.55		
	(0.53)		
PopuList Populism * Share of manifesto		−3.91	
		(3.21)	
Pauwels Anti-elitism * Share of manifesto			−8.00
			(9.24)
Years into term	−0.69***	−0.77***	−0.71***
	(0.16)	(0.17)	(0.17)
Number of debates on the list	−0.02***	−0.02***	−0.02***
	(0.01)	(0.00)	(0.01)
Period = 2017-2021	−0.01	−0.00	−0.07
	(0.06)	(0.07)	(0.05)
Constant	23.58	−3.63	133.00
	(113.31)	(139.29)	(98.76)
Log pseudolikelihood	−279.54	−283.77	−282.60
Pseudo *R*-squared	0.18	0.17	0.17
N	630	630	630

Without debate requests on issues that encompass more than 20% of the requesting party's election manifesto. Standard errors clustered by party * period; 0.1 < * < 0.05 < ** < 0.01 < ***.

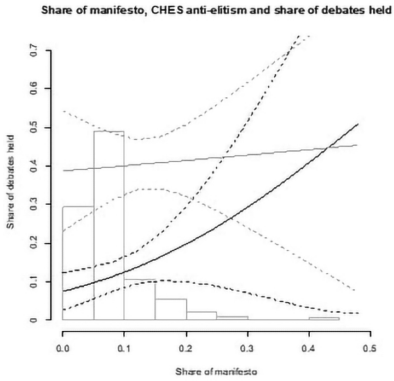

Figure A1 *Share of manifesto, CHES anti-elitism and share of debates held. Black line is minimal anti-elitism; grey line is maximal anti-elitism.*

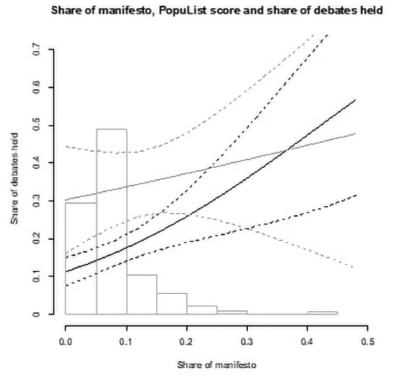

Figure A2 *Share of manifesto, PopuList score and share of debates held. Black line is not populist; grey line is populist.*

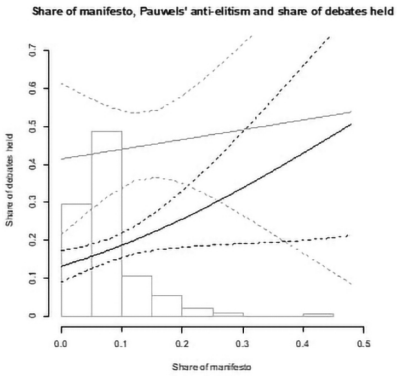

Figure A3 Share of manifesto, Pauwels' anti-elitism and share of debates held. Black line is minimal populism; grey line is maximal populism.

RESEARCH NOTE

Peer Assessment in Parliament

Promises and Pitfalls of a Marginalised Method in Parliamentary Research

Richard Schobess[*]

Abstract

Peer assessment is a rather marginalised method in political research. This research note argues that the collective expertise of MPs can complement other data to contribute to more comprehensive evaluations of MPs' parliamentary work. Yet, this method is potentially flawed by low survey participation and rater bias among MPs. The experience with a peer assessment survey among members of three Belgian parliaments shows that participation does not necessarily need to be problematic. However, the empirical analysis suggests that scholars should control for various forms of rater bias.

Evaluating the work of colleagues who are active in the same field (peer review) has become a dominant method to judge the quality of scholars' academic work. Despite the general prominence of peer review in academia, the advantages of the use of peer evaluation to measure concepts for which data is otherwise hardly available remain almost entirely unexploited in political research. The lack of interest in peer evaluation is particularly surprising given the recent surge in scholarly attention to individual MPs' parliamentary performance (e.g. Bouteca, Smulders, Maddens, Devos & Wauters, 2019; Bräuninger, Brunner & Däubler, 2012; Papp & Russo, 2018). This research note argues that peer evaluations among members of parliament (MPs) allow scholars to analyse MPs' parliamentary performance[1] not only with regard to their (formal) parliamentary activity but also with regard to less visible and more qualitative aspects of their parliamentary work.

The scarce use of peer assessments[2] among MPs by political scientists might be a sign either of lack of awareness or of scepticism towards the methodology in a parliamentary context. Doubts about the suitability of peer assessment in parliament might, for example, be nourished by concerns about participation in political elite surveys (Bailer, 2014) and the attention to rater bias in psychological and educational research (see e.g. Hoyt, 2000; Magin, 2001). The goal of this research note is therefore twofold. First of all, it strives to enhance scholars' familiarity with this unconven-

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tional (but promising) method for the field of legislative studies. Second, the recent experience with a peer assessment survey among members of three Belgian parliaments allows a more evidence-based debate about the potentials and pitfalls of the still rather marginalised method.

This research note first provides a short overview of existing approaches to evaluate MPs' parliamentary work, before discussing fundamental methodological choices regarding the design of peer assessment surveys as well as its eventual implications. Finally, MPs' survey participation and various empirically identified forms of rater bias among Belgian MPs are presented.

1 Review of Existing Approaches to Evaluate MPs' Parliamentary Work

Previous evaluations of MPs' parliamentary work can be divided into three categories based on the respective data source. The vast majority of recent studies on individual MPs' parliamentary performance relied on behavioural data from official parliamentary repositories analysing MPs' use of parliamentary tools such as parliamentary questions, legislative initiatives or the involvement in parliamentary debates (e.g. Bäck & Debus, 2016; Bowler, 2010; Bräuninger et al., 2012; Papp & Russo, 2018). The rather extensive data availability also enabled cross-country comparisons (e.g. Däubler, Christensen & Linek, 2018) as well as analyses over time (e.g. Wauters, Bouteca & de Vet, 2019). However, that approach typically restricts parliamentary performance to MPs' use of formal parliamentary tools, potentially neglecting less visible aspects of their parliamentary work (Norton, 2018) or evaluations according to more qualitative criteria (Bouteca et al., 2019).[3] Owing to the focus on publicly visible aspects of parliamentary work, data from official parliamentary repositories is particularly well-suited to studying the relationship between parliamentary activity and incumbents' chances of getting re-(s)elected.

A second (smaller) strand of the literature relied on direct evaluations by relevant stakeholders such as citizens (e.g. Sulkin, Testa & Usry, 2015), journalists (Bouteca et al., 2019; Sheafer, 2001) or lobby organisations (Miquel & Snyder Jr, 2006).[4] Relying on data from surveys and interviews notably allows these studies to include more qualitative evaluation criteria. Moreover, evaluations by important stakeholders incorporate the perspective of those actors whose judgments may be most relevant from a normative point of view. However, these external actors are often also unable to observe less visible aspects of MPs' parliamentary work behind the scenes and hence lack access to valuable information (and, potentially, the expertise to evaluate parliamentary work on specific policy issues). Including the (often more general) perceptions by external actors with regard to MPs' parliamentary work can be useful in complementing quantitative measures of parliamentary activity and advancing research that is related to trust and legitimacy.

A third approach to evaluate MPs' parliamentary work relied on the collective expertise of MPs themselves based on survey or interview data. Some of these studies incorporated some form of peer assessment (Fran-

cis, 1962; Humphreys & Weinstein, 2012; Miquel & Snyder Jr, 2006; Sheafer, 2001).[5] Owing to MPs' privileged access to information on less visible aspects of parliamentary work (such as the influence within parliamentary party group meetings) and their domain-specific expertise (to evaluate MPs' contributions in parliamentary committees), that approach enabled researchers to assess more diverse facets of MPs' parliamentary work. Integrating the expertise of MPs in measuring their (perceived) qualitative parliamentary performance may be particularly useful to complement quantitative measures of parliamentary activity or investigate topics such as individual MPs' legislative effectiveness in party-centred contexts.[6] However, some scepticism may be warranted when relying on the perspectives of partisan actors. It might therefore come as a surprise that previous studies that involved peer evaluations among MPs neither reported nor analysed potential patterns of response bias or rater bias.[7] Moreover, fundamental methodological choices for the survey design that might influence MPs' survey participation and possibilities to control for rater bias have so far remained rather undiscussed. To enable sound methodological choices for future peer evaluations among MPs, this gap will be filled on the basis of the experience with a recent peer assessment survey among Belgian MPs.

2 Methodological Choices for Peer Assessment Surveys Among MPs

Owing to the heterogeneity of previous peer evaluations in educational, psychological or political research, scholars who are willing to employ peer assessment among MPs will face a variety of methodological choices. This section briefly discusses important questions concerning the design of peer assessment surveys among MPs and its potential implications.

A first choice for the development of a peer assessment survey concerns the content. Scholars may be interested in evaluations of more general or more specific aspects of MPs' parliamentary work. Although the expertise of MPs on particular aspects of parliamentary work might be the central motivation for this methodology, the inclusion of many specific survey questions also has disadvantages. On the one hand, raters may be unable to discriminate between similar questions without having sufficient information or precise evaluation criteria and, consequently, may rely on 'general impressions' of their colleagues instead (Thorndike, 1920).[8] On the other hand, peer assessments with many specific questions necessarily increase the length of the survey, potentially resulting in lower participation rates. Similarly, this problem may undermine scholars' efforts to include several indicators (survey questions) per concept. While respondents may be unable to discriminate between almost identical evaluation criteria, the inclusion of two indicators per concept results in a doubled survey length. That question is also related to the number of peers every respondent is asked to evaluate. On the one hand, more evaluations per rater will provide more data per respondent and allow more precise identifications of eventual rater biases (Hoyt, 2000), while, on the other hand, longer lists of peers per respond-

ent may cause lower response rates owing to longer surveys with more monotonous survey experiences (long questions).

While often treated less explicitly in previous studies, the design of peer assessment surveys also requires a choice about which peers are evaluated. Respondents may be asked to evaluate a specified number of peers from the entire parliament or a random sample of a subgroup of MPs, e.g. from the same parliamentary party, parliamentary committee or electoral district. Instead of neglecting this question, the choice should be motivated by the content of the survey. If the primary focus is, e.g., on MPs' work within parliamentary committees, evaluations from MPs without any information about the committee work of some colleagues might be less valuable. Similarly, the empirical identification of raters' discrimination based on party characteristics requires that every rater be presented a list of peers with some balance between MPs from the same/different political party as herself.

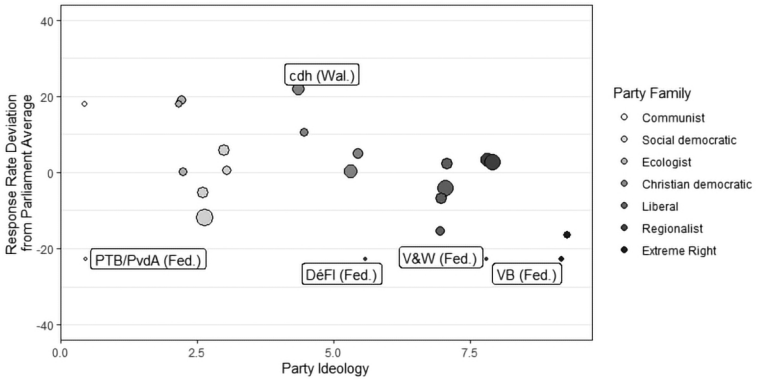
Finally, evaluations can take different forms. Depending on the level of complexity deemed acceptable for eventual respondents, evaluations can range from rather simple procedures such as rank-ordering peers based on (electronic) picture cards to more precise estimations of MPs' parliamentary work based on ordinal or continuous scales. While simpler forms may facilitate faster responses and potentially higher response rates, more complex scales entail lower losses of information. However, the use of continuous scales may overestimate respondents' capability to provide infinitely detailed evaluations even though MPs are usually highly educated and possess detailed information about the parliamentary work of their (closest) peers.

As the preceding discussion shows, the design of peer assessment surveys is a constant trade-off between measures that may affect the survey participation as well as the ability of researchers to receive more precise measurements, e.g. by controlling for various forms of rater bias. While previous applications of peer assessments in parliamentary research failed to report consistently about survey participation or the control for raters' biases, this research note discusses both aspects for an exemplary peer assessment survey among Belgian MPs. The survey employed here (see Appendix) consisted of six peer assessment questions for each of twelve peers on an ordinal scale ranging from one to five.[9] In view of our primary interest in assessing MPs' qualitative parliamentary performance within parliamentary committees and their party groups,[10] the lists of peers consisted of 25% randomly sampled MPs from the same parliamentary party as the respondent and 75% randomly sampled MPs that are active in the same parliamentary committees.[11]

3 Participation in MP Peer Assessment Surveys

This section briefly discusses the participation of MPs in the aforementioned peer assessment survey with a primary focus on the number of participants (response rate) and their representativeness for the population of invited MPs (response bias).

For the purpose of our study we invited 349 members of three Belgian



Note: Circle sizes represent the seat shares of parliamentary party groups. Parliamentary parties with less than two MPs were excluded for ease of interpretation.
Fed. = Federal Parliament; Wal. = Parliament of Wallonia.

Figure 1 Response rates of parliamentary party groups relative to average response rates per parliament

parliaments to participate in an online survey between January and March 2019 at the end of the parliamentary term preceding the general elections on 26 May 2019.[12] Personal invitations for the peer assessment survey were sent by email, outlining the general objectives of the survey and the purely academic purpose. Furthermore, the invitation assured strict confidentiality of all responses as well as full anonymisation of the results before providing a link to the individual survey version. All in all, the peer assessment survey had a response rate of 28.3% and provided 6576 evaluations covering 93.1% of our population of Belgian MPs. Since the response rate is comparable to those of other MP surveys in Europe (Bailer, 2014), the level of participation is rather acceptable – certainly when considering the sensitive topic (evaluating peers) and the limited familiarity with the methodology in European parliaments.

However, the main problem may not be unit non-response but rather response bias given that frontbenchers and MPs from larger parties are typically less likely to participate in MP surveys (Bailer, 2014). Parliamentary parties' deviating response rates from the parliamentary average indicate indeed that the survey participation might not have been completely at random (see Figure 1). Nevertheless, there seem to be no obvious participatory patterns pertaining to the seat share of parliamentary parties or party ideology. The figure may point, however, to slightly lower response rates of MPs from more ideologically extreme parties.

In order to examine the participatory patterns more closely, the survey participation of MPs has been analysed empirically. Table 1 presents the results for three probit models with a dichotomous dependent variable (sur-

vey participation = yes/no) and several potential explanatory factors that might be associated with MPs' participation in the peer assessment survey.[13] As the results for Model 1 show, none of the variables are significantly associated with MPs' survey participation (with the potential exception that MPs from regional parliaments might be slightly more likely to participate, $p < 0.1$). Furthermore, MPs from ideologically more extreme parties did not participate significantly less often than more moderate MPs (Model 2). Finally, the results show that MPs who are generally more active in parliament were significantly more likely to participate in the peer assessment survey. In contrast, those MPs who were characterised by more qualitative parliamentary work (rated by their peers) did not participate significantly more often.[14]

While MPs' participation in the peer assessment survey might be rather independent of party characteristics, these findings indicate that more parliamentary active MPs might be overrepresented among survey respondents. Such a self-selection mechanism could eventually result in respondents assigning more importance to quantitative aspects of parliamentary work (potentially inflating the correlation between measures of quantity and quality of parliamentary work). Additionally, several spontaneous reactions from invited MPs showed that lack of time is a repeatedly mentioned reason for non-participation, underlining the importance of short peer assessment surveys.

4 Rater Bias: Patterns of Systematically Deviating Evaluations

Although MPs' participation in peer assessment surveys may be a common cause of concern, scholars might be even more sceptical about whether MPs will actually assign honest evaluations. To facilitate a more evidence-based discussion on whether this scepticism is warranted, this section presents a brief overview of empirically identified forms of rater bias for respondents of a peer assessment survey among Belgian MPs (see foregoing discussion).

In the absence of valid alternative measures for the six indicators of qualitative parliamentary work employed here, rater biases have been identified on the basis of systematic patterns

Table 1 *Peer Assessment Survey Participation: Probit Models with Individual MPs' Survey Participation as Dependent Variable (yes = 1, no = 0) to Identify Systematic Forms of Response Bias.*

	Dependent Variable:		
	Survey Participation		
	(Model 1)	**(Model 2)**	**(Model 3)**
PPG Size	−0.003 (0.01)	−0.003 (0.01)	0.003 (0.01)
Opposition	−0.34 (0.24)	−0.33 (0.29)	−0.04 (0.36)
Ideology	−0.07 (0.05)	−0.07 (0.06)	0.02 (0.07)
Regional	0.30 (0.15)	0.30 (0.15)	0.30 (0.17)
Frontbencher	−0.03 (0.20)	−0.03 (0.20)	−0.04 (0.22)
Female	0.001 (0.15)	−0.0005 (0.15)	0.06 (0.16)
Dutch	0.08 (0.16)	0.08 (0.16)	0.11 (0.17)
Ideology^2		−0.002 (0.02)	−0.04 (0.03)
Activity			0.46** (0.16)
Quality			0.01 (0.27)
Constant	−0.55* (0.26)	−0.55* (0.26)	−0.80** (0.29)
Observations	349	349	325
Log Likelihood	−204.71	−204.71	−180.51
AIC	425.42	427.41	383.01

Note: *p < 0.05 **p < 0.01 ***p < 0.001

among evaluations with various dyadic characteristics between raters (respondents) and targets (their evaluated peers). Taking previous findings in educational settings and the particularities of the parliamentary context into account, we tested for (dyadic) rater bias deriving from characteristics of MPs' parliamentary parties, institutional factors or individual characteristics.[15] Systematic deviations have been identified with a Bayesian ordered probit varying-intercepts, varying-slopes model.[16] The results show that MPs were generally more likely to assign higher scores to members of their own parliamentary party as well as to those MPs with higher political positions than their own (see Table 2).[17]

Importantly, the impact of MPs' rater biases can be quite substantial. Figure 2 summarises several important findings pertaining to select forms of rater bias. First of all, the black elements of the figure show the expected *average* difference between peer evaluations resulting exclusively from both MPs belonging to the same/different parliamentary party (above) or the same/different gender (below). While raters can be expected to have a 99.2% probability of assigning an above-medium score for MPs of their own parliamentary party, this probability drops to only 8.6% for MPs from other parliamentary parties.[18] In contrast, there appears to be no *general* gender effect for MPs' peer evaluations. However, a second important finding is the sub-

Table 2 *Rater Bias in Peer Assessment: Bayesian Multilevel Ordered Probit Model (Varying Intercepts and Varying Slopes) with Peer Assessment Scores as Dependent Variable (Ordinal Scale from One to Five).*

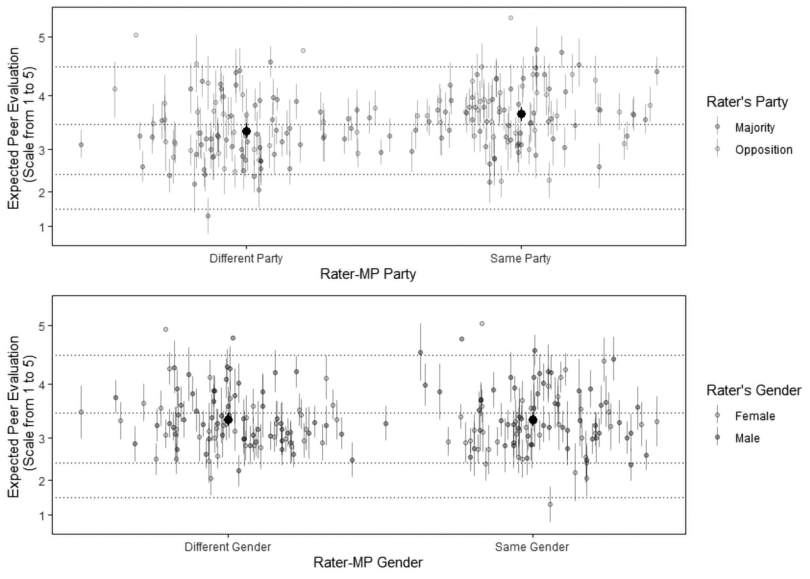
	Dependent Variable:		
	Peer Evaluation		
	5%	**50%**	**95%**
Same Party	0.28	0.5	0.72
Same Coalition	−0.05	0.13	0.32
Ideol. Distance	−0.13	−0.05	0.03
Hierarchy	0.11	0.23	0.36
Same Gender	−0.08	0.02	0.12
Same Language	−0.1	0.12	0.33
Question 2	−0.37	−0.25	−0.13
Question 3	−0.52	−0.41	−0.31
Question 4	0.29	0.46	0.63
Question 5	−0.33	−0.19	−0.06
Question 6	0	0.1	0.2
Constant	1.81	2.15	2.48
Observations		6576	
Groups (Raters)		99	

Note: Coefficients' percentiles of the posterior distribution shown (the same sign of a coefficient in all three columns indicates a 95 percent posterior probability that the coefficients is positive/negative). Threshold estimates and variance terms not reported here.

stantial difference between individual raters (grey elements in Figure 2). In fact, individual raters tend to assign *generally* higher/lower evaluations (rater severity) captured by varying intercepts (left part of Figure 2). Furthermore, individual raters may also differ in their *strength* of various forms of dyadic rater bias (varying slopes, right part of Figure 2). While MPs' same party bias might apply to almost all raters independent of, e.g., government party status, same gender bias may be observed only for some respondents but not for others. As such, same gender bias is more pronounced among male respondents but is much more limited among female respondents.[19] Taken together, these findings highlight the importance of considerable efforts into the control for various forms of rater bias when relying on peer assessments among MPs.

5 Conclusion

This research note argues that evaluations of individual MPs' parliamentary work based on the collective expertise of MPs can enrich political analyses by complementing other sources of data. While the growing literature on (aspects of) MPs' parliamentary performance relies largely on publicly



Note: Expected average effects (black) and individual effects for 99 raters (grey) based on a Bayesian multilevel ordered probit model. Posterior medians and 90% confidence intervals shown.

Figure 2 ***Expected peer assessment scores for MPs of the same/different parliamentary party as the rater (above) and the same/different gender as the rater (below)***

available data on MPs' use of formal parliamentary tools, these studies may neglect other important details of the work inside parliaments. Notably, that approach often leaves differences *between* individual parliamentary questions or legislative initiatives unattended. Yet one single parliamentary question revealing a major government scandal may outweigh 100 questions simply reiterating publicly available statistics in many respects. Moreover, the exclusive focus on formal parliamentary tools largely disregards MPs' parliamentary work behind closed doors such as their activities aimed at representing voters within their parliamentary party group or seeking support for legislative initiatives in the informal space. Therefore, peer assessment among MPs provides a promising approach to complement parliamentary activity data with more qualitative aspects of MPs' parliamentary work, thereby also taking activities in less visible areas (such as parliamentary party groups) into account.

However, MPs' survey participation and bias among raters are potential pitfalls that might discourage scholars from employing this method. The experience with a peer assessment survey among members of three Belgian parliaments shows that participation does not necessarily need to be problematic aside from the eventual over-representation of more parliamentary active MPs. However, the empirical identification of systematically deviating evaluations suggests

that future applications of this method should be careful to control for theoretically expected forms of rater bias.[20] In the Belgian context, characterised by hierarchically organised parliaments, strong political parties and a linguistic divide, scholars may need to control for potential sources of dyadic rater bias that are based on MPs' party characteristics, linguistic groups and hierarchical relations between MPs in addition to personal characteristics such as gender. Only when potential pitfalls such as low/unbalanced participation and rater bias are taken into account may scholars fully benefit from the advantages of peer assessment among MPs to complement other data on MPs' parliamentary performance, allowing them to investigate new research questions.

This research note facilitates a discussion about potential risks and benefits of peer assessment in parliament. While this study is only a first step towards a more evidence-based debate, we strongly encourage other scholars to report systematically about methodological choices as well as about participation and rater bias in peer assessment surveys among MPs.

Notes

1 For a conceptual discussion and normative concerns see (Schobess, 2021).

2 Although 'peer evaluation' and 'peer assessment' are often used interchangeably, this research note considers peer assessment as a subtype of peer evaluation methods that strives to collect quantitative data.

3 Notable exceptions are, e.g., Martin (2011) and Solvak (2013), allowing the inclusion of specific qualitative evaluation criteria for selected formal parliamentary activities.

4 Some of these studies actually relied on a combination of several types of actors.

5 Other studies relied on MPs' self-reported activities (e.g. Deschouwer, Depauw & André, 2014).

6 That is because previous measures of legislative effectiveness based on bill passage (Volden & Wiseman, 2014) are considerably flawed under very high levels of party unity.

7 A notable exception is the study of Humphreys and Weinstein (2012) that mean-standardised raw peer assessment scores for MPs from majority vs. opposition parties.

8 This effect is also called halo error.

9 Previous approaches in parliamentary research ranged from one to six questions (concepts) and a list of peers to be evaluated per respondent ranging from 15 to all MPs in parliament. Furthermore, these studies did not specify subgroups of (more closely related) MPs and made use of rank-ordering or ordinal scales (see Francis, 1962; Humphreys & Weinstein, 2012; Miquel & Snyder Jr, 2006; Sheafer, 2001).

10 For a general description and the precise survey questions see (Schobess, 2021).

11 In practice, this approach may require additional steps of random sampling for exceptional cases such as MPs from political parties with fewer than three MPs.

12 The following MPs have been invited: all members of the Belgian Chamber of Representatives (150 MPs) as well as two regional parliaments: Flemish Parliament (124) and the Parliament of Wallonia (75). The lists of MPs have been created in October 2018 before

the expected reshuffle following the 2018 local elections.

13 In addition to expected lower participation rates in MP surveys for frontbenchers and MPs from larger parties, it has been tested for potential effects of MPs' government party status, party ideology (general left-right ideology, see Polk et al., 2017), squared party ideology (extremism), type of parliament (regional vs. federal), gender and language.

14 The measure of parliamentary activity included MPs' use of six parliamentary tools comprising parliamentary speeches, parliamentary questions and legislative initiatives. For a more detailed description of the measures of parliamentary activity and quality of parliamentary work see Schobess (2021).

15 The peer assessment literature identified various forms of rater bias in educational contexts: bias for members of the same group, dominant members and based on friendship (Pond & ul-Haq, 1997; Strijbos, Ochoa, Sluijsmans, Segers & Tillema, 2009).

16 For more details about the empirical approach see Schobess (2021).

17 The presidents of parliamentary party groups, parliaments and political parties have been counted as holding higher-level positions.

18 All calculations are based on posterior probabilities for predictions, with all other explanatory variables held constant at their median.

19 Paired t-tests for male and female respondents' predicted same gender bias (posterior medians for same gender vs. different gender evaluations) show a positive effect for male respondents ($p = 0.059$) but not for female respondents (negative sign, $p = 0.32$).

20 Based on the peer assessment literature and specific characteristics of the selected case and the respective research objective.

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Appendix

Tabel A1 *Peer assessment survey questionnaire for the operationalisation of qualitative aspects of individual MPs' parliamentary performance*

Aspect of Parliamentary Performance	Peer Assessment Survey Statement (Disagree/Agree, Five-Point Scale)
Representation Quality	He/she is very loyal towards his/her voters (e.g. he/she keeps his/her electoral promises).
Legislative Quality	He/she is very competent in developing legislative initiatives to solve current problems in society.
Control Quality	Controlling the government with his/her parliamentary work, he/she focuses on relevant problems in society (instead of insignificant questions).
Representation Effectiveness	In comparison with other MPs, he/she is very successful in representing the interests of his/her voters, attracting attention to topics that are important to them.
Legislative Effectiveness	He/she is very successful in building support among other MPs for his/her legislative initiatives.
Control Effectiveness	In comparison with other MPs, he/she has more policy impact with his/her parliamentary control work (parliamentary questions, committee work, budgetary control).

Note: Statements presented to MPs (disagree/agree, five-point scale) with regard to the parliamentary work of colleagues during the current legislative term. Source: (Schobess, 2021)