University of Antwerp

Negativity in Politics from Election to Election
Attacks in Parliaments throughout the Electoral Cycle

PhD thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Social Sciences: Political Science at the University of Antwerp to be defended by Željko Poljak

Faculty of Social Sciences
Department of Political Science
Promotors: Prof. dr. Stefaan Walgrave and dr. Julie Sevenans
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Introduction

During his first Prime Minister's Questions in the UK parliament, the ex-Prime Minister (PM) Boris Johnson called Jeremy Corbyn, who was the leader of the opposition at the time, a "chlorinated chicken" and described him as a "great big girl's blouse" (Reuters, 2019). Almost one year before that, it was Jeremy Corbyn who allegedly called the then PM Theresa May a "stupid woman" (BBC, 2018). In Belgium, a country with a completely different political system (Lijphart, 2012), things are no different. Barbara Pas, a radical-right member of the country's federal parliament (MP), called PM Alexander De Croo a "champion of lying" while handing him a Pinocchio doll (Redactie24.be, 2021). During a different event, it was the mainstream PM De Croo who stated that MP Bert Wollants is "suffering from amnesia" (HLN, 2022). Even in countries that incorporate elements of both the British and Belgian political systems, such as Croatia, similar patterns are observed. Social-Democratic President Zoran Milanović stated that the Christian-Democratic PM Andrej Plenković is behaving like a "frustrated father" who "comes home and freaks out his wife" (Dnevnik.hr, 2022) while the PM, a few days later, described the President as "a wild, uncultured primitive" (Jutarnji.hr, 2022).

These are just a few examples of very personal and insulting rhetoric in day-to-day politics from three vastly different countries. Despite the extremity of these examples, as citizens, we are continuously exposed to politicians using negativity between themselves, whether on social media (Frimer et al., 2023; Ott, 2017), in newspapers (Niven, 2001; Vliegenthart et al., 2011) or on TV (Maier and Jansen, 2017; Goovaerts and Turkenburg, 2022). This observation is concerning since ample literature demonstrates that politicians indulging in negativity may have adversarial effects on citizens (see e.g. Fridkin and Kenney, 2011; Hopmann et al., 2018; Van der Goot et al., 2023; Walter and Ridout, 2021). For example, negativity can demotivate the electorate to participate in democratic processes such as elections (Nai, 2013), and can make the electorate emotionally angry (Gervais, 2017; Walter and Ridout, 2021). Furthermore, negativity has been shown to increase voters' cynicism diminishing political trust (Lau et al., 2007; Van't Riet & Van Stekelenburg, 2022), especially towards particular parties and politicians (Clementson et al., 2023; Lefevere et al., 2020). This provides a fruitful ground for democratic backsliding in society (Marien and Hooghe, 2011; Van Elsas and Fiselier, 2023) and allows ideologically extreme and populist parties to thrive (De Vries and Hobolt, 2020). Lastly, it has also been shown that negativity in politics may give rise to affective polarisation in society (Druckman et al. 2019; Iyengar et al., 2012; Skytte 2022). As such, negativity does not only impact the linkage between politics and citizens but also society as a whole,

whereby increasing resentment among politicians spills over among the electorate and partisan supporters (Hernandez et al, 2021; Nai and Maier, 2023).

However, despite the adverse impact of political negativity on citizens, negative politics can also play a crucial role in preserving the quality of democracy. Conflict is an inherent characteristic of politics (Schattschneider, 1960), where actors are expected to compete for power (Bachrach and Baratz, 1962) and express their views on key issues through criticism of one another (Geer, 2006). As such, this use of negativity helps signal to voters where politicians stand on policy and can clarify to the electorate their differences. Consequently, negativity in politics enhances political knowledge by providing valuable information about political distinctions. Moreover, exposure to political conflict and differences between actors may also increase satisfaction with democracy (Ridge, 2022; Tuttnauer, 2022) and may stimulate citizens' interest in politics (Brooks and Geer, 2007; Mutz, 2015).

While we are well aware that negativity is one of the causes that impact the quality of contemporary democracies, it is largely unclear if negativity among politicians is indeed as widespread as it appears to be, especially in day-to-day politics, and what are the conditions that lead to politicians' negativity usage. What we do know, is that negativity in politics occurs due to the negativity bias (Soroka, 2014) that exists on both the side of politicians and the side of citizens. As citizens, we are more likely to engage with negative, rather than positive information (Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2020; Soroka et al., 2019). This increases the demand for negativity in news (Robertson et al. 2023) and may lead journalists to prioritise such news stories (Lamot and Van Aelst, 2020). As a result, politicians that want to communicate with the public through media outlets are usually more successful if they convey negative, rather than positive information (Haselmayer et al., 2019; Skytte, 2019). This trend has been amplified by social media, where politicians directly communicate with voters and where most citizens' engagement happens when politicians post something negative (Mueller and Saeltzer, 2022; Peeters et al., 2022).

As such, negativity can be a powerful tool for politicians to gain citizens' attention and ensure re-election. The negative campaigning literature, which focuses exclusively on official campaigns and not on day-to-day politics, has established that politicians' negativity usage is a *vote*-seeking strategy. Therefore, this makes opposing actors and those losing in the polls more negative compared to actors that are in the government and those that are high in the polls (Benoit, 1999). This overall premise of negativity being used as a *vote*-seeking strategy has been dominating both "traditional" US literature on negative campaigning (e.g. Haynes & Rhine, 1998; Lau and Pomper, 2001) as well as more contemporary studies

from Europe (e.g. Nai, 2020; Somer-Topcu and Weitzel, 2022). It has furthermore been speculated that negative campaigning has been on the rise in recent decades (Geer, 2012).

Despite the lack of literature on negativity outside campaigning periods, there are reasons to expect that negativity spills over from campaigns to day-to-day politics. Many studies have argued that cooperative and peaceful governing periods during the electoral cycle between two consecutive elections are increasingly tainted by competitive and adversarial campaigns (Heclo, 2000). As a result, politicians are permanently campaigning instead of governing. Therefore, the idea of the permanent campaign suggests that politicians now prioritise their public image on a daily basis (Blumenthal, 1980), aiming to sustain or boost public support and secure re-election. Essentially, it proposes that the electoral atmosphere, such as negative campaigning, may persists even in the time between elections.

Although studies have supported this phenomenon of permanent campaigning (Joathan and Lilleker, 2020), it remains unclear whether negative campaigning during campaigns is similar to negative campaigning in day-to-day politics. For example, do low-approval actors also engage in negativity after the election? Does the opposition go negative immediately after the government assumes office despite the "honeymoon period" (Chanley et al., 2000)? And if they do go negative, how is this negativity voiced, on what issues are politicians attacking, and who do they target? These questions have not been addressed in the current literature. What we do know, however, is that different patterns of political actors' behaviour can be observed when comparing campaigns and routine periods (Ceccobelli, 2018; Vasko and Trilling, 2019). Furthermore, changes have been observed in-between elections, not only in the politicians' behaviour (Schwalbach, 2022; Seeberg, 2022) but also in the public approval of politicians (Müller and Louwerse, 2020) and media reporting on politicians (Falasca, 2014; Müller, 2020; Van Aelst and De Swert, 2009; Vliegenthart, et al., 2011). Therefore, the current theory of negative campaigning is not entirely suited for studying the usage of negativity on a day-to-day basis.

It is important to answer these questions as campaigns only last a couple of weeks, and it is likely during the electoral cycle, the period in-between two consecutive elections, when negativity fuels citizens' resentment with politics. Put differently, while negativity in campaigns may have an immediate and short-term impact on citizens' attitudes and behaviour, it is likely negativity in general day-to-day politics that has long-lasting effects on the electorate. This is especially relevant knowing that some literature claims that negativity is on the rise (Geer, 2012), especially more adversarial forms of negativity such as incivility (Frimer et al., 2023). Therefore, the main research questions analysed in this dissertation relate to: *who* goes negative against *whom*; *how* is this negativity used, *on what* is it based; and lastly, *when* does this

negativity take place. Answering these questions will ultimately allow us to become better aware of *why* some parties and politicians engage in negativity throughout the electoral cycle and will help us gain better knowledge regarding politicians' general negativity usage. Ultimately, this will help us determine whether citizens' growing resentment of politics stems from politicians' increasing use of negativity or if politicians engage in necessary political conflict that aligns with democratic principles.

The main scientific contribution I wish to achieve with this dissertation is to disentangle negativity in politics as a general concept that appears in both day-to-day and campaign politics, moving away from a campaign-centric perspective. As such, I want to provide an overarching theoretical framework to understand politicians' negativity usage throughout the entire electoral cycle. To achieve this, I need to bridge the gap between both negative campaigning theory (e.g. Benoit, 1999) and other theoretical approaches from day-to-day politics (e.g. Green-Pedersen, 2007). This is why I will rely on a broad array of theories and concepts, trying to create a novel theoretical framework allowing us to disentangle general negativity usage among political elites. Precisely, besides negative campaigning theory (Benoit, 1999), I will use party competition (Downs, 1957), role congruency (Eagly and Karau, 2002), issue competition focusing on issue salience (Ansolabehere and Iyengar, 1994), and ownership (Petrocik, 1996), prospect theory of decision-making (Kahneman and Tversky, 1979), and mediatization of politics (Strömbäck, 2008) throughout this dissertation. This will allow me to generate hypotheses regarding negativity usage, which will relate to my research questions. Ultimately, by testing hypotheses that answer these research questions, we will be closer to understanding *why* negativity occurs in politics in the first place and whether the supposed increase in negativity usage can be blamed for the increasing democratic deficit in contemporary democracies.

In addition to theoretical advancement, I also want to provide methodological improvements to the current study of negativity in politics. For example, as I will outline throughout my dissertation, studying negativity during campaigns makes it difficult to make stronger causal claims and may lead to spurious relationships (e.g. Harrington and Hess, 1996). This outcome is caused by the methodological shortcomings of studying negativity during short-lived campaigns, something that has been acknowledged by the negative campaigning literature (Nai, 2020: 447; Walter et al., 2014: 560). Because campaigns tend to be short, lasting only a couple of weeks, negative campaigning scholars could not establish clear causal links that lead politicians to use negativity (but for improvements regarding this do see Hassell, 2021; Maier and Jansen, 2017; Nai and Martínez i Coma, 2019). For example, because campaign strategies are planned before the official campaign, it is difficult to establish when the decision to execute negative

campaigning has been made. Furthermore, by neglecting day-to-day politics, the negative campaigning literature has been unable to test if, for example, more interaction with media makes negativity usage more likely as politicians adopt the media's negativity bias. As such, I want to reaffirm established findings from negative campaigning literature with greater validity (e.g. opposition is more negative) while uncovering new causal dynamics that lead to negativity (e.g. politicians with higher media experience are more negative).

The last scientific objective of this dissertation is to explore the current state and spread of negativity. Knowing the adversarial effect of negativity on the public, I aim to uncover whether this is a product of political elites who are in permanent negative campaigning with each other. Therefore, looking at day-to-day political negativity will allow me to see how much exactly are politicians prone to negativity and what forms of negativity get utilised. Therefore, uncovering the level of negativity usage and its various forms, such as incivility, will show us how much can political elites be attributed to continuous (negative) campaigning, as has been expected since the mid-20th century (Blumenthal, 1980). Furthermore, it is also possible that some of the challenges current democracies face, such as the increase of affective polarisation (Garzia et al., 2023) and challenger parties (De Vries and Hobolt, 2020), may be the results of increasingly higher levels of negativity between political elites. Still, it is largely unclear if this is entirely true and whether negativity is truly on the rise (Walter, 2014b), thereby amplifying the democratic deficit in societies. As such, I also aim to show longitudinal trends of negativity in the last decade uncovering whether the expected increasingly wide spreading negativity is truly taking placing and contributing to concerning political phenomena. For instance, it is plausible that negativity among political elites simply represents essential policy conflict that upholds and sustains the proper functioning of democracy.

Defining Negativity in Politics

Negativity in politics is a broad concept (Lipsitz and Geer, 2017). It can, for example, relate to media outlets that overreport negative political news, or it can refer to citizens who actively indicate negative attitudes toward political elites (Soroka, 2014). However, in this dissertation, I want to tackle negativity used by political actors, namely political parties and politicians, because these political actors are one of the main suppliers of negativity in politics, which have surprisingly been overlooked in political research on negativity outside campaigns.

In this dissertation, I build upon the well-known "directional" (Walter and Vliegenthart, 2010) or "binary" (Haselmayer, 2019) definition of negativity in politics. This definition, proposed by the US political scientist John Geer, defines *negativity* as "any criticism leveled by one candidate against another during a campaign" (Geer, 2006: 23). Despite its benefits in terms of its simplicity, some adjustments are necessary to increase the validity of this definition throughout the entire electoral cycle (and not only during campaign periods). That is, it is important to redefine the directional definition of negativity to avoid current dependency on campaigning periods (Geer, 2006) and the electoral competition logic of us vs. them (candidate vs. candidate; see also Benoit, 1999; Lau and Pomper, 2001).

I define negativity, which I also label interchangeably as attacks throughout the dissertation, as criticism from one political actor to another political actor. Therefore, the concepts of campaigning and competition are gone in this definition. Regarding campaigning, current literature has predominantly studied negativity during campaigns, but as explained earlier, negativity occurs on a day-to-day basis as well. Some politicians are party warriors with the main purpose of discrediting their competitors throughout the electoral cycle (Ketelaars, 2019; Sevenans et al., 2015). In the most severe cases, this can result in actual physical confrontations (Schmoll and Ting, 2022). As such, negativity takes place regardless of the time at which it is observed.

Furthermore, the definition does not refer explicitly to competitors (i.e. candidates) since negativity in politics can be directed toward anyone. For instance, negativity can occur on the intra-coalition (Martin and Whitaker, 2019), intra-government (Lynch and Whitaker, 2013), or intra-party level (Watts and Bale, 2019). During campaigns, parties (or an election coalition) are more unified, with the party leadership often having a tight grip on the party's behaviour (see Dolezal et al., 2017). In day-to-day politics, this unified behaviour is not always present. Furthermore, in multi-party systems where coalitions between parties need to be formed, negativity among coalition partners can occur. Especially when parties deviate from policy outcomes envisioned by the coalition agreement (Höhmann and Sieberer, 2020; Martin and Vanberg, 2004). Moreover, in majoritarian one-party governments, majority MPs may not support policy outcomes that may hurt their re-election in a constituency (Kam, 2009). Intra-party attacks may even be supported by the party leadership if it helps them to preserve a seat in a constituency (Proksch and Slapin, 2012). The opposition is also prone to intra-party conflict. The leadership may not be in line with the majority of party members (Watts and Bale, 2019), and intra-party elections can create wedges along party lines (Cross and Pruysers, 2019), all of which may emerge in the public.

Despite dropping campaigning and competition, this dissertation's definition of negativity still keeps the applicability principle of the original definition (Geer, 2006), that is, it encompasses any negativity regardless of the content, nature, level, or venue. Regarding content, examples such as calling someone's policy proposal rubbish (policy criticism), or criticising someone as reckless (trait criticism), can all be classified as instances of negativity in politics (Benoit, 1999). Note that issue and trait criticisms are not mutually exclusive (see more in Chapter 4), as negativity can be used on both fronts, e.g., a politician is incompetent and his policies demonstrate that. Regardless of the content, scholars have taken the position that both types of negativity can be good for democracy (Geer, 2006). Namely, attacking policies can help to indicate to voters where parties stand on issues and making such distinctions may help to increase satisfaction with democracy (Ridge, 2022; Van Elsas and Fiselier, 2023). On the other hand, attacking traits can also help voters to become better aware of the skills and expertise certain politicians possess. The latter is of particular relevance with the increasing partisan dealignment where voters become volatile (Dassonneville, 2023) and base their vote choice on individual politicians, rather than parties (Garzia, et al., 2022). The content of negativity in day-to-day politics will be studied in greater detail later in this dissertation (see Chapter 4).

Besides content, the nature of negativity can also vary, as politicians may choose whether to deviate from conventional social norms when they use negativity (Mutz 2015; Walter, 2021). In other words, politicians may express their negativity by using uncivil language which can include name-calling, mocking, or sarcasm (Sobieraj and Berry, 2011; Stryker et al., 2016). This incivility, which I will study in greater depth in chapters 2, 4, and 6 is the most problematic form of negativity. Incivility decreases the quality of the political debate (Marien et al., 2020) leading to lower levels of political trust (Clementson et al., 2023; Goovaerts and Marien, 2020; Van't Riet and Van Stekelenburg, 2022). When comparing various forms of negativity, scholars find that incivility is the most harmful to citizens' attitudes and behaviour (see e.g. Fridkin and Kenney, 2011; Hopmann et al., 2018; Reiter and Matthes, 2021; Walter and Ridout, 2021). As a result, incivility is extremely newsworthy as it provokes stronger reactions among the public compared to civil forms of behaviour (Muddiman, 2018; Mutz 2015; Skytte, 2019).

Lastly, negativity can take place on any level: between individuals, parties, or governments at the local, regional, national to supranational levels. However, this dissertation's definition focuses predominantly on formal political actors that engage in political competition within a certain polity, hence parties (Chapter 1; 3; 4; 5) and politicians (Chapter 1; 2; 6), and not on informal ones such as non-governmental organization, media, interest groups, the army, or foreign political actors. Lastly, the

directional definition of negativity is also applicable to any type of venue (see Walter and Vliegenthart, 2010). Negativity may be employed in a television or parliamentary debate, TV ad, parties' press releases or conferences, on politicians' social media profiles, etc. This dissertation will almost exclusively focus on parliamentary venues. However, in Chapter 6, I do explore how negativity may spill over to media venues, and how negativity in media may reinforce negativity in parliaments. I furthermore discuss venue differences in the concluding chapter of the dissertation.

Theory of Negativity in Politics

In this dissertation, I will borrow from several theories to create a broad theoretical framework. The basis for this framework is the notion that political decision-making is rational from the politicians' point of view, i.e., politicians carefully assess their actions to maximise their gain (Brams, 2014). However, we know that full rationality cannot be achieved due to the multifaceted context in which decision-making takes place (Simon, 1990). Therefore, the theory adopted in this dissertation assumes that politicians are driven by maximising their goals, even if the actions they take to achieve these goals (e.g., the choice to use negativity) end up hurting them in the end. While negativity may be the result of sudden ad-hoc decision-making in which negativity usage relates to the mere personality of an individual politician (Nai et al, 2022), recent studies show that some of the central claims of politicians' rational decision-making calculus hold. Namely, we can expect politicians to use negativity when they estimate the benefits of negativity usage to be greater than the costs (Maier et al., 2022). This should have implications for who uses negativity against whom, how they use it, on what they focus, and lastly when they do it.

In the literature, scholars tend to agree that political actors pursue three different goals: *vote*, *office*, and *policy* goals (Strøm & Müller, 1999). As such, politicians make decisions to win votes during an election (*vote*), enter executive office (*office*), or implement changes to society (*policy*). Campaign studies mostly argue that during campaigns *vote* goals are the main driver for the behaviour of politicians (Benoit, 1999). After all, *office* goals, such as securing a position in the cabinet, and *policy* goals, such as implementing policy changes, cannot be achieved when the campaign is ongoing. Only after acquiring *votes* parties deal with decision-making aimed at gaining or maintaining access to *office* (e.g. coalition formation) and decision-making aimed at changing *policy* (e.g. passing a legislation).

In this dissertation, I argue that the presence of negativity in politics is also a product of the *vote*, *office*, and *policy* goals. Bridging political goals and negativity is not novel, given that the negative

campaigning literature has already highlighted that politicians use negativity to win over *votes* (Lau and Pomper, 2001; Skaperdas and Grofman, 1995). During campaigns, for example, mostly risk-seeking politicians facing low approval ratings or politicians from the opposition are prone to using negativity (Benoit, 1999; Dolezal et al., 2018; Elmelund-Præstekær, 2008; 2010; Haynes and Rhine, 1998; Hansen and Pedersen, 2008; Maier and Jansen, 2017; Nai and Sciarini, 2018; Walter and Van der Brug, 2013). This negativity is usually directed at risk-averse parties such as government parties and frontrunner parties (Nai, 2020; Walter, 2014a). This is because the usage of negativity has been shown to have unintended consequences. For example, as mentioned in the beginning, a politician using negativity may demobilise the electorate to participate in elections, hereby lowering support for this politician (see review in Lau et al., 2007). Furthermore, negativity may also give a boost to the second-preferred candidate or party (Walter and Van der Eijk, 2019). Politicians with low approval ratings or opposing parties have much less to lose if they go negative compared to politicians or parties that enjoy high approval or incumbency perks (Green and Jennings, 2012). This shows that variation among politicians' negativity usage does exist depending on the cost-benefit framework. Furthermore, in the last decade, the theory has also expanded towards *office* goals before deciding to go negative in campaigns. For example, parties with the least coalition potential are more likely to use negative campaigning as they are not expected to cooperate in government formation (Walter and Van der Brug, 2013; Walter et al., 2014). As such, it is safe to say that *vote*- and *office*-seeking goals are interlinked and of high priority during campaigning periods of politics.

On the other hand, despite neglecting negativity as a concept, non-campaigning literature studying routine day-to-day politics has shown that politicians engage in conflict to push for *policies* they care about. For example, even though cooperation between parties and politicians may exist outside campaigns, governing parties need to protect themselves from the compromises they make in office (Fortunato, 2021). As such, they may use tools such as parliamentary questions to hold their coalition partners accountable (Höhmann and Sieberer, 2020). Furthermore, while the opposition may support the government's policy (Andeweg, 2013), the government likely neglects or avoids issues that the opposition cares about (Seeberg, 2022). This can prompt the opposition to be extra critical to force the government to tackle their issues or adopt their solutions (Seeberg, 2023). Therefore, this line of literature highlights that conflict over issues takes place outside campaigns (see also Sevenans and Vliegenthart, 2016).

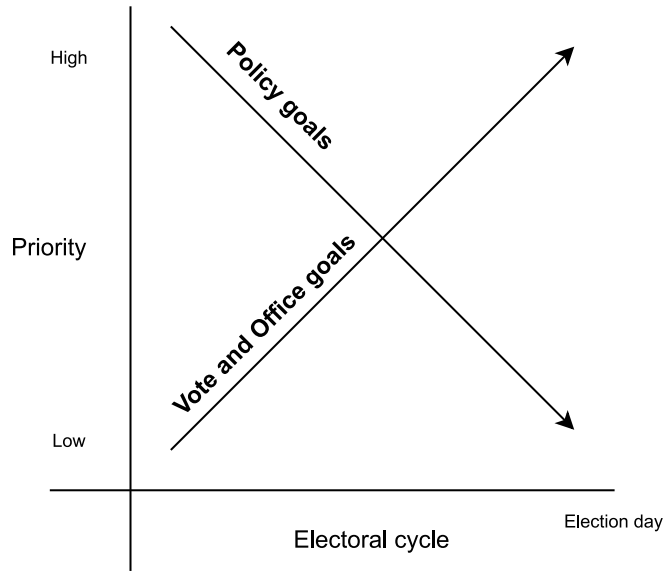
In summary, the first reason that can explain politicians' negativity usage lies in the *vote*- and *office*-seeking goals as was established by the negative campaigning literature. By going negative, parties and politicians can accumulate voters on their side and ensure that once election day arrives, they will be

the preferred candidate or party. In addition, a favourable electoral outcome may secure the possibility to participate in government formation and secure a position in office. The addition to the current theoretical framework, however, is that politicians also use negativity due to *policy*-seeking goals. This is of particular importance in day-to-day politics as politicians are expected to be responsive to real-world problems (Ansolabehere & Iyengar 1994) and push for policies they own to be high on the agenda (Vliegenthart and Walgrave, 2011).

Of course, both *policy* and *vote/office* goals can overlap and are not mutually exclusive (Downs, 1957). For example, going negative to put a certain policy on the agenda, may increase the approval rating among voters who care about this issue. In turn, a higher approval rating due to negativity may increase the bargaining power of a politician to get an issue on the agenda. However, in the politicians' perception, these goals do not have the same utility all the time. A politician who is running a negative election campaign to get re-elected does not prioritise at that particular moment in time a certain policy ambition. On the other hand, a politician who is pursuing a certain policy during the term does not attach high priority to what will happen during the next election (e.g. Louwerse and Otjes, 2016).

For the aforementioned reasons, I propose that the electoral cycle increasingly influences the trade-off between prioritising *policy*- or *vote*/*office*-seeking goals (Schwalbach, 2022; Seeberg, 2022; Somer-Topcu, 2009). I argue that negativity usage is initially driven by *policy* goals in the early stages of the cycle. However, as the elections draw near, *vote*/*office* goals take centre stage, and negativity usage is aimed at attracting voters rather than changing policy. Figure 1 presents this expectation as a heuristic framework for the rest of the dissertation. The arrows in the figure showcase the main expectation that certain trade-offs need to be made in goal priorities when using negativity. Specifically, negativity is expected to decrease in relation to policy goals and increase in relation to vote and office goals as the election approaches.

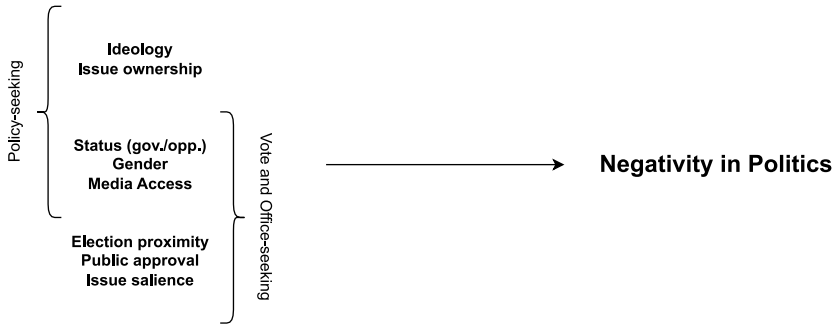
Figure 1. Theoretical conditions of this dissertation that are expected to lead politicians to utilise negativity throughout the electoral cycle



Note: The figure is a merely heuristic outline of the main expectations and should not be interpreted as deterministic

To be able to test whether politicians use negativity as a strategy to achieve *policy* or *vote*/*office* goals, and is this usage conditioned on the electoral cycle, several indicators are used, presented in Figure 2, to explain a political actor's decision to (not) go negative. On the top-left side, Figure 2 shows the indicators that can be used to analyse whether negativity predominantly is used to achieve *policy* goals, namely ideology and issue ownership. The bottom-left side of Figure 2 shows the indicators that might explain going negative to achieve *vote*/*office* goals: election proximity, public approval, and issue salience. Additionally, I also take media access, status (government vs. opposition), and gender into account (indicated in the middle left in Figure 2). While all of these negativity indicators are explored for the decision to use negativity, I will also explore the impact of these indicators on particular types of negativity, such as incivility (Chapter 2; 4).

Figure 2. Indicators based on which politicians are expected to utilise negativity throughout the electoral cycle



While election proximity is observed as a standalone variable indicating *vote*-seeking aspiration (see later Chapter 1 and 4), to test the dynamic aspect of negativity usage (Figure 1), this indicator is interacted with other predictors. For example, while I investigate whether ideological differences explain negativity usage as a *policy*-seeking mechanism, I also interact this with election proximity to analyse whether this *policy*-seeking mechanism is decreasing as elections draw closer (Chapter 1). On the other hand, looking at public approval as an indicator of the negativity usage to gain *vote*-seeking goals, I interact this with election proximity to test if during the electoral cycle, the impact of public approval on negativity usage increases (Chapter 5). Overall, if the main framework holds, we would assume that policy goals are becoming less significant throughout the electoral cycle while *vote*/*office* goals are becoming increasingly significant. As I will show throughout this dissertation, there is strong support that *vote*-seeking goals become increasingly important to politicians impacting their negativity usage (Chapter 2; Chapter 4; Chapter 5), yet *policy* goals appear to be stable regardless of the electoral cycle (Chapter 1; Chapter 3; Chapter 4).

In the following section, I will present several theories using these indicators to outline the general expectations and hypotheses of this dissertation. More specifically, these theories will provide hypotheses regarding who goes negative against whom (status; gender; ideology), how and on what (issue salience; issue ownership), and when (election proximity; public approval; media access). By answering these questions, I will investigate the occurrence of negativity throughout the electoral cycle and demonstrate support for the notion that negativity gets used rationally by specific groups of actors showing how the theory of negativity throughout the electoral cycle plays out in the empirical world.

Status and Ideology

The central aspect of routine politics is a conflict between actors and their policies (Schattschneider, 1960). This notion has accumulated literature on the spatial model of party competition by Downs (1957). These studies argue that parties clash on several ideological dimensions, with the ultimate goal of positioning themselves closer to voters (Stokes, 1963). The main premise of the spatial model of party competition is a strong indication of negative usage in day-to-day politics that is driven by acquiring *policy* goals that benefit *vote* goals (Downs, 1957). I test this expectation through two conditions: status regarding government vs. opposition and ideology.

Regarding status, the main clash in politics is between governing and opposing parties (Hix and Noury, 2016). Governing parties enjoy incumbency perks in comparison to the opposition. For example, while governing parties easily produce policy output by changing the legislation, the opposition's only option is to criticise such output (De Giorgi and Ilonszki, 2018). Therefore, the opposition has to go negative against the government if it aspires to have *policy* success during the cycle. For example, by going negative, the opposition may set their issues on the agenda (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2010), acquire and maintain ownership over issues (Walgrave and De Swert, 2007), and ultimately impact policy outcomes (Seeberg, 2023). These achievements may have long-term benefits for the opposition by lower approval of the government (Seeberg, 2020b) and reaching higher voter support in the upcoming election (Tuttnauer and Wegmann, 2022). However, governing parties also need to keep tabs on their coalition partners to prevent policy drift from the coalition agreement that could erode their voter base (Martin and Vanberg, 2004). As such, governing parties are likely to target themselves (Haselmayer and Jenny, 2018).

This situation on the party level also has implications for individual politicians. Namely, the criticism orchestrated by opposing parties is likely aimed at prominent figures within the executive cabinet, namely, the PM and Ministers. After all, it is the cabinet politicians that propose policies that the opposition can attack (see also Thesen, 2012). Therefore, it is expected that the PM and Ministers bear the responsibility of counterattacking and employing negativity against the opposition. This strategy serves not only to defend their policy record but also to safeguard their personal image. In turn, the work on internal criticism among coalition partners in the government is likely handed to less prominent majority MPs. As such, the task of addressing internal criticism within the government coalition typically falls upon less prominent majority MPs. In this context, intra-government criticism is anticipated to be undertaken by majority MPs who do not hold cabinet positions. Additionally, aside from critiquing

coalition partners, majority MPs may find themselves needing to adopt a negative stance towards their own party if the party's policies in the government conflict with the interests of the voters in their respective constituencies (Kam, 2009; Bøggild and Pedersen, 2023). Such actions may even be embraced by party leaders seeking to maintain the party's seat in a given constituency (Proksch and Slapin, 2012).

Besides status, ideological positions can also serve as a predictor of party competition (Hix and Noury, 2016; Otjes and Louwerse, 2018). Specifically, when parties exhibit greater ideological distance, the potential for conflict rises. This phenomenon underscores parties' *policy*-seeking objectives, as opposed to *vote*-seeking ones. The rationale behind this is that parties with substantially different ideologies also tend to have distinct sets of voters. Consequently, the incentive to attack ideologically distant parties to secure *votes* is relatively minimal (Haynes & Rhine, 1998; Ridout & Holland 2010; Walter, 2014a). Indeed, numerous campaign-focused studies have not identified ideology as a significant predictor of negativity usage (Dolezal et al., 2018; Elmelund-Præstekær, 2010; Haselmayer & Jenny, 2018; Walter, 2014a). However, if *policy*-driven negativity exists throughout the electoral cycle, as depicted in Figure 2, I anticipate that an increase in ideological distance would fuel negativity in day-to-day politics.

Gender

While I have previously discussed potential individual characteristics distinguishing regular MPs from cabinet members (PMs and Ministers), there are additional individual attributes that may influence politicians' engagement in negativity. One such indicator can be found in Eagly and Karau's role-congruency theory of prejudice (2002), which posits differential expectations for women and men. This theory suggests that gender stereotypes prescribe distinct behavioural norms: women are expected to adhere to communal norms (e.g., displaying kindness or sympathy), while men are expected to conform to agentic norms (e.g., demonstrating aggression or dominance).

These gender-based expectations can significantly impact politicians' behaviour. For instance, a female politician who exhibits communal norms is likely to receive more favourable approval than a female colleague displaying agentic norms. Consequently, female politicians seeking to maximise their success in achieving *policy* and *vote*-related objectives are more inclined to align their behaviour with communal expectations. This propensity can contribute to women in politics adopting a less negative tone compared to their male counterparts.

Yet, while empirical studies demonstrate that women use less negativity in day-to-day politics (Hargrave & Langengen, 2021; Haselmayer et al., 2021), other studies show that women, during campaigns, tend to use negativity as equally as men (Bystrom, 2004; Maier, 2015; Walter, 2013). Therefore, I argue that female politicians are caught in a double bind. They behave communal in day-to-day political roles as they push for their policies. However, as goals shift toward re-election (Figure 2), women find it difficult to ignore the negative nature of politics associated with agentic norms. As such, women use negatively closer to elections with the intention of demonstrating to voters that they are fit for the agentic nature of politics (Gordon et al., 2003). To compensate for this divergence from stereotypical behaviour, which can result in a backlash (Bauer et al., 2022), I furthermore expect that negativity used by women is going to be civil. Lastly, my theory argues that the same applies to targets: women are going to be avoided in negative and uncivil attacks. They are not held to an equal account as men, so politicians avoid placing a communal woman in an agentic context (Maier & Renner, 2018).

Issue Ownership and Issue Salience

While the previous conditions establish which parties and individual politicians are inclined to adopt negative strategies and who the targets of these strategies are, they do not elucidate which specific issues become the focal point of these attacks. To address this aspect, I draw upon insights from the issue competition literature (Green-Pedersen, 2007). This body of research posits that politicians engage in competition over issues with high salience and on issues that they own (Klüver and Sagarzazu, 2016; Wagner and Meyer, 2014). Salience pertains to issues that hold significance within society (Ansolabehere and Iyengar, 1994; Jennings and John, 2009), while ownership relates to issues of particular importance to political parties (Budge and Farlie, 1983; Petrocik, 1996; Walgrave et al., 2015).

Therefore, I anticipate that issues on which politicians and parties engage in negativity will be contingent on the criteria of salience and ownership. Although both factors are intertwined with both *policy*-seeking and *vote*-seeking objectives, ownership is primarily associated with *policy*, while salience tends to align with *vote*. This distinction arises because ownership signifies issues that parties actively campaign on and prioritise, reflecting issues that matter to them and their constituents. When politicians employ negative tactics on owned issues, it is likely driven by a genuine desire to bring about policy change (Egan, 2013), which can be fundamental for retaining their core voter base. In contrast, politicians resorting to negativity on salient issues are more inclined toward *vote*-seeking goals, as they respond to the expectations of the majority of the electorate regarding the issues that politicians should address

(Damore, 2002; Elmelund-Præstekær, 2011). As such, when salience and ownership align, we can anticipate a party that owns this salient issue to employ the highest level of negativity.

Election proximity

Going back to the foundation of the negative campaigning theory, largely rooted in Benoit's functional theory of campaigning (1999), we know that the drive behind employing negativity during campaigns is based in the pursuit of *votes*. Negativity is used as a means to acquire votes at the election through negative messages. These messages can (i) directly impact voters, (ii) impact voters through media channels, or (iii) impact voter perceptions through political discussions among friends or family (Benoit, 2017). Consequently, the increasing proximity of elections often compels politicians to deploy negativity more frequently (Damore, 2002; Nai and Sciarini, 2018). Furthermore, as elections draw closer, the type and nature of attacks that politicians use to target opponents changes.

In this dissertation, it is anticipated that the described electoral competition dynamic extends beyond official election campaigns. As the election date approaches, vote-seeking objectives become increasingly important (Figure 2). This shift has implications for the use of negativity, as it amplifies conflicts between political opponents and coalition partners, resulting in greater negativity usage. Furthermore, as negativity becomes more widespread, attracting voters becomes more challenging. Consequently, we can expect that the nature and tone of attacks are likely to become more personal and less civil. In contrast, post-election periods are expected to be characterised by lower levels of negativity. This reduced negativity can be attributed to factors such as the government enjoying a honeymoon period and a lack of government activity for which the cabinet can be blamed.

Public approval

In addition to the proximity to elections, the decision to employ negativity can be influenced by a reference point in which politicians find themselves. This concept aligns with the prospect theory, which claims that experiencing gain tend to make individuals more risk-averse, whereas experiencing loss can drive them to take risks (Kahneman and Tversky, 1979). For instance, when there's a favourable deviation from a specific reference point (gain), individuals become risk-averse to safeguard their current advantageous position. Conversely, an unfavourable deviation from a specific reference point (loss) tends to induce risk-taking behaviour. This concept can be applied to the realm of public approval in politics,

with numerous studies demonstrating that greater risk-taking occurs when approval ratings are low (Somer-Topcu, 2009; Vieider and Vis, 2019).

Applying this framework to negativity, attacking colleagues can serve as a means to potentially improve one's public approval (and consequently, voter support), but it also entails uncertainty regarding the actual outcome (see Roese and Sande, 1993; Fridkin and Kenney, 2004; Walter and Van der Eijk, 2019). Consequently, individuals with high approval ratings may not feel compelled to take risks that could jeopardize their favourable standing. On the other hand, individuals experiencing a decline in approval may be more willing to take risks by employing negativity, hoping to reverse the trend and increase their approval (Skaperdas & Grofman, 1995). Furthermore, since public approval status is closely linked to *vote*-seeking objectives, it is likely to interact with the previously discussed election proximity indicator. Therefore, following the pattern depicted in Figure 2, the influence of public approval is expected to be more pronounced as an election draws closer, rather than further away from it.

Media Access

Finally, the concept of mediatization plays a pivotal role in understanding politicians' behaviour. Politicians not only rely on the media as a source of information but also as a platform to promote their policy agendas and personal profiles (Van Aelst and Walgrave, 2016). To elevate a particular policy on the political agenda, politicians often require media support to push for that issue. Similarly, the prospects of re-election and acquiring higher office are often contingent on a politician's media visibility (Van Erkel and Thijssen, 2016; Van Remoortere et al., 2023). Consequently, politicians adapt their behaviour to align with the logic of the media, a central aspect of the mediatization of politics (Strömbäck, 2008). It is through access to the media that politicians can maximise their efforts to achieve *policy* and *vote*-seeking objectives.

It is well-established that there is a pronounced negativity bias in news coverage driven by user engagement (Soroka, 2014). Therefore, this bias toward negativity may spill over to politicians who perceive negativity as the most effective means to secure media attention and enjoy the associated benefits (Ridout and Walter, 2015). As a result, it is anticipated that employing negativity generates media attention that can prove advantageous for a politician (Haselmayer et al., 2019). Such media visibility serves the dual purposes of advancing policy objectives by drawing attention to specific policies and reaching a broader electorate with their messages. Consequently, once a politician experiences increased

media coverage through the use of negativity, they are likely to resort to negativity again, in contrast to those who struggle to gather media attention.

Overview of the dissertation

Using the above six theoretical frameworks, this dissertation has six chapters. Each of these chapters elaborates on causal mechanisms in greater detail and tests them through empirical analyses. The chapters reflect research questions that were posed in the introduction, with some chapters tackling one or more research questions, demonstrated in Table 1. In chapters 1 and 2, I particularly zoom in on the question of *who* goes negative against *whom*, while in chapters 2, 3, and 4 I will show *how* is negativity used and *on what* is this negativity based. Lastly, as stated previously, the impact of timing will be studied in every chapter as every predictor that may cause negativity gets interacted with election proximity to see the impact of conditions on negativity usage throughout the electoral cycle. The question of *when* will particularly be explored throughout chapters 4, 5, and 6.

Table 1. Main research questions and chapters

Who* goes negative against *whom?					
	***How* and *on what* do they go negative?**				
***When* do they go negative?**					
CHAPTER 1	**CHAPTER 2**	**CHAPTER 3**	**CHAPTER 4**	**CHAPTER 5**	**CHAPTER 6**
Status and Ideology	Gender	Issue Ownership and Salience	Election Proximity	Public Approval	Media Access

More specifically, as can be seen in Table 2, Chapter 1 explores party competition and looks at who is on the attacking and who is on the receiving side of negativity, focusing on *status* (government vs. opposition) and *ideology*. Chapter 2 on the other hand takes a predominantly individual perspective of role-congruency theory and focuses on *gender* (women vs. men) of both attackers and targets while not only looking at negativity but incivility as well. The following Chapter 3 makes a novel approach by combining issue competition literature and negativity looking at what *issues* are used when negativity gets employed: are politicians attacking more on salient or issues they own, and what happens when salience and ownership are (non)congruent. Afterwards, in Chapter 4, I explore the timing of attacks based on *election proximity* zooming in on several types of attacks (policy, trait, and incivility) while relying on

the negative campaigning theory of how negativity is means to an end (election victory). Chapter 5 looks at whether *public approval* impacts negativity usage, combining elements of the prospect theory. Lastly, Chapter 6 revolves around mediatization of politics and how the outcome of negativity, which may give politicians *media access*, impacts politicians' negativity usage.

Table 2. Overview of the chapters

CHAPTER	INDICATOR	GOAL	ACTORS	THEORY	MAIN HYPOTHESES
Chapter 1	Status	Policy/Vote	Parties/Politicians	Party competition	Being in the opposition makes politicians negative
	Ideology	Policy	Parties		Ideological differences make politicians negative
Chapter 2	Gender	Policy/Vote	Politicians	Role congruency	Being a man makes politicians negative
Chapter 3	Issue Ownership	Policy	Parties	Issue competition	Owned issues are more likely to be used in negativity
	Issue Salience	Vote	Parties		Salient issues are more likely to be used in negativity
Chapter 4	Election Proximity	Vote	Parties	Negative campaigning	Election proximity makes politicians negative
Chapter 5	Public Approval	Vote	Parties	Prospect theory	Losing approval makes politicians negative
Chapter 6	Media Access	Policy/Vote	Politicians	Mediatization	Trying to gain media access makes politicians negative

The dissertation will zoom in on negativity usage in parliamentary venues. Parliaments are a good venue to study negativity usage across the electoral cycle. Namely, they are the main venue in which politicians pursue their political goals on a day-to-day basis throughout the electoral cycle. On the one hand, it is in parliaments where parties try to push for their policies to be addressed and implemented in society (Louwerse and Otjes, 2016). For example, parties are known to highlight relevant issues they care about trying to influence the political agendas (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2010; Vliegenthart and Walgrave, 2011). On the other hand, parliaments present venues where politicians also focus on discrediting their competition. As was shown by other studies, parties are known to employ criticism in parliaments to discredit their competition in voters' perceptions (Seeberg, 2020b). Finally, exploring negativity in parliamentary venues can also be highly indicative of negativity employed in other venues (see also Chapter 6). For example, recent studies show that issues politicians bring in parliament are highly correlated with issues they feature online (Peeters et al., 2021). Overall, working with parliaments presents a strength as it allows for a valid venue to test the theoretical framework of negativity usage across parties and politicians consistently throughout the whole electoral cycle which likely mirrors their negative behaviour across other venues.

In particular, this dissertation will explore negativity during question time sessions in the (federal) parliaments of Belgium (*Vragenuur*), Croatia (*Aktualno prijepodne*), and the United Kingdom (*Prime Minister's Questions*; PMQ). I work with question time sessions as they present one of the most important debates that take place in parliaments when the (more-powerful) executive branch of government is questioned by the (less-powerful) legislative branch (Russo and Wiberg, 2010). This generates high-media attention for these debates that likely reach citizens (Osnabrügge et al., 2021; Salmond, 2014) and are deemed highly important and influential by politicians themselves (Soontjens, 2021). Countries, on the other hand, are chosen due to the highly different party-system structures which can impact negativity usage (Elmelund-Præstekær, 2010; Walter, 2014b) and parliamentary behaviour (Proksch and Slapin, 2012; Schwalbach, 2022). As such, any findings that travel across these cases are highly generalisable. I will argue in greater detail why I work with question times and with these countries in each chapter.

Negativity during question time sessions was studied by working with a sample of QTs between January 2010 and December 2020. This period is sufficient to explore negativity usage through several full electoral cycles in each country, including electoral cycles that finished early due to snap elections (2010 in Belgium; 2016 in Croatia; 2017 and 2019 in the UK). Speeches made during QTs were content analysed by a team of student coders who were trained for six weeks in recognising the previously defined "directional" negativity in each speech that was made during QTs (see *Appendix – Coder training*). This data is the basis for all empirical tests throughout the dissertation and is transformed accordingly to tackle research questions and hypotheses from each chapter. For example, Chapter 1 looks at who attacks whom, and therefore the coded data was transformed into dyadic data to explore who assumes the role of attacker and the role of target. On the other hand, Chapter 6 explores if politicians are impacted by media access in their negativity usage, so the initial data is transformed to reflect all individuals that participate in QTs. In each chapter, I will give an in-depth look into how exactly was the initial coded data transformed for hypotheses testing. The concluding chapter of this dissertation contains a synthesis of all the main findings.

CHAPTER 1

Parties' attack behaviour in parliaments: who attacks whom and when

Abstract

Various research has been directed towards investigating the behaviour of political parties engaging in attacks. However, this topic has predominantly been studied in campaigning venues while focusing only on the attacker (parties that are attacking). This study contributes to the existing literature by (i) studying attack behaviour in the parliamentary venue, and (ii) analysing the interactions between both the attacker and the target. To this end, this paper uses longitudinal data on attacks during question time sessions in the parliaments (2010 to 2020) of Belgium, Croatia, and the UK. More specifically, I investigate the conditions that make parties engage in mutual attacks. These conditions can be characterised along three dimensions: time (proximity to elections), status (government vs. opposition), and ideology (close vs. distant). The results confirm the overarching argument that: (i) more attacks in parliaments happen closer to election day; (ii) opposing parties are more likely to attack the government rather than vice-versa; (iii) governing parties equally attack the opposition and themselves; and finally (iv) the larger the ideological distance between parties, the more likely attacks happen (with mainstream parties engaging equally in attack behaviour compared to radical parties). As such, these findings contribute to our understanding of attack strategies between parties in regular day-to-day politics.

Reference:

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Introduction

A well-known notion in political science literature is that conflict is at the root of all politics (Schattschneider, 1960). Indeed, the literature on communication between political actors has established that interactions between political actors are often conflictual and characterised by negative communication (Benoit, 1999; Geer, 2006). More specifically, research has documented the corrosive effect of negative interactions among political actors on citizens' attitudes, beliefs, and behaviour. For example, voting behaviour literature has found that negativity in politics can demobilise voters and discourage them from going out to vote on election day (e.g. Lemert, 1999; Nai, 2013). Studies on political polarisation have also pointed towards negative communication between politicians as the main cause for the increasing levels of inter-partisan animosity among party supporters (e.g. Iyengar et al, 2012). Furthermore, negativity in politics has been found to affect people's attitudes: it lowers their impression of political efficacy and their political trust (e.g. Lau et al, 2007; Mutz and Reeves, 2005; Thorson et al, 2000).

However, while the effects of negativity are quite well-known to political science scholars, the mere occurrence of negativity itself in the interaction between political actors has received less attention. One strand of research that does investigate the occurrence of negativity is the literature regarding negative campaigning. This literature studies the mechanisms that explain under which conditions political parties engage in attack behaviour during campaigns (for an overview see Nai and Walter, 2015). This has produced substantive knowledge on the subject with a general conclusion that parties strategically employ negativity by attacking their rivals in the hope of reaching their goals. However, there are two main gaps in the overall knowledge about how parties engage in attack behaviour.

First, previous studies only investigated under which conditions parties attack during campaigns. This resulted in a theoretical understanding of parties' attack behaviour in short-lived campaigning venues, but has left a gap regarding the circumstances under which parties attack in non- campaigning venues, e.g., parliaments (but see Ketelaars, 2019). There are reasons to expect different dynamics to take place in parliaments. During campaigns, parties are driven by vote and office goals when they engage in attack behaviour (e.g. Somer-Topcu and Weitzel, 2022; Walter et al., 2014) while in parliaments, policy goals such as placing issues high on the agenda or acquiring ownership over an issue also take the stage (e.g. Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2010; Otjes and Louwerse, 2018; Walgrave and De Swert, 2007). Furthermore, ordinary party members are more prominent in parliaments than in campaigns (since campaigns are usually dominated by the party leadership), which can facilitate intra-party conflicts (or

dissent; see Kam, 2009). As such, a theoretical framework is required describing the conditions under which parties attack each other (or themselves) in a parliamentary venue.

Second, most methodological approaches studying parties' attacks take only the perspective of the attacker, i.e., the party that decides to engage attack behaviour. There are a few noteworthy exceptions to this where the target and/or the interaction between both the attacker and the target are considered (see Haselmayer and Jenny, 2018; Walter, 2014a). However, it is not always clear what the direction of the attack is and which parties attack each other. For example, Walter (2014) found that the government is more likely to be targeted in attacks (for a similar insight on an individual level see Nai, 2020), but whether this is a product of the opposition attacking the government or the governing parties attacking themselves is not entirely disentangled. Similarly, Haselmayer and Jenny (2018) classify attacks that happen between governing and opposing parties but do not specify the direction of the attack (government to opposition or vice-versa). As such, it is important to follow-up on these fundamental studies by providing a different operationalisation of the interaction between attackers (parties that attack) and targets (parties that are being attacked), while including potential intra-party attacks.

With that in mind, this paper aspires to make contributions to the literature by (i) hypothesising about political parties' attack behaviour in parliaments (theoretical contribution), while (ii) offering a better approach to the operationalisation of interactions between the attacker and the target (methodological contribution). This paper's main argument is that parties strategically attack each other in a parliamentary venue, similar as they do in campaigning venues, with the election date putting pressure on parties to become more hostile and with the opposition dominantly attacking the government (Nai and Walter, 2015). However, unlike campaigns, it can be expected that governing parties also engage in attacks, not just with the opposition, but also between themselves in order to, for example, prevent potential policy drifts from the coalition agreement (Martin and Vanberg, 2004). Lastly, given that parties in parliaments deal with day-to-day political issues, ideologically distant parties are expected to clash more compared to ideologically close ones, a hypothesis that did not find strong support in some campaigning studies (Dolezal et al., 2018; Elmelund-Præstekær, 2010; Haselmayer and Jenny, 2018; Walter, 2014a).

To test the abovementioned hypotheses, I use novel longitudinal data on attacks during parliamentary question time (QT) sessions in Belgium, Croatia, and the UK in the last 11 years (January 2010 – December 2020). As the results indicate, parties do consider the timing of their attacks as more attacks occur closer to election day. Furthermore, opposition parties are more likely to attack the

government than vice-versa, while governing parties are equally likely to attack the opposition and their coalition partners (or themselves). The results also show how ideology can play a role in nurturing attack behaviour. Overall, results confirm the expectation that parties strategically employ attacks in a parliamentary venue.

Parties' attack behaviour in parliaments

Literature on party politics has established that parties work towards reaching three goals: (i) gather votes of citizens (vote goals), (ii) get into the executive (office goals), and (iii) implement their policies (policy goals) (Strøm and Müller, 1999). One strategy that parties employ to reach these goals is to attack their rivals using negative communication. The general consensus in the literature is that an attack can be defined as any type of criticism directed towards a political opponent (Geer, 2006). This means that attacks always involve a directional interaction between two actors where Actor A expresses criticisms (through a media statement, TV add etc.) towards Actor B which can vary in its content (policy and/or trait) and language (e.g. incivility; see Mutz and Reeves, 2005).

Attacks between political actors can take place on several levels (between individuals, parties, group of parties), but they are always driven by the underlying party competition logic, in which vote (e.g. Somer-Topcu and Weitzel, 2022), office (e.g. Walter et al., 2014) and policy (e.g. Otjes and Louwerse, 2018) goals are the main objectives. For example, recent studies have shown that attacking actors on policies may lower voters' perceptions of the targeted actor (Lefevere et al., 2020; Seeberg and Nai, 2021). This may cause the target's performance during the next election to worsen, possibly granting the attacker more votes (vote) and a seat in the cabinet (office). However, it is important to note that attacks are not always successful and can backfire (the so-called backlash effect) where voters punish attackers, rather than targets (see Lau et al, 2007: 1180-1183). For this reason, this paper considers attack behaviour to be a strategic decision taken on the party level and driven by party goals. This strategic decision making is the focus of the theory presented here and a deeper analysis of the types and forms of attacks is beyond the scope of this paper.

As stated in the introduction, attacks have been predominantly studied in campaigning venues such as TV debates or spots. While it is important to understand parties' attack behaviour in campaigning venues, it only paints part of the picture. Two underlying gaps can be identified. First, parties are incentivised to attack on policy and/or trait to obtain vote (e.g. Somer-Topcu and Weitzel, 2022) and office

(e.g. Walter et al., 2014) goals during campaigns, whereas outside campaigns, policy goals also become relevant (e.g. Otjes and Louwerse, 2018). In other words, while in campaigns parties attack their rivals expecting to gain support of the electorate (vote) and a potential seat in the cabinet (office), outside campaigns, they may also engage in attacks trying to, for example, place issues high on the agenda (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2010) or secure ownership over an issue (Walgrave and De Swert, 2007). By achieving such policy goals, parties also aspire to have long-term benefits in terms of vote and office.

Second, during campaigns it is the party's leadership that dominantly engages in conflict, whereas outside of campaigns other party members (MPs, ministers, speakers, etc.) become equally, if not even more, important. As these party members may pursue their individual goals (Sevenans et al. 2015), intra-party conflicts, which are not likely to arise during campaigns, are more prevalent outside of campaigns (Kam, 2009). For example, politicians seeking re-election in single-member districts sometimes have to go against party lines to retain their seats in their constituency and the party leadership may tolerate such a course of action because it also benefits the party as a whole to keep their seat (Proksch and Slapin, 2012).

As such, it is unclear how (i) incentives to reach policy goals and (ii) the presence of a variety of party members in non-campaigning venues impact parties' attack behaviour. These considerations necessitate going beyond campaign attacks and force us to investigate attack behaviour in non-campaigning venues. This is especially important for studies that show that attacks in politics adversely affect citizens, as they likely result not only from attacks in short-lived campaigning venues, but also from attacks in routine day-to-day venues as well.

Therefore, this paper focuses solely on parliamentary venues (which are dissolved during campaigns). These venues are ideal to study non-campaign attack behaviour because they allow us to address the two gaps defined above. First, parliaments are the main venue where issue competition, and hence conflict over policy goals, take place (gap 1; see Sevenans and Vliegenthart, 2016). Second, in parliaments various party members from MPs to ministers regularly engage in direct verbal debates and attacks, sometimes resulting in intra-party attacks (gap 2; see Kam, 2009). Of course, many scholars have extensively studied party behaviour in parliaments with a general conclusion that parties and their members behave strategically in order to achieve political goals, such as re-election. For example, there are studies that established how, depending on the electoral system, politicians adapt their legislative behaviour (see review in André et al. 2014). However, despite the abundant literature, attack behaviour as a tool that is employed by politicians to achieve their goals in parliaments has largely been neglected in the current studies.

My theoretical foundation also stems from the view that parties are strategic and rational actors who carefully assess their attacks with the primary aim of achieving their goals. However, because policy goals are more profound in parliaments and various party members get a chance to engage in conflict, different attack behaviour strategies and mechanisms could be present. As such, I argue that there are several underlying questions parties ask themselves in parliaments, two of which will be tested here: when and who should we attack?[1] The question of when relates to the condition of time, i.e. closer to the election date or not. The question of who is less straightforward, especially in multi-party systems where multiple parties can be attacked. In the context of this paper the question of who to attack relates to (i) the status (opposition vs. government) and (ii) the ideology (close vs. distant). Down below, I elaborate on all three conditions (time, status and ideology) and compare them to attack behaviour in campaigning venues.

Time

Campaigning literature has established that as the election day approaches, more attacks can be expected in campaigning venues as the pressure to acquire vote and office goals rises (Damore, 2002; Nai and Sciarini, 2018). By going negative closer to the election date, parties have more chance of appearing in the news (Haselmayer et al., 2019) in order to discredit their opponents in the perception of citizens. This is important as it may attract undecided and swing voters. However, once elections are over parties have exact knowledge about their support in the electorate (vote) and the position in which they will be until the next election (office). Such a situation leads to less pressure on parties and their members to attack each other, providing room for more fruitful discussions or even cooperation in parliaments (Andeweg, 2013).

Despite this, it is safe to expect that attack behaviour in parliaments is also tainted by elections. The closer to the election, the more important attacks in parliament become as this causes visibility in the media and puts competitors in a bad light. Furthermore, while in campaigns the election date has a dominant influence on the attacking behaviour of the opposition and parties that lag behind in the polls (e.g. Nai and Sciarini, 2018), the election date is likely to have a hostile influence on all parties in parliament. This is due to parties feeling the pressure to differentiate themselves from other parties in

[1] Other questions which will not be explored here, but are also expected to impact attack behaviour are, e.g., *how should we attack* and *on what should we attack?*

parliament, as cross-party cooperation during the legislature may have blurred party lines in the perception of voters (both in the government and in the opposition). By contrast, once elections are over, and politicians have secured a position for the current term, the urge to discredit opponents and/or differentiate from other parties decreases (see Schwalbach, 2022). This is why I hypothesise that more attacks between parties in parliaments occur closer to the (parliamentary) election date, rather than immediately after it.

H1: Parties are more likely to attack each other as the election comes closer

Status

Besides considering when to attack, parties and their members also consider their status when they attack, i.e. whether they are part of the ruling majority or the opposing minority. Current literature has found ample evidence of how opposing parties engage significantly more in attack behaviour during campaigns compared to governing parties (Benoit, 1999; Dolezal et al., 2018; Elmelund-Præstekær, 2010; Haynes and Rhine, 1998; Hansen and Pedersen, 2008), who are mostly targeted in these attacks (Walter, 2014a). A similar pattern was observed in parliaments because it is the parliamentary opposition's role to hold the government accountable (De Giorgi and Ilonszki 2018) and governing parties enjoy incumbency perks that allow them to implement policies in society. By producing output, governing parties provide the opposition with a portfolio of issues that can be criticised (e.g. Loxbo and Sjölin, 2017), something governing parties (mostly) cannot do to opposing parties. This is particularly important for achieving policy goals and acquiring the ownership of issues (which can result in more votes). As such, I hypothesise that opposing parties are more likely to attack governing parties than vice-versa.

H2: Opposition parties are more likely to attack government parties compared to government parties attacking opposition parties

While it is expected that opposition parties dominantly attack governing parties, it is also very likely that the government does not remain silent and also engages in attacks. However, while the opposition has a clear target to aim for, governing parties are faced with a choice of whether to attack the

opposition or their coalition partners (Haselmayer and Jenny 2018). Although governing parties prevent internal conflicts during the term by agreeing on policies (e.g. coalition agreements), agency drift is possible where a minister from party A diverges from the position of coalition partner B (Martin and Vanberg, 2004). This is why recent literature has started to address how coalition partners go about such situations, e.g., by asking questions in the parliament to ministers from a coalition party (Höhmann and Sieberer, 2020). By questioning their coalition parties' ministers, a particular governing party can prevent policy outcomes (policy goals) that are not favourable for them which could hurt them long-term (vote and office goals).

Even in countries with one (dominant) governing party, internal party conflict on policies can exist because parties in the government need to take concrete policy positions which may conflict with the positions of some party members (see e.g. Lynch and Whitaker, 2013). For example, in a first-past-the-post electoral system, a constituency that has a majority MP elected to the parliament may result in that MP attacking its own governing party for a policy that is unpopular in its constituency. In fact, such course of action may be tolerated (and welcomed) by the party leadership if it is going to result in a party keeping that seat in the parliament (see more in Proksch and Slapin, 2012). Therefore, it can be expected that governing parties are actually equally likely to attack the opposition and their coalition partners (or themselves) in parliaments as it may serve their policy interest and re-election objectives.

H3: Government parties are equally likely to attack the opposition and their coalition partners (or themselves)

Ideology

Lastly, scholars have also argued that parties attack each other based on their ideology. For example, parties with radical ideological positions are likely to attack more because their profile prevents political cooperation with other parties (Maier and Nai, 2021) resulting in attacks between ideologically distant parties. At the same time, parties may also attack ideologically proximate parties because this is where their voter base is (Haynes and Rhine, 1998; Ridout and Holland; 2010). However, this topic has had some mixed results in campaigning literature, with some scholars finding proof of ideology distance (e.g. Nai, 2020), others finding ideological proximity (e.g. Walter, 2014a), and some finding no attacks based on ideology at all (e.g. Dolezal et al., 2018; Elmelund-Præstekær, 2010; Haselmayer and Jenny, 2018). These

mixed findings can be expected as during campaigns parties are focused on *vote* and *office* goals, rather than *policy* goals, resulting in ideology not necessarily being a fundamental initiator of attack behaviour. However, in parliaments, the discussion is inevitably driven by *policy* goals, forcing parties to compete with ideologically distant parties if they want to obtain them (Otjes and Louwerse, 2018). In fact, in some systems, left-right ideological placement can be a better predictor of parliamentary behaviour compared to the government-opposition divide (Hix and Noury, 2016). Hence, it can be expected that ideologically distant parties attack each other significantly more, compared to ideologically proximate parties.

H4: Ideological distant parties are more likely to attack each other rather than ideological proximate parties

Methodology

Cases

To test my hypotheses, I focus on oral question time sessions (QTs) in the parliaments of three European parliamentary democracies: Belgium (federal parliament), Croatia, and the UK. QTs were chosen because they are the ideal place to test strategic attack behaviour of political parties. More specifically, QTs take place consistently in time (outside of campaigns) and contain direct verbal confrontations between parties on everyday issues with heavy media coverage (Salmond, 2014). Because of this, parties likely understand that QTs present high gain opportunities unlike any other parliamentary debate format (similar claim in Osnabrügge et al., 2021). Concretely, the media coverage of QTs enable a party to easily acquire *policy goals* (e.g. placing an issue high on the agenda; Bevan and John, 2016) and *vote/office goals* (e.g. lowering rival's perception among the electorate; Seeberg, 2020b). As such, despite certain drawbacks of working with QTs (e.g. opposition cannot question opposition), they present a suitable context to inspect the hypotheses presented in the theory.

Note that the setting of these QTs are significantly different across the three countries which allows me to test my hypotheses following the most different system design. In other words, because there are differences in how QTs are structured (see below), any similar findings regarding attack behaviour can potentially be generalized (at least in the European parliamentary perspective). This is

further amplified by the fact that each country has a different party system (i.e. multi-party, two-party, two-block).[2]

In the UK, question time takes place almost daily, but given that the most attention is placed on the Prime Minister's Questions (PMQs), the analysis is conducted on transcripts from those debates. PMQs take place every Wednesday at noon, they last for 30 minutes, and MPs ask questions to the PM who answers each question having general knowledge on which issues will and may be raised (Bevan and John, 2016). MPs are not granted a follow-up opportunity (with an exception of the opposition leaders). In case the PM is absent, other government members step in (most notably Nick Clegg during Cameron's first cabinet). Legislative scholars tend to agree that PMQs in the UK are conflictual (Salmond, 2014), offering substantive power to the opposition to challenge the government (Garritzmann, 2017). However, smaller parties in the opposition are known to be left out of the debate with little interference (Thompson, 2018).

By contrast, in Belgium and Croatia, transcripts from oral QT sessions to all government members are analysed because there is no QT specifically for the prime minister. In Belgium, QTs (nl. *Vragenuur*) take place every Thursday afternoon and last for approximately 1 to 2 hours. MPs ask questions in groups (based on a topic) to one or several members of the government who then answers all questions at once. Afterwards, the same MPs are granted a rebuttal to express their (dis)satisfaction with the answer. Each party group has the ability to ask questions per QT (approximately 2) regardless of their size in the parliament (see De Kamer, 2014). Members of the government are notified of the topics that are going to be discussed on the same day of the QT. All of this has led Belgian QTs to be characterised as more policy-driven (Salmond, 2014).

In Croatia, QTs (hr. *Aktualno prijepodne*) only take place once every 2-3 months (usually 4 times per year; at the start of each plenary sitting), but they last an entire day. The number of questions (40) are distributed to parties based on the share of seats parties have in the chamber (favouring the two dominant parties in Croatia; like the UK). A question can only be asked to one individual member of the government who is expected to respond immediately (see Hrvatski sabor, 2020). This government

[2] Belgium is characterized by an extremely fragmented yet consensus-type multi-party system where each ideology, due to the country's linguistic divide, is usually represented by two parties (one for Dutch-speaking Flanders and another for French-speaking Wallonia). A complete contrast to this is the UK with its majoritarian two-party system in which there is a clear line between the main governing and opposing party. Lastly, Croatia encompasses elements of both Belgium and the UK, placing it somewhere in the middle between the two extremes. The Croatian party system can be classified as a multi-party system (like in Belgium), but parties can easily be divided into two main blocks led by the two dominant parties who never or rarely cooperate (like in the UK).

member is informed about the topic 24 hours prior to the start of a QT. MPs are allowed a rebuttal to express their (dis)satisfaction (similar to Belgium). As such, Croatian QTs have features of both Belgian and UK QTs, but their low frequency and longer duration makes them heavily distinct from the other two.

Raw data

In order to study attacks during QTs, I randomly selected one QT per month in the last 11 years in each country (from January 2010 until December 2020 ; N = 257). This resulted in the following number of QTs: 103 in Belgium (30.5% of all Belgian QTs), 39 in Croatia (100%), and 115 in the UK (32.7%). Throughout this period, these QTs did not show any deviation in the format that was outlined above. Once QTs were sampled, I scraped full transcripts from these QTs from official parliamentary websites in each country (for Belgium - dekamer.be; for Croatia - edoc.sabor.hr; for the UK - hansard.parliament.uk). The scraped and raw data had every speech contribution as an observation (N = 23,991; see *Appendix – Coder training*) including a transcript of what each person said during a particular QT without any interruption (Belgium N = 6,634; Croatian N = 9,395; UK N = 7,962). These included both formal (questions, answers, replies, points of order) and informal (interruptions, shouting in the chamber, speakers' interventions) speech contributions which is an advantage as most studies tend to focus only on the formal speech contributions (see Fernandes et al., 2021). Protocol speeches when the speaker gives the floor (only transcribed in Croatian debates) and when PMs in the UK are asked to list their engagements at the start of every PMQ (see Bevan and John, 2016) were dropped (final Croatian N = 5,087/UK N = 7,731).

Coding process

A special codebook was designed (following previous content studies on attacks relying dominantly on Geer, 2006) to serve as a guide during the quantitative content analysis that was performed on the raw data. Four coders (together with the author) from Belgium and Croatia who speak the relevant languages (Dutch, Croatian, English and French) and who are familiar with the systems performed the coding. The main goal was to reliably identify and code attacks between political actors during QTs. As such, coders were trained and tested for six weeks before they were allowed to code independently (see *Appendix – Coder training* outlining the training process together with Krippendorff's alpha scores that reached satisfactory levels in the final two weeks).

According to the codebook, an attack is seen as any criticism from one political actor towards another actor (or themselves) on policy and/or trait.[3] Therefore, coders needed to identify (1) a *criticism* and (2) an *actor* to which the criticism is directed before they could code it as an attack. An actor that is targeted in an attack can be of any type: individual (PM), groups of individuals (Ministers), individual parties (Labour), and a group of parties (coalitions, opposing parties, government). Coders also coded attacks towards actors outside the parliamentary arena (regional governments, presidents, MEPs, Mayors, etc.) but not towards informal actors (unions, NGOs, etc.) and foreign political actors. Once coders identified an attack in a speech unit, they coded this attack by registering how many attacks exactly are present (in case more actors are attacked) and which actors are targeted and their party affiliations (in case it is not a party as a whole). Coders were trained not to code something as an attack when they saw criticism that politicians did not explicitly link to an actor or when politicians neutrally mention actors (see *Appendix - Examples of coding negativity* for examples of attacks and non-attacks in each country).

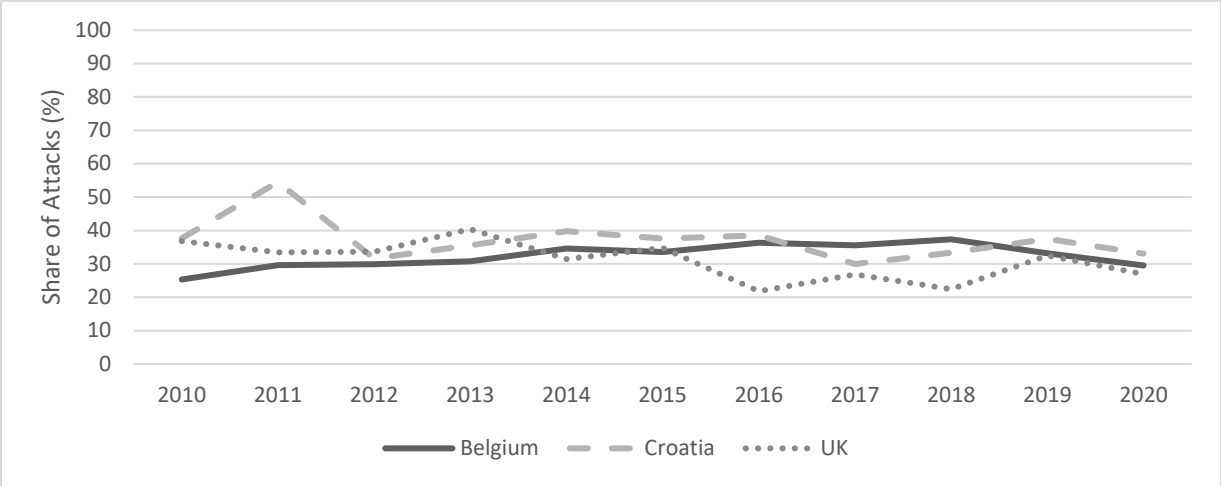
Overall, 6,427 speech contributions included at least one attack and they account for 33% of all speech contributions (Belgium 32.7%, Croatia 36.9%, the UK 30.8%; see Appendix A). On a descriptive level we can thus conclude that, despite the differences in QT structures, attacks take on average one-third of all speech contributions in the three countries. Furthermore, this appears to be consistent across the observed years (Figure 1). This is an interesting finding considering that QTs (especially in the UK) are perceived as highly conflictual (e.g. Salmond, 2014), while it appears that, on average, more than half of QTs are not devoted to attacks. Across all three countries, the majority of attacks contain policy criticisms (Belgium 83.5%, Croatia 71.7%, the UK 72%), while trait criticisms appear in less than half of the attacks (Belgium 43.1%; the UK 48.49%), with Croatia being the exception (61.8%).[4] [5]

[3] This definition goes beyond current definitions that state that attacks only entail criticisms towards political opponents. I opted for the broader definition where attacks can be directed to anyone given that, outside campaigns, potential intra-party conflicts are possible (Kam, 2009).

[4] Note that one attack can have both policy and trait criticism inside.

[5] While these results deserve more attention, they are beyond the scope of this study as I do not explore the strategic decision on *how* and *on what* to attack (see footnote 1).

Figure 1. Share of attacks in all speech contributions during QTs through years



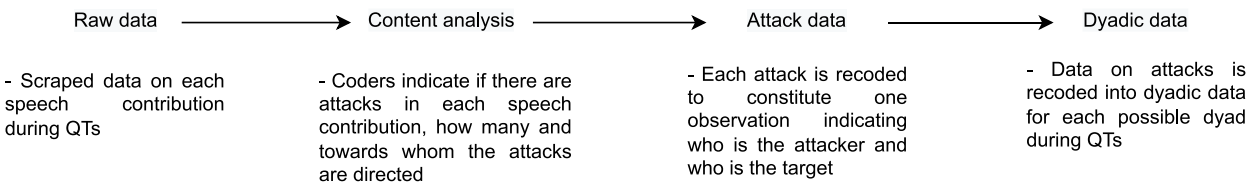
Note: Protocol speeches in Croatia (Speaker's moderation) and the UK (PM's daily engagements) not included

Final data

In total, 9,099 attacks were gathered and compiled into data that included information on (i) *the attacker* and (ii) *the target* (see Appendix A). To be able to test my hypotheses, I recoded this data into dyadic data where each dyad constitutes a unit of observation of whether one party chose to attack another party during a particular QT (total N = 21,254; per-country information in Appendix B). In other words, the final dataset shows for each QT whether somebody from party A decided to attack someone from party A[6], B, C, D, etc., or not. Parties that did not take part during a particular QT (i.e. parties that did not get a chance to speak) were not included in dyadic data (see Appendix B for data structure and for the list of parties in the sample). For example, during a QT that took place in June 2020 in the UK, five parties spoke during the PMQ, resulting in 25 party dyads (5^2), but in July, six parties spoke resulting in 36 dyads (6^2). Steps which have led to dyadic data are showcased in Figure 2.

[6] Intra-party attacks are also considered.

Figure 2. Methodological steps leading to dyadic data



Note: See more in Appendix A (attack data) and Appendix B (dyadic data)

Variables

Attack. There is one main dependent variable (DV) in this study that has a binary outcome indicating whether an attack for a specific dyad took place during a QT or not. Hence, the DV indicates whether a party attacks (1) or not (0) in each dyad during a particular QT (attacks that cannot be specifically tied to a particular party are dropped, e.g. attacks towards independent MPs, Coalition Governments, Coalitions etc.). While this approach obscures the quantity of attacks one party directs towards another during a particular QT, this does not pose a problem for the purpose of this study as it aims to identify the strategic decisions of parties on *who* to attack and *when* to attack. The decision on *how much* to attack is beyond the scope of this paper.[7]

Election date. Given that QTs were sampled on a monthly basis, this variable indicates how many months have passed since the date of the last election (for a similar approach to measure time elapsed in between elections see e.g. Borghetto and Belchior, 2020). Therefore, this variable indicates election closeness[8] (bigger the value, closer the election). For example, if a QT took place in May 2012, while the previous election was held in May 2010, then the value of this variable is 24.

Status. This is a categorical variable that explains the direction of a dyad based on parties' government or opposition status (O→G; G→O; G→G; O→O). As such, a dyad that indicates whether the Labour attacked the Conservative party during a QT in December 2018 when Conservatives are in power

[7] Out of all dyads with attacks, 51% contain 1 attack, 23% contain 2 attacks and 8% contain 3 attacks. As such, the share of dyads that go above 3 attacks is below 20%.

[8] This variable can also be operationalised as an 'election expectation' that measures the months until the next election (i.e. accounting for snap elections; see Appendix G4).

is classified as opposition towards government (O→G). This is an improvement with respect to previous studies that did apply a dyadic structure in their data but did not classify the direction of attacks between governing and opposing parties (Haselmayer and Jenny, 2018) and/or only looked at differences (see below *Ideology*) between parties in a dyad (e.g. Ridout and Holland 2010; Walter, 2014a).

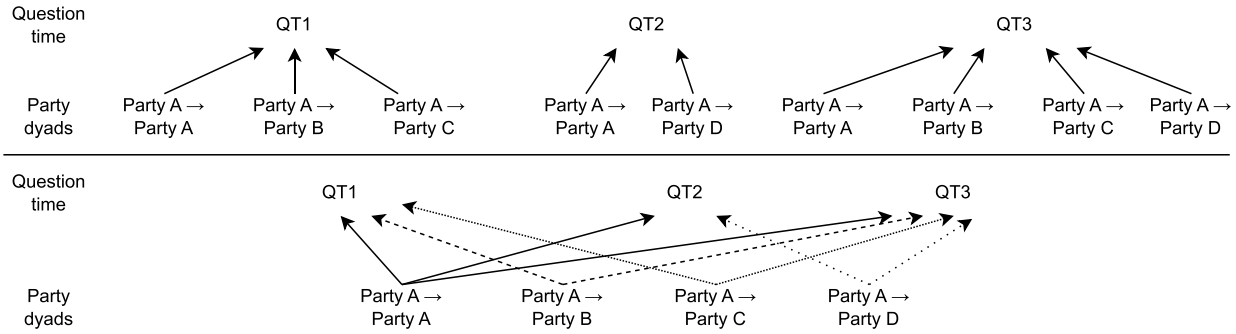
Ideology. A continuous variable that indicates the absolute distance between ideological positions of parties in a dyad. An ideology score closer to 0 indicates ideologically proximate parties while a score closer to 1 indicates ideologically distant parties. Ideological distance is calculated by assigning ideological scores to each party based on the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES; variable *lrgen*) trend data (Bakker et al., 2020) which covers ideological shifts parties make through the years, and then calculating the absolute difference in scores between parties in dyads (see Appendix B for descriptive statistics for each variable).

Method

Given that the final dataset has a hierarchical structure, mixed-effects multilevel logistical regressions are used to test the hypotheses. There are two levels in this model, namely, (i) a specific QT that is nested in a parliamentary term within one country (N=257) and (ii) all possible party dyads during that particular QT (Min = 9; Max = 169; Mean = 73.1; per country info in Appendix B). Since each dyad is observed once for each QT, but can be featured in multiple QTs, a multiple membership multilevel model is used (that is also appropriate for hierarchical panel data; see more in Chung and Beretvas; 2012). This approach accounts for the fact that identical party dyads in different QTs are not independent (lower level dyads are crossed in higher level QTs in which they appear; see Figure 3).[9] In other words, every dyad has a unique ID (e.g. dyad that indicates whether Conservatives attacked Labour in the UK) which allows the model to account for the fact that most dyads re-appear in different QTs (e.g. Conservative→Labour dyad is featured in every QT in the UK). This model is then used to evaluate the hypotheses. A country control variable is also added to account for differences in dyads/QTs, as well as controls for inter-annual changes. Parties that are not included in CHES are dropped when running these models (i.e. each dyad in which they appear; final N of dyads: 18,743).

[9] While general multilevel modelling is not new to the literature studying party attacks (e.g. Nai and Sciarini, 2018: Walter et al., 2014), the usage of the multi-membership model that accounts for the complex reality of parties' animosity (or disinterest) in one-another has, to the best of my knowledge, never been considered.

Figure 3. Regular multi-level model (above) vs. multi-membership multi-level model (below)

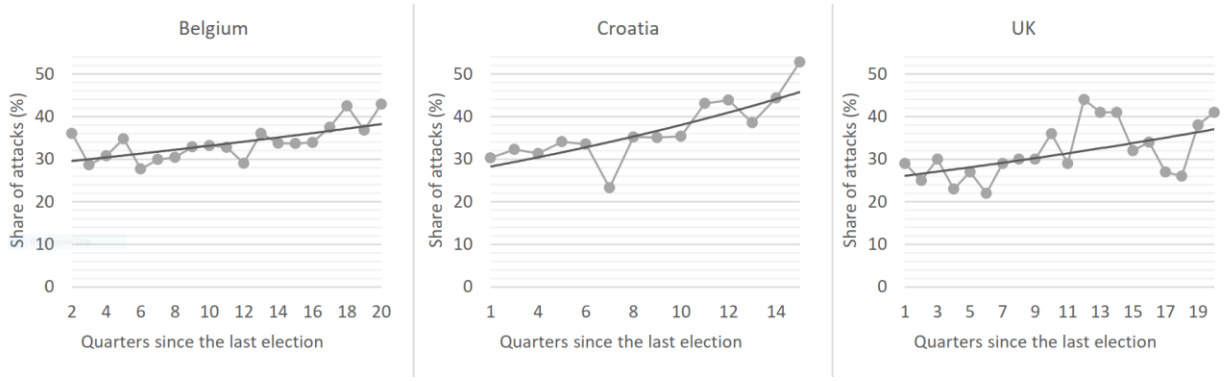


Note: Based on Figures 1 and 2 in Chung and Beretvas, 2012; Party-dyads indicate all possible attacks if the possible attacker is Party A which spoke during every QT.

Results

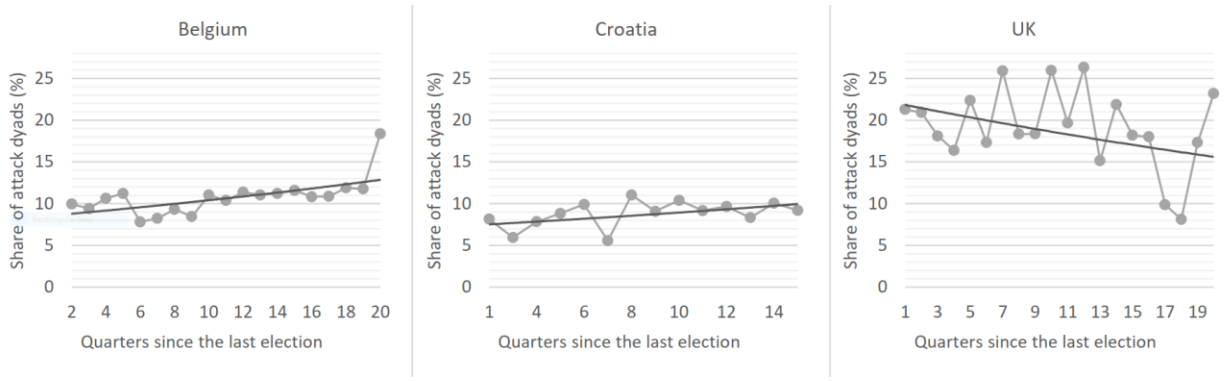
Before discussing the regression results, I first present some descriptive results. Figure 4 shows the evolution of the share of speech contributions with attacks (within the pool of all speech contributions that were made during QTs) over time (per quarters since the last election). In all three countries, a trend can be observed indicating that attacks during QTs increase as we move towards the next election. Furthermore, Figure 5 shows the evolution of the share of attack dyads in each country (within the pool of all possible dyads) over time (per quarters since the last election). In Belgium and Croatia, we observe a slight rising trend in the share of attack dyads as we move through the electoral cycle. This means that we can expect slightly more parties to attack each other closer to the next election. In the UK, however, we observe an overall decreasing trend. A notable exception to this decreasing trend is the rise in attack dyads in the final two quarters before an election. While these figures indicate some support for H1, they also show that parties' attack behaviour can be a stable phenomenon as the share of attacks does not diverge a lot throughout the parliamentary term. In other words, out of all possible party dyads in Belgium and Croatia, on average 11% and 9% of them exhibit attack behaviour respectively. In the UK, which has a lower amount of parties and dyads, this share is about 19%.

Figure 4. The share of attacks in all speech contributions during investigated QTs (per quarters since the last election)



Note: These results are generated using the initial raw data on speech contributions that was manually coded to indicate presence of attacks

Figure 5. The share of attacks in all party dyads during investigated QTs (per quarters since the last election)

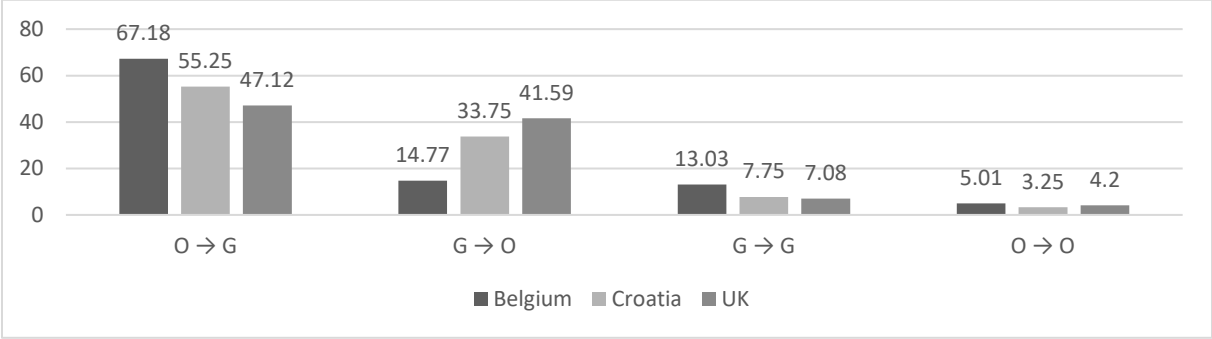


Note: These results are generated using dyadic data that indicates which party dyads contain attacks out of all possible dyads during QTs (see Appendix B). / The shares are higher for the UK because the amount of possible party dyads is smaller compared to Belgium and Croatia

Next, regarding H2 and H3, all attack dyads are categorised based on the status (government vs. opposition) of the attacker and the target. Figure 6 shows the relative share of each 'attack direction' in the total pool of attack dyads for each country. As this figure indicates, the opposition attacking the government is the most prevalent attack direction, followed by the government attacking the opposition. This shows strong support for H2, i.e., the opposition is more likely to attack the government than vice-versa. However, note that the governments in the UK do appear to be equally willing to attack the opposition (for this exception in the UK see also Walter et al. 2014: 563). H3, i.e., the government is equally likely to attack the opposition and the government only appears to hold in Belgium. The share of attacks Belgian governing parties direct towards the opposition and themselves is roughly the same. On the other

hand, in Croatia and the UK the share of attacks between governing parties is much smaller than the share of attacks from governing parties towards the opposition. The least amount of attacks occurs between opposition parties in all three countries.

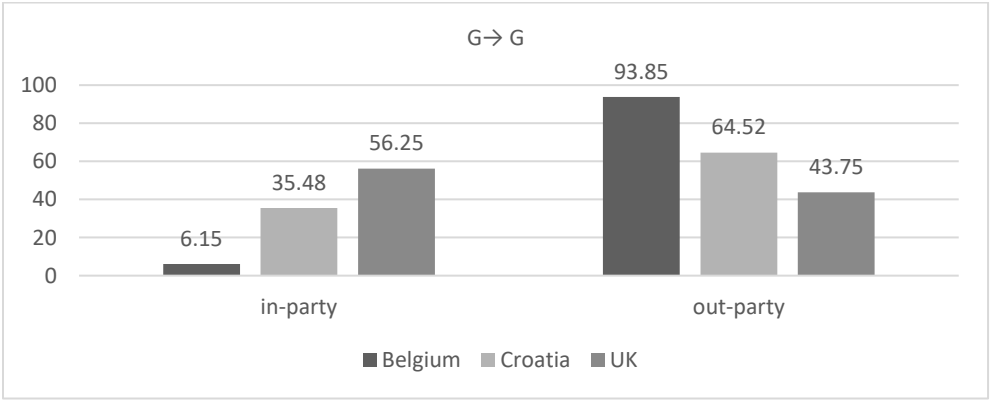
Figure 6. Attacks distributed across four potential directions per country (%)



Note: → indicates the direction of the attack

Zooming in on intra-governmental attacks, Figure 7 shows the share of internal party criticisms (politicians attacking their own party, colleagues and/or themselves) and external criticism towards coalition partners, out of all G→G-attacks. As can be seen, as we move from Belgium to Croatia and the UK the share of internal-party criticism increases, and the share of external attacks decreases. This indicates, for example, that the governing Conservative MPs in the UK are almost equally willing to attack their own party and their coalition partners during this study period (LD; DUP). In contrast, Belgium's governing parties are predominantly focused on attacking coalition partners during QTs. This is in line with the argument that systems where voters vote for parties try to limit intra-party criticism, unlike systems where voters vote for candidates (see Proksch and Slapin, 2012).

Figure 7. Share of in-party and out-party attacks (%) out of all G → G attacks



To inspect how ideology plays a role in attack behaviour (H4), each party is assigned an ideological party family (those families that can be rank-ordered from left to right[10]). Table 1 shows the relative share of occurrence of all attack dyads between party families. These results show some support for H4. In other words, we can observe that parties do not frequently attack ideologically proximate families (lighter grey cells), nor do they frequently attack the most ideologically distant families (darker grey cells). The maximum share of attacks from a certain family is usually directed towards families that are somewhere in the middle of the spectrum between the attacker and the most distant party family (not the case for Christian democrats; all of these findings are consistent in each county – see Appendix C).

Table 1. Distribution of attacks by party family (attacker) towards other party families (targets) (%)

		ATTACKER						
		Radical left	Green	Social.-Dem	Chris.-Dem.	Liberal	Conservative	Radical right
TARGET	Radical left	0	0	1.39	1.01	4.29	2.25	0
	Green	0	0	1.39	5.72	5.63	4.50	2.88
	Social.-Dem.	15.83	14.39	5.20	18.52	**28.95**	**54.50**	24.52
	Chris.-Dem.	15	21.59	19.58	11.45	27.35	13.50	**31.73**
	Liberal	**49.17**	**40.91**	28.25	**39.06**	15.82	17.50	26.44
	Conservative	19.17	21.97	**40.90**	18.86	15.01	5.50	14.42
	Radical right	0.83	1.14	3.29	5.37	2.94	2.25	0
	Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Note: This table should be read top-down. Going top-down in the first column shows the share of attacks radical left parties direct towards each ideological family.

Furthermore, it is also clear that niche parties (radical right, radical left, and green) are less likely to be on the receiving end of an attack compared to mainstream parties. This is because niche parties, unlike mainstream parties, mostly did not hold office in the three studied countries hereby limiting the amount of criticism directed towards them (see H2). For this reason, *status* could be a better predictor of the victim of an attack than *ideology*. However, we can conclude that there is a semi-curved ideology effect where parties attack only the mainstream parties that are ideologically different from them (e.g.

[10] Note that this categorical classification is only used for descriptive purposes. In regressions, I use a continuous measure of the ideological distance.

radical right -> Chris. dem.; liberal -> social. dem., etc.), and not the niche parties (e.g. radical left -> radical right, social. dem. -> radical right, etc.).

Going beyond these descriptive findings, Table 2 presents the results of four multi-level multiple membership regressions analyses. Model 1 shows the results for all countries combined and indicates confirmation for H1, H2, H3 and H4. Regarding *time* (H1), we can see that as we move one month away from the previous election, the probability of attack happening between parties increases significantly. This means that closer to the next election, more attacks between parties are issued. Furthermore, as we compare the four directions of attacks based on party *status*, we can see a significant decrease in the probability of all attack directions compared to the O→G reference direction. This implies that during QTs most attacks go in a direction from the opposition towards the government (H2), followed by attacks from the government towards the opposition (G→O), attacks between government parties (G→G), and attacks between opposition parties (O→O).

Here, we can also observe that the difference in coefficients between G→O and G→G is fairly small meaning that the probability of the government attacking opposition is similar to the probability of the government attacking itself during QTs. As such, when using G→G as a ref. direction (see Appendix D.1), we can see no significant difference in the probability of attacks between G→O and G→G, therefore confirming H3. Lastly, the results also show that for each increase in ideological distance the probability of an attack increases significantly. In other words, we can expect more attacks to take place between parties that have ideologically distant positions compared to parties that have similar or identical positions (H4), indicating that different policy positions indeed drive attack behaviour in parliaments.

Table 2. Multilevel regressions testing probabilities of attacks occurring during QTs

	Model 1 (full)	Model 2 (Belgium)	Model 3 (Croatia)	Model 4 (UK)
	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)
Election date (months since)	.008 (.003) **	.012 (.004) **	.073 (.019) ***	.017 (.008) *
Opp. →Gov. (ref.)				
G→O	-1.298 (.114) ***	-1.683 (.125) ***	-.987 (.269) ***	-.814 (.450) †
G→G	-1.484 (.113) ***	-1.484 (.120) ***	-2.475 (.392) ***	-.750 (.485)
O→O	-3.005 (.140) ***	-3.092 (.154) ***	-4.924 (.543) ***	-3.113 (.463) ***
Ideological distance	2.520 (.483) ***	1.902 (.357) ***	1.781 (1.710)	3.683 (1.951) †
Country (ref. Belgium)				
Croatia	-.335 (.238)	-	-	-
United Kingdom	1.121 (.356) **	-	-	-
Intercept	-2.632 (.290) ***	-2.153 (.294) ***	-7.078 (1.107) ***	-1.685 (.754) *
Variance (QTs)	.320 (.043)	.285 (.044)	.323 (.149)	.149 (.391)
Variance (dyads)	1.671 (.115)	.796 (.080)	3.984 (.696)	1.998 (.407)
N (QTs)	257	103	39	115
N (min. dyads)	9	100	49	9
N (max. dyads)	169	169	144	25
AIC (empty model)	9.540 (10.272)	7.319 (7.899)	1.164 (1.328)	944 (1.016)

Note: †p<0.1; *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001 / Control for years included in every model

Despite finding support for the hypotheses in Model 1, there are certain differences among the three countries as can be seen from the results of Models 2, 3 and 4. For example, we can see that H2 does not hold in the UK as the negative coefficients for attacks between G→O compared to O→G are not on a statistically significant threshold level (p-value is not below .05). This indicates that the probability of governing parties attacking the opposition during QTs equals the probability of attacks in the opposite direction, but also for attacks within the government (insignificant coefficient for G→G when compared to O→G). Furthermore, we can observe that H3 does not hold in Croatia as governing parties are significantly more likely to attack the opposition, rather than themselves (Appendix D.1). Lastly, there is no significant effect of ideology in Croatia and the UK (Model 3/4). This indicates that less polarised party systems with more equal opportunities for parties to attack during QTs (e.g. each Belgian parliamentary party is granted question slots during QTs) are likely to have more attacks based on ideology. This is unlike two-party and polarised party systems that favours two dominant parties during QTs leading conditions on who to attack to be based along majority vs. minority lines (Croatia/the UK).

Robustness checks

Lastly, several robustness tests were run to verify the results (Appendix D). These robustness tests inspect exclusively the attacks made by MPs (in the UK MPs without a cabinet seat), the interactions between IVs, the differences between snap and regular elections, the impact of second-order elections, and the attacks between mainstream vs. niche parties (Belgium) and two main parties vs. third parties (Croatia/the UK). The results of these robustness tests are mostly in line with the main findings presented earlier. For example, the results confirm that the proximity to parliamentary elections (H1) is the main driver for attacks (Appendix D.5), whereas second-order elections have no impact (with an exception for the UK where certain tests indicate that UK parties may be constantly hostile regardless of the proximity to the next elections; see also Figure 5). The robustness tests also reveal that attacks between government parties (G→G) are driven by majority MPs (in Belgium and the UK), and that attacks from the government towards the opposition (G→O) are driven by cabinet members (H3). As such, while the cabinet attacks the opposition, majority MPs are in charge of holding their coalition partners (Belgium) and their own party (UK) accountable. By contrast, in Croatia, majority MPs together with the cabinet go after the opposition (possible reasons for this are presented in Appendix D.2).

Finally, similar to the findings from Table 1 (H4), I found that mainstream parties in Belgium are equally engaging in attacks compared to niche parties (radical right, radical left, and green), both of which go after mainstream parties (Appendix D.6). In Croatia and the UK, the two main parties are even more hostile than third parties, because they are focused on criticising each-other. As such, granting third parties in Croatia and the UK equal share of slots during QTs would likely lead to similar findings that were found in Belgium (i.e. that third-parties attack the two main parties equally as they attack each-other). Most importantly, these findings diverge from campaigns where ideologically radical parties engage the most in attack behaviour. These tests show that mainstream parties become equally (or more) hostile in a parliamentary setting. However, both in campaigns and parliaments, the main targets remain mainstream parties (likely an outcome of their status in the government; H2).

Discussion and conclusion

This paper investigated the conditions under which parties engage in attack behaviour in parliaments. The main hypothesis of the paper was that parties strategically attack each other by carefully assessing *when* and *who* to attack. By analysing parties' attacks in three European parliamentary democracies with

different party systems, I found that: (i) parties attack each other in parliaments significantly more when they are closer to election day; (ii) the opposition dominantly attacks the government; (iii) governing parties are equally likely to attack the opposition and themselves; and (iv) ideological distant parties are more likely to attack each other compared to ideologically proximate parties. As such, this paper contributes to the current literature on three levels.

First, literature on parties' attack behaviour is dominantly focused on campaigning venues in the past. By contrast, this study investigated attack behaviour in parliaments outside of campaigns. The results show some similarities with attacks that happen in campaigning venues (i.e. parties engage more in attacks as the election date comes closer and the opposition attacks more compared to the government), but there are some important differences as well. The first difference is that governing parties often engage in attack behaviour, sometimes even to a similar extent as parties in the opposition (Croatia/UK). Governing parties are also known to attack their coalition partners (Belgium) and themselves (UK) through attacks issued by their MPs, whereas cabinet members are in charge of attacking the opposition (not in Croatia where the government is united in solely attacking the opposition). The second difference relates to ideology. While several campaign studies identified that ideology has no impact on attacks, it appears that attacks in parliaments are driven by ideological differences. This is especially true in countries with multi-party systems and equal opportunities in parliaments to attack (Belgium). Additionally, while during campaigns radical parties with the least coalition potential tend to attack the most, in a parliamentary setting, mainstream parties become equally (Belgium) or more likely to attack (Croatia/UK).

Second, the paper expands our understanding with regards to the underlying mechanisms of issue competition in parliaments. We know from previous studies that opposition parties use QTs in parliaments to influence agenda-setting by raising issues that are important to them (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2010). This study contributes to this logic by providing an indication that the opposition also attacks the government in this process. In turn, this issue competition also causes the government to engage in attacks. By receiving criticism from the opposition, the government has the need to fight back and protect their policy record. Furthermore, parties in a ruling coalition may attack their partners to prevent the potential policy drift (Höhmann and Sieberer, 2020), and MPs elected in single-member districts may attack their own governments for policies that may conflict with their constituency's interests (Kam, 2009). As such, it is possible to conclude that attack behaviour is one of the key features of issue competition in parliaments but not necessarily always. While attack strategies during QTs take up one-third of all speech contributions in all three countries, QTs are also likely devoted to praises (i.e. positive campaigning), but also neutral and strictly policy-driven questions, rather than conflict-driven attacks (see

examples of non-attacks in *Appendix - Examples of coding negativity*). Therefore, I advise future studies to be cautious in selecting elements of QTs (such as questions) as a proxy for attacks between politicians, especially further way from the elections.

Third, this study contributes to the parties' attack behaviour literature by methodologically studying parties' attacks from a comparative perspective, while considering both the attacker and the target. As previous studies dominantly dealt with features of the attacker, they failed to identify the target of these attacks. The approach taken in this study has allowed us to uncover some patterns of attack behaviour that were not tested before. For example, the results align the notion from the literature on the politics of legislative debate that parliamentary speeches differ across different systems (Fernandes et al., 2021). In both Belgium and Croatia (proportional elections), there are low levels of intra-party attacks, whereas in the UK (majoritarian elections) parties allow more intra-party conflict.

A potential pathway of future research is to further explore the content and characteristics of these attacks, and who uses these attacks towards whom on an individual level. Future research should also investigate other parliamentary debates that might uncover attack behaviour patterns that, due to the nature of QTs, are overlooked in this paper (attacks between opposition parties can hardly take place). Considering differences in QTs and party-systems, I also encourage the exploration of attack behaviour in different countries than the ones addressed in this paper.

CHAPTER 2

The role of gender in parliamentary attacks and incivility

Abstract

It has been well established that politicians attack their competitors to reach their political goals. As such, there is a considerable amount of literature on their attack behaviour. However, this literature almost exclusively investigates attack behaviour during campaigns, and so far, few studies have addressed the nature of attacks during more routine times in parliaments. This article aims to fill this gap by examining in-parliament attack behaviour and, more specifically, the gender characteristics of attacks. It is theorised that women are less likely to attack and be attacked than men due to the stereotypical gender roles. However, it is anticipated that this compliance to stereotypes diminishes as proximity to elections increases, resulting in women engaging in attacks as much as men. To limit the cost of their divergence, attacks employed by and toward women are expected to be more civil. Lastly, this study argues that adherence to gender stereotypes is stronger in countries with candidate-centred parliamentary systems than party-centred ones. This study finds support for the theoretical framework using longitudinal data on individual attacks in the parliaments of Belgium, Croatia, and the UK. Results confirm that politicians adhere to gender stereotypical roles in parliaments, with women attacking and being targeted less than men, and when women do attack or are targeted, less incivility is employed. Proximity to elections makes both women and men more hostile, but women lower the cost of their increasing attack behaviour by using less incivility, unlike men who increasingly opt for uncivil attacks closer to elections. Additionally, these findings strongly apply in the candidate-centred system of the UK, whereas in the party-centred system of Belgium and Croatia, hardly any support for the theory can be found.

Reference:

Poljak, Ž. (2022). The Role of Gender in Parliamentary Attacks and Incivility. *Politics and Governance*, 10 (4), 286-298. DOI: https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v10i4.5718

Introduction

Politicians use attacks to discredit their competitors and to move toward their political goals. For example, politicians may attack, hoping to lower competitors' approval to secure re-election, entry to office, and policy implementation. As such, much has been written regarding individuals that attack during campaigns, especially through the lens of gender. By surveying politicians, studies have shown how men prioritise attacks during campaigns more compared to women (Herrnson & Lucas, 2006; Maier & Nai, 2021). On the other hand, content studies of campaign messages show that women are known to engage in attacks equally (e.g., Auter & Fine, 2016; Banwart & Bystrom, 2022; Maier, 2015; Walter, 2013) or even more than men (e.g., Evans et al., 2014; Wagner et al., 2017). Despite this abundance of studies, we lack knowledge regarding the gender characteristics of attacks outside campaigns.

Only a handful of recent studies have tackled possible attack behaviour outside campaigns. Focusing on parliamentary speeches, these studies highlighted that men use *adversarial* (Hargrave & Langengen, 2021) and *negative* (Haselmayer et al., 2021) speeches more often than women, which is in line with stereotypical gender roles that see men as more aggressive or dominant (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Although these studies provide a key indication of the gender characteristics of attackers in parliaments, that is, that men probably attack more compared to women, we still do not know who is at the receiving end of these attacks nor how attack behaviour evolves throughout the electoral cycle. Additionally, far too little attention has been paid to how these attacks are executed, especially when attacks diverge from expected gender roles. For example, women in the parliamentary opposition may choose to attack since it is their role to hold the government accountable (De Giorgi & Ilonszki, 2018). Lastly, we still lack a comparative perspective on this subject because previous studies focused their analyses on single-country cases. This limits our knowledge on the subject, given that gender can play a different role across different political systems.

To provide an understanding of these open questions, I follow the role congruency theory of prejudice by Eagly and Karau (2002), which argues that deviations from stereotypical gender roles may cause women to face prejudice. As society considers women as *communal* (e.g., kind) and men as *agentic* (e.g., aggressive), female politicians showing agentic behaviour may end up not reaching their political goals. This is why men are usually considered more likely to attack than women, and this notion appears to hold in parliaments looking at the forms of speeches (Hargrave & Langengen, 2021; Haselmayer et al., 2021). The first aim of this article is to extend this theoretical framework toward targets of attacks. I expect that gender stereotypes also apply to targets, with women receiving fewer attacks than men.

Furthermore, I argue that this gender-conforming behaviour loses its importance as proximity to elections increases, with women and men engaging equally in attack behaviour (Maier, 2015; Walter, 2013).

The second aim of this article is to investigate the manner of attacks in cases when women do assume an *agentic* role, both as an attacker and as a target. I expect incivility, which can be present or absent in an attack, to be the key. Women avoid the cost of showing *agentic* behaviour by using less incivility when they attack compared to men. In turn, all politicians avoid the cost of targeting women, perceived as *communal*, by using less incivility. Lastly, I integrate this framework with the literature on the politics of legislative debate (Fernandes et al., 2021), arguing that adherence to stereotypical gender roles is stronger in parliaments oriented at candidates rather than parties.

These hypotheses are tested for the parliaments of Belgium (2010–2020), Croatia (2010–2021), and the UK (2010–2020). I use data on attacks and incivility employed by individual politicians during parliamentary question time sessions (QTSs). Results show that women are indeed less likely to attack or be attacked than their male colleagues. Women are also less likely to use incivility when they attack, and are less likely to be attacked in an uncivil manner when compared to men. Furthermore, both men and women engage in attacks more frequently as elections approach, but women compensate for this by using less incivility, unlike men, who are more likely to employ incivility closer to elections. Lastly, the comparative design of this study confirms that adherence to gender stereotypes is much stronger in the UK, a country with a political system in which candidates independently run for office in single-member districts. In the party-driven systems of Belgium and Croatia, in which citizens vote for parties and not candidates, politicians are less likely to conform to gender stereotypes. As such, these results provide a valuable understanding of the role gender can play in attacks and the incivility used in parliamentary venues.

Attack Politics in Parliaments: Gender Perspective

To analyse the role of gender in parliamentary attacks, I rely on the role congruency theory of prejudice by Eagly and Karau (2002). This theory argues that women face prejudice based on (a) how they behave (descriptive prejudice) and (b) how they should behave (prescriptive prejudice). These prejudices are rooted in stereotypical gender roles that see women as *communal* (i.e., kind, sympathetic, friendly, gentle) and men as *agentic* (i.e., aggressive, dominant, self-confident). Therefore, for instance, if a woman

diverges from *communal* behaviour toward *agentic* behaviour, this would negatively impact her reputation (Eagly & Karau, 2002, p. 576).

This broad notion was used by scholars who explored gender differences in attacks during campaigns. Through a survey method with politicians, some studies have demonstrated that female candidates are hesitant to employ attacks in their campaigning strategies (Herrnson & Lucas, 2006; Maier & Nai, 2021). However, content studies of campaigns generally show women to be equally negative as men (Bystrom, 2004). For example, a study of the recent 2020 US Senate race has shown that both female and male candidates used an equal number of attacks in TV ads (Banwart & Bystrom, 2022). At the same time, experts rated Trump's and Clinton's campaigns during the 2016 presidential elections as negative (Nai & Maier, 2018). Furthermore, a study on attack behaviour in party broadcasts in the UK, Netherlands, and Germany found no differences between the attacks made by parties with female and male leaders (Walter, 2013); a similar finding can be observed in German television debates (Maier, 2015). Some studies have even shown female politicians to be more likely to attack than men (e.g., Evans et al., 2014; Wagner et al., 2017). These non-stereotypical findings were explained by the hypothesis that women try to escape *communal* stereotypes by attacking equally (or more frequently) to show voters that they are fit for political roles that are considered *agentic* (Gordon et al., 2003).

Despite these non-stereotypical findings in campaigns, European literature on attacks outside these periods has identified more gender-conforming attack behaviour. More specifically, Hargrave and Langengen (2021) and Haselmayer et al. (2021) recently looked at differences in speech styles between female and male members of parliament (MPs) in the national parliaments of the UK and Austria, respectively. While controlling for already established predictors, such as the difference between government and opposition, they identify that women employ less adversarial and negative speeches than men. These findings are also in line with Ketelaars (2019), who surveyed Belgian politicians (including members of the parliament) outside campaigns, finding that men prioritise attacking strategies more than women. Therefore, unlike campaigns, these studies corroborate the expectations set by the role congruence theory.

The causes of contrasting behaviour in parliaments and campaigns may be linked to the more versatile approach female politicians are expected to take to achieve their political goals. In other words, female politics are caught in a double bind between behaving in a *communal* manner (as is expected because they are women) and an *agentic* manner (as is expected because they are politicians). Given that citizens perceive politicians as *agentic*, female politicians need to escape *communal* stereotypes during

campaigns by attacking as much as men to secure re-election (Gordon et al., 2003; Maier, 2015). However, in parliaments, politicians compete over policy goals, such as pushing for a specific issue to be high on the agenda (Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2010) or trying to acquire ownership over issues (Otjes & Louwerse, 2018). As such, female politicians may evaluate that *communal* behaviour benefits achieving their policy aspirations, while *agentic* behaviour benefits their re-election aspirations.

However, this argument raises the question of why female politicians would conform to *communal* behaviour in parliaments if they already show *agentic* behaviour during campaigns. The cause of this may be due to parliamentary venues traditionally being workplaces that adhere to gender stereotypes (Erikson & Verge, 2022). Therefore, female politicians opting for *communal* behaviour in a dominantly gender-conforming venue such as parliaments provide a greater chance to profile certain policies higher on the agenda or secure their implementation. This is in contrast to campaigning venues, where expectations come from voters who see politics and politicians as *agentic*, which leads to a shift in female politicians' behaviour. Male politicians, in turn, can opt for *agentic* behaviour both in parliaments and campaign venues, as both align with their stereotypical gender roles (parliament) and expectations of them as politicians (campaigns). This is why I hypothesise that women will be less likely to attack in parliaments when compared to men (H1a). However, because of the inevitable elections and the double bind that encourages women to engage in *agentic* behaviour during campaigns, it is expected that the effect of H1a decreases as proximity to the upcoming election increases (H1b).

H1a: Female politicians are less likely to attack compared to male politicians in parliaments.

H1b: The effect of H1a decreases as proximity to elections increases.

Still, if parliaments dominantly represent venues for gender-conforming behaviour to maximise political goals, it is unclear how this translates toward targets of parliamentary attacks. This is why I extend the theoretical framework by arguing that stereotypical gender roles apply not only to the mere decision to attack (or not) but also to a decision of whom to target in an attack. Namely, if most politicians abide by gender-stereotypical behaviour in parliament, with men attacking more than women (H1a), it is also very likely that men are targeted more than women. This decision to attack men more frequently also stems from the role congruency theory, whereby female politicians, due to their association with *communal* roles, are not seen as possible targets of attacks that would otherwise place them in an *agentic*

context. Therefore, if an attacker targets a woman, who is not associated with *agentic* norms like men, this may backfire, causing the attacker to be perceived with disapproval because the decision of who to target diverges from expected gender roles (for a somewhat similar claim, see Haselmayer et al., 2021, p. 6). As such, attacking women who are seen as *communal* can be costly for the attacker. This is unlike attacks that target men who are seen as *agentic*, so targeting them and placing them in an agentic framework is expected and can even be beneficial (Fridkin et al., 2009). This is why I argue that female politicians are less likely to be attacked than male politicians in parliaments (H2a). Regardless, given the expectation that behaviour tends to be more *agentic* due to the increasing proximity of the election campaign and vote-seeking goals, it may be that the boomerang effect of attacking female politicians also decreases closer to elections as more attacks are issued. Hence, I argue that the impact of H2a decreases as proximity to elections increases (H2b).

H2a: Female politicians are less likely to be targeted compared to male politicians in parliaments.

H2b: The effect of H2a decreases as proximity to elections increases.

At the same time, there are other predictors for behaviour in parliaments, such as a politician being part of the opposition or the government (Hix & Noury, 2016). We know from the parliamentary literature that the opposition is expected to hold the government accountable (De Giorgi & Ilonszki, 2018). This is because the government holds the keys to the office and has policy perks, which makes it a target of attacks (sometimes even from the majority benches; e.g., Kam, 2009; Martin & Whitaker, 2019). Therefore, depending on their role in the political system (i.e., cabinet, majority, or opposition), politicians may feel pressured to behave contrary to the gender stereotypes in parliaments. For instance, women in the opposition may be required to be critical and employ *agentic* behaviour. Their role is hence at odds with the *communal* perception expected of them in gender-conforming parliaments, which may hurt their policy goals (H1a). Similarly, female politicians in the government, due to their position, are expected to be targets of attacks. However, because of gender stereotypes, aggressive behaviour towards female cabinet members may backfire (H2a).

This begs the following question: How do politicians balance the costs and the benefits of attacking and being targeted when they diverge from gender stereotypes in parliaments? I expect incivility, seen as a communication interaction that violates social norms (see more in Walter, 2021), to

be a possible answer. To appease gender stereotypes, there will be less incivility whenever women do attack or are targeted (H3a/H4a). For example, when the government's policy fails, female politicians in the opposition will likely have to engage in attack behaviour. However, to limit the cost of diverting from the gender stereotype (which may cause prejudice and hurt their goals), female politicians will try to be as polite as possible. In turn, their male colleagues are expected to employ more incivility due to the *agentic* nature of incivility not being costly for them (Bauer et al., 2022; Goovaerts & Turkenburg, 2022). Furthermore, I also expect female targets to be less likely to receive an uncivil attack since campaigning studies show that the presence of women in political debates lowers incivility (Maier & Renner, 2018). This means that all politicians, when forced to target a woman, will restrain from uncivil language. In turn, when targets are males, incivility is more likely to be employed. Lastly, if there is pressure closer to the election to increase non-stereotypical gender behaviour (H1b/H2b), then it is also plausible to expect that the usage of incivility in attacks decreases to compensate for such divergence (H3b/H4b).

H3a: Female politicians are less likely to attack using incivility compared to male politicians in parliaments.

H3b: The effect of H3a increases as proximity to elections increases.

H4a: Female politicians are less likely to be targeted with incivility compared to male politicians in parliaments.

H4b: The effect of H4a increases as proximity to elections increases.

Lastly, while it is expected that there is gender-conforming behaviour in parliamentary venues, there may be differences across different systems (Hargrave & Langengen, 2021, p. 583). This is why I borrow the distinction from the emerging literature on the politics of legislative debate regarding candidate vs party-centred systems (Fernandes et al., 2021). If citizens elect candidates, there is more importance on individual politicians and their own reputations during parliamentary debates (Proksch & Slapin, 2012). However, if citizens elect parties, there is a stronger emphasis on the party brand that diminishes individual characteristics. For example, scholars have shown how in the candidate-driven parliament of the UK, there can be a disconnect between what politicians from the same party feature on their issue agendas (Bevan & John, 2016) with individual politicians focusing on representing their individual constituencies (Blumenau & Damiani, 2021). This is unlike the party-driven parliaments of

Belgium, for example, where there is strong party discipline concerning issues that need to be addressed (Peeters et al., 2021).

Because of this, I argue that politicians in candidate-dominated systems are more prone to gender-congruent attack behaviour because there is more emphasis on them as individuals. As such, if female politicians in candidate-driven parliaments divert from stereotypical behaviour, there is much on the line. For example, they may face the consequence of not securing a policy that would be beneficial for their electoral constituency. They may also have to deal with disapproval from the party leadership that may prevent them from seeking re-election in a constituency, especially if there are no gender-related legislative quotas to secure certainty of women re-appearing on ballots. Such a context is unlike party-driven systems where parties provide a certain level of protection from individual gender-incongruent attack behaviour. For example, even if female politicians face the cost of diverting from gender stereotypes in these systems, they can still secure their policy through their party and rely on voters electing their parties, not them individually. This may further be enhanced with gender quotas which would ensure female politicians' spots on a ballot to seek re-election despite diverting from stereotypical gender roles.

H5a: Female politicians adhere more to gender-congruent attack behaviour in candidate-centred compared to party-centred parliaments.

Methodology

Cases

I test my expectations on parliamentary QTSs from the (federal) parliaments of Belgium (*Vragenuur*), Croatia (*Aktualno prijepodne*), and the UK (*Prime Minister's Questions* [PMQs]). I work with these debates because they present high gain opportunities for politicians to reach their goals due to the heavy media exposure QTSs tend to receive (Osnabrügge et al., 2021; Salmond, 2014). This makes it a perfect case of parliamentary politics to explore whether there are gender differences in attack strategies that seek to fulfil politicians' goals. This was empirically demonstrated in several studies conducted on QTSs from Belgium (Sevenans & Vliegenthart, 2016; Vliegenthart & Walgrave, 2011), Croatia (Kukec, 2022), and the UK (Bevan & John, 2016; Seeberg, 2020b) which have shown how politicians use QTSs to fulfil their policy

aspiration, such as placing issues higher on the agenda and trying to pursue voters to elect them at the upcoming elections.

Furthermore, I work with Belgium, Croatia, and the UK because of vast differences in (a) how these QTSs are structured across these three countries and (b) possibilities (and incentives) for female representatives to engage in QTSs. This is important as it allows to test the theory in a robust setting across highly different cases, ensuring a certain level of generalisation while lowering possible selection bias (e.g., studying a specific context of low female representation, which can have implications for parliamentary behaviour; see Childs & Krook, 2008). Given the importance of these differences, I will reflect on them in greater detail.

Regarding QTS differences, these are highly rooted in the electoral (party) system of each country. Namely, due to the proportional elections where citizens elect parties, the parliaments of Belgium and Croatia are an example of party-driven venues. This party-driven context is reflected in parliamentary procedures where it is parties, and not individual politicians, that are granted slots to ask questions to the cabinet during QTSs (weekly in Belgium; quarterly in Croatia). In Belgium, which can be described as a partitocracy, each major party is granted an equal number of slots during QTSs. In Croatia, which does not have such a strong and stable party system as Belgium, slots during QTSs are granted based on the share of seats. This rule favours two major competing parties in Croatia that employ strong party discipline in QTSs (see Kukec, 2022). As a result, politicians are usually expected to follow party lines during QTSs in both countries. For example, studies from Belgium (De Vet & Devroe, 2023) and Croatia (Šinko & Širinić, 2017) have highlighted how female politicians during (plenary) QTSs tend to profile soft issues, unlike men who deal with hard issues (see also Bäck & Debus, 2019). This is a likely outcome of a strong party discipline during high-profile debates, such as QTSs, where parties select politicians to raise issues that fit their profile (De Vet & Devroe, 2023). While both countries allow preferential voting, this mechanism provides little incentive for politicians to deviate from their parties, as entry to the parliament based on preferential voting is difficult to achieve in both Belgium (Van Erkel & Thijssen, 2016) and Croatia (Picula, 2020). Both countries also have gender quotas that try to ensure that the share of women and men on ballots remains fairly equal, providing a safety net for female parliamentarians already elected to (possibly) re-appear on a party's ballot.

The UK parliament, on the other hand, can best be described as candidate-driven due to the majoritarian elections where citizens elect politicians in single-member districts (Proksch & Slapin, 2012). This doesn't mean that parties are not as important as in Belgium and Croatia, as they still play a major

role in getting a politician elected to the parliament (Blumenau & Damiani, 2021, p. 779), and no gender-related legislative quotas are imposed on parties when determining who will run for a party in constituencies. However, once inside the parliament, parties have an incentive to let politicians act in their own personal interest and that of the constituency they represent (Blumenau & Damiani, 2021; Proksch & Slapin, 2012). This is in line with parliamentary procedures as QTSs in the UK (specifically PMQs) are structured by individual questions asked to the prime minister (PM; or a cabinet member when the PM is absent). Only the opposition leaders are granted secure slots to question the PM, while other members who want to question the PM are decided by a random shuffle. This provides less interference from the party leadership and allows politicians to have a certain level of autonomy during QTSs.

Regarding differences in (descriptive) female representation, although all three countries had both male and female PMs, ministers, and party leaders participating in QTSs, the representation of female politicians during QTSs differs vastly (see Table 1). Belgium has a high share of females elected in the parliament, with an average of 39.2% for the last four elections. However, looking at the randomly selected sample of QTSs during the two full parliamentary terms that took place in the 2010s, female politicians were generally underrepresented by nine percentage points in QTSs compared to the share of how many were elected. In turn, Croatia has a significantly lower share of elected female representatives than Belgium (the average for the last five elections is 18%); however, they tend to be overrepresented during QTSs in the last decade. Finally, the UK is somewhere between Belgium and Croatia regarding elected female representatives, with an average of 27% of females elected for the past five elections. Furthermore, unlike in Belgium and Croatia, representation during QTSs in the UK (determined by a random shuffle) generally ensures a fairly equal representation of female MPs during QTSs. As such, with this case selection, we capture parliaments that typically provide lower (Belgium), equal (UK), or higher (Croatia) possibilities for female politicians to participate in QTSs, which makes the chance of selection bias lower than if we had worked with one specific parliamentary setting.

Table 1. The share of women elected to the parliament and the average share of women that participated in QTs

Country	Term	Share of elected female politicians*	Average share of female politicians per QT **	Difference
Belgium	2007-2010	36.7	37.2	+0.5
	2010-2014	39.3	30.4	-8.9
	2014-2018	39.3	30.5	-8.8
	2018-2023	41.3	41.4	+0.1
Croatia	2007-2011	20.9	29.5	+8.6
	2011-2015	19.9	23.4	+3.5
	2015-2016	15.2	16.7	+1.5
	2016-2020	12.6	20.4	+7.8
	2020-2024	23.2	30.4	+7.2
UK	2005–2010	19.8	18.1	-1.7
	2010–2015	22.0	23.3	+1.3
	2015–2017	29.4	28.9	-0.5
	2017–2019	32.0	34.8	+2.8
	2019-2024	33.8	28.5	-5.3

* Based on: The Belgian Institute for the Equality of Women and Men - IGVM, 2022 for Belgium (*Chamber of Representatives*); Šinko, 2016 for Croatia; Allen, 2020 for the UK (*House of Commons*). ** Indicates average share of females that participate per QT in the sampled period (N= 261). More detailed descriptive results are available in Appendix F.

Speech data during QTSs

To explore attack behaviour and incivility usage longitudinally during QTSs in all three countries, I randomly sampled one QTS per month from January 2010 to December 2020 (2021 for Croatia). This resulted in a total of 261 QTSs in my sample, which covered all quarterly QTSs in Croatia (N = 43; 100%) and 1/3 of all weekly QTSs in Belgium (N = 103; 30.4% out of all QTSs) and the UK (N = 115; 32.7%). To generate raw data on individual politicians who attacked and were targeted within these QTSs (and whether incivility was involved), I scraped transcripts of sampled QTSs from official parliamentary websites where units of observation constitute every speech contribution during the sessions. Protocol speeches such as speakers moderating the debate (only in Croatia) or the UK's PMs listing their engagements at the start of every PMQ were not included in this data (Belgium N = 6,634; Croatia N = 5,679; UK N = 7,731).

Four coders, together with the author, performed a quantitative content analysis on these speech contributions in which the main goal was to collect information on attacks (a six-week training process with reliability scores is presented in *Appendix – Coder training*). Coders had to carefully read each speech contribution during QTSs and identify (a) if an attack was present or absent. The codebook defines attacks

following Geer (2006) as all criticism directed toward political competitors but also extends this to internal attacks as parties are prone to intra-party dissent in parliaments (Kam, 2009), and coalition partners may hold each-other accountable (Martin & Whitaker, 2019). Therefore, attacks can only be directed towards formal political actors seen as individuals (e.g., PM, Ministers), parties (e.g., Conservatives, Labour), or groups of parties (e.g., opposition, coalition, government). Attacks directed towards informal actors (e.g., the army, NGOs, foreign actors) are not coded.

If a speech unit was coded as containing an attack, coders proceeded to code (b) if there was a presence of incivility. As stated in the theory, incivility is operationalised as a communicative interaction between political actors that violates social norms (Walter, 2021) and is therefore nested in attacks (i.e., attacks can either have incivility present or absent). As such, any form of name-calling, mocking, or insulting language used in attacks on politicians and their policies was coded as incivility. Lastly, coders also had to indicate who was on the receiving end of the attack, and in the case of multiple attacks, coders coded each attack separately. As such, in one speech unit, one actor may have attacked both Minister A and B, so coders had to indicate for both targets separately whether they were attacked with incivility or not. In total, 6,643 speeches or 33.2% had at least one attack present (Belgium 32.7%; Croatia 36.8; UK 30.9%) and the overall number of attacks was 9,485 (Belgium N = 3,117; Croatia N = 3,339; UK N = 3,029). 1,735 or 18.3% of all attacks made were employed using incivility (Belgium 23.5%; Croatia 15.4%; UK 16.1%). Examples of civil, uncivil, and non-attacks per country are available in Appendix E.

Final Data

Based on coded speeches, I was able to generate new data to test hypotheses. This data includes all individual politicians that participated during QTSs (Belgium N = 369; Croatia N = 468; UK N = 833) which are observed per each QTS in which they made at least one speech contribution (Belgium N = 2,898; Croatia N = 2,354; UK N = 2,930). As such, on a QTS where 40 politicians spoke (e.g., by asking questions, giving answers, raising points of order), each of these 40 was treated as a unique observation for that particular QTS (see Table 2). This allows me to explore whether these politicians decided to employ an attack (dependent variable 1) and/or were targeted (dependent variable 2) during that particular QTS. In turn, when values in these two variables are 1, it indicates that an actor employed an attack and/or was targeted; data also indicates if incivility was present in any attacks that were employed (dependent variable 3) or received (dependent variable 4). These four constitute binary dependent variables of my study, each of which corresponds to the four hypotheses, while gender (male vs. female) and proximity

to elections (i.e., how many months have passed since the last parliamentary election) present the main independent variables. Speakers that moderate QTSs are omitted because they are bound to attack regularly on QTSs when rules of procedures are not followed.

Four control variables are included in the data: the politician's position (opposition, majority, or cabinet), country, ideology, and inter-annual (yearly) dummies. Ideology is generated using Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) data (Jolly et al., 2022), where the average ideological scores of each party in the studied period are attributed to their respective members. These scores are then calculated for divergence from the political centre, with 0 indicating the political centre. As such, the bigger the score, the more ideologically extreme politicians are. Descriptive statistics for variables are available in Appendix F.

Table 2. Example of the final dataset

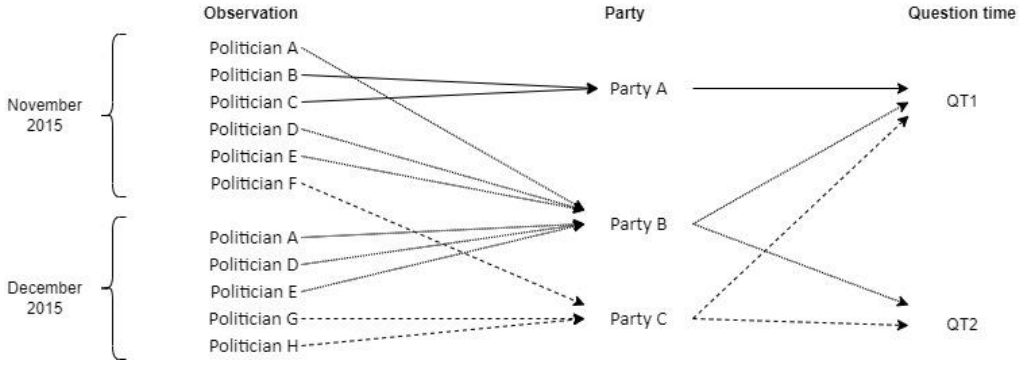
N	Date	Prox. Elect.	Politician	Party	Gender	Employing attack	Getting targeted	Attacking with incivility	Getting targeted with incivility
7,954	13.2.2019	20	Theresa May	Con	1	1	1	1	1
7,955			Helen Whately	Con	1	0	0	-	-
7,956			Craig Mackinlay	Con	0	1	0	0	-
7,957			Jeremy Corbyn	Lab	0	1	1	1	0
7,958			Vicky Foxcroft	Lab	1	0	0	-	-
7,959			Luke Pollard	Lab	0	1	0	0	-
7,960			Liz Saville Roberts	PC	1	0	1	-	0
7,961			Ian Blackford	SNP	0	1	1	1	0
7,962			Mhairi Black	SNP	1	0	0	-	-
(...)			(...)	(...)	(...)	(...)	(...)	(...)	(...)

Note: Only a fraction of data is shown for one QT in the UK

Method

I employ logistic regressions due to the binary nature of my DVs. These regressions are run through multi-level models because data is hieratical, with politicians being observed on two levels: parties (N = 39) and QTSs (N = 261). Both levels are entered as random intercepts in the model in which the level of parties is crossed in the level of QTSs in which they appear (Figure 1). This (multiple-membership) multi-level modelling strategy is important because it accounts for the fact that politicians of each party re-appear as observations throughout my data. As such, this modelling strategy prevents biases where politicians from a certain party may skew the results of the model, while in reality, they all belong to one party that re-appears across the dataset (see Chung & Beretvas, 2012). When running these models, I drop all politicians who are independent or whose parties are not featured in the CHES dataset.

Figure 1. Multi-level model observing politicians per each party crossed in QTSs.



Results

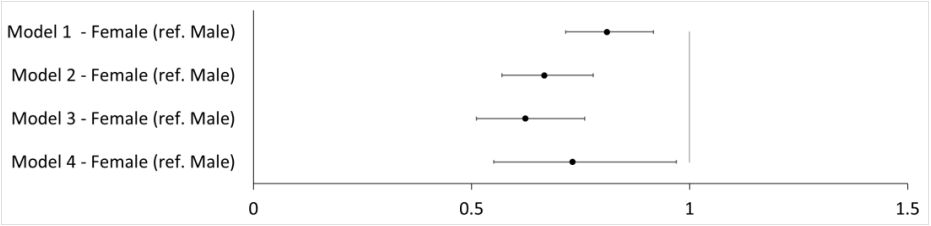
I will first test my five main hypotheses (H1a–5a), after which I will explore trends as the proximity to parliamentary elections increases (H1b–4b). The results from my main models are reported in Table 1 and Figure 2. As can be seen, the results show support for H1a, H2a, H3a, and H4a (for descriptive analyses, see Appendix G). Odds that female politicians will attack (H1a), be targeted (H2a), use incivility when they attack (H3a), and be targeted with incivility (H4a) during QTSs significantly decrease when compared to their male colleagues. Overall, these multivariate analyses show strong support for the main theory of this article on how women and men behave according to their stereotypical gender roles in parliamentary attacks. Furthermore, when women need to attack, such as when they are in the opposition, we can expect them to be less likely to employ incivility. Lastly, when women are at the receiving end of attacks, there is a greater chance that these attacks will be civil, unlike those that target men.

Table 3. Multi-level regressions testing probabilities of engaging in attacks during QTs

	Model 1	**Model 2**	**Model 3**	**Model 4**
	DV1: Employing attack (1=Yes)	DV2: Getting targeted (1=Yes)	DV3: Attacking with incivility (1=Yes)	DV4: Getting targeted with incivility (1=Yes)
	Coef. (S.E.)	Coef. (S.E.)	Coef. (S.E.)	Coef. (S.E.)
Male politicians (ref.)				
Female politicians	**-.210 (.062) ****	**-.405 (.079) *****	**-.473 (.101) *****	**-.312 (.144) ***
Proximity to Elections	.013 (.002) ***	.007 (.002) **	.008 (.003) **	.008 (.005) †
Ideology	1.493 (.855) †	.358 (1.072)	3.072 (.887) **	.056 (1.072)
Opposition MPs (ref.)				
Majority MPs	-2.869 (.102) ***	-3.082 (.158) ***	-1.129 (.157) ***	-.418 (.326)
Cabinet politicians	-2.497 (.107) ***	1.112 (.103) ***	.140 (.148)	.914 (.155) ***
Belgium (ref.)				
Croatia	.382 (.221) †	.568 (.279) *	-.737 (.259) **	-.331 (.247)
UK	-1.028 (.253) ***	.203 (.338)	.126 (.277)	.365 (.279)
Constant	.908 (.291) **	-1.532 (.345) ***	-1.390 (.327) ***	-1.495 (.401) ***
Variance (QTs)	.364 (.041)	.083 (.146)	.222 (.093)	.260 (.136)
Variance (Parties)	.429 (.096)	.617 (.106)	.430 (.097)	.307 (.129)
N (total)	7,724	7,724	3.140	1.595
N (QTs)	261	261	261	261
N (min. politicians per QT)	13	13	3	1
N (max. politicians per QT)	56	56	37	23
AIC (empty model)	8.140 (9.509)	5.785 (7.707)	3.584 (3.810)	1.938 (1.984)

Note: †p<0.1;*p<0.05;**p<0.01;***p<0.001 / Control for yearly differences included

Figure 2. The odds ratio of the gender variable calculated from the models in Table 3. Notes: Ratios < 1 indicate lower odds of women appearing in an attack compared to men; Horizontal lines indicate confidence intervals (95%); Odds ratio for all variables available in Appendix H.



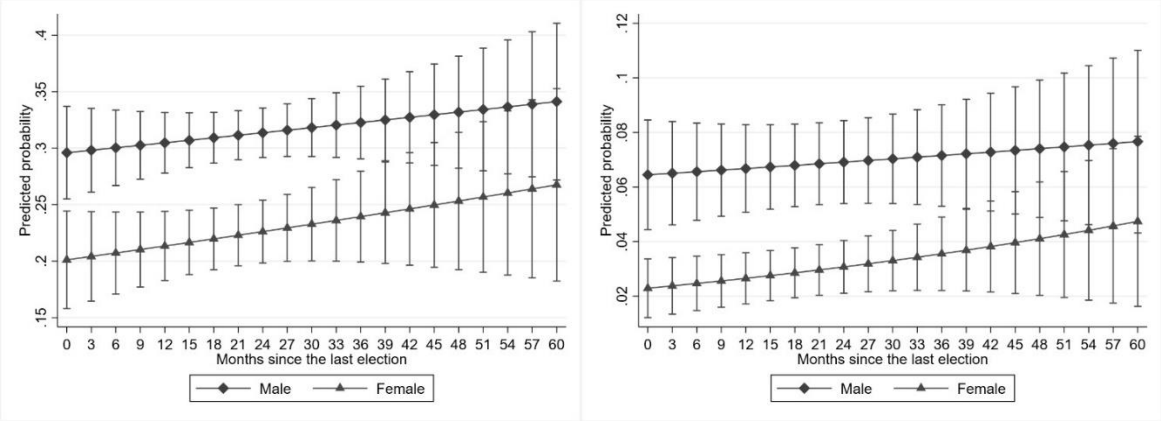
To test H5a, that there are also differences among countries, I run models that interact variables on gender and country. For H1a, H2a and H3a, there is a significant difference across countries, with women conforming to gender expectations more in the UK when compared to Belgium and Croatia (see regressions' output in Appendix I). In addition to that, running models separately in each country further

confirms this. While coefficients in almost every model go in a negative direction (with lower odds of women engaging in attacks and incivility than men), these are significant in the UK but less so in Belgium and Croatia. Specifically, in Belgium, I can reject all hypotheses. In Croatia, I find support for H2a while H3a is relatively close to being significant ($p = 0.071$). In contrast to these two countries, H1a, H2a, H3a, and H4a have support in the UK. As such, there is a strong indication that H5a holds and that gender-conforming behaviour is more visible in the candidate-driven compared to the party-driven parliaments.

Finally, I test H1b-H4b, which argued that women's adherence to gender stereotypes decreases as proximity to the upcoming election increases while the protection mechanism of not using incivility increases. Given the null findings of gender-conforming attack behaviour in Belgium and Croatia, I specifically focus on the case of the UK to test these expectations. Namely, I run models that interact variables on gender and proximity to elections, after which I plot predicted probabilities of these interactions to inspect patterns of attack behaviour throughout the electoral cycle (regressions' output and tests for Belgium and Croatia are available in Appendix J).

As is demonstrated in Figure 3, there is mixed support for H1b and H2b. Namely, gender-conforming behaviour expected from H1a and H2a exists regardless of elections, with women attacking and being targeted significantly less than men throughout the UK electoral cycle. Still, comparing increases in average probabilities throughout the electoral cycle for men and women separately, we can descriptively confirm certain differences. For example, when comparing the first month after an election to the final month before an election, the average probability of an attack being employed increases by 33% for women (from 0.2 to 0.27) and 15.3% for men (from 0.3 to 0.34). As such, on a descriptive level, women do increase their attack behaviour closer to elections more strongly when compared to men. This is likely a result of the double-bind argument in which women have to balance both *communal* and *agentic* norms through time. This is unlike men who can opt for agentic behaviour regardless of elections, making their increase in attack behaviour less profound.

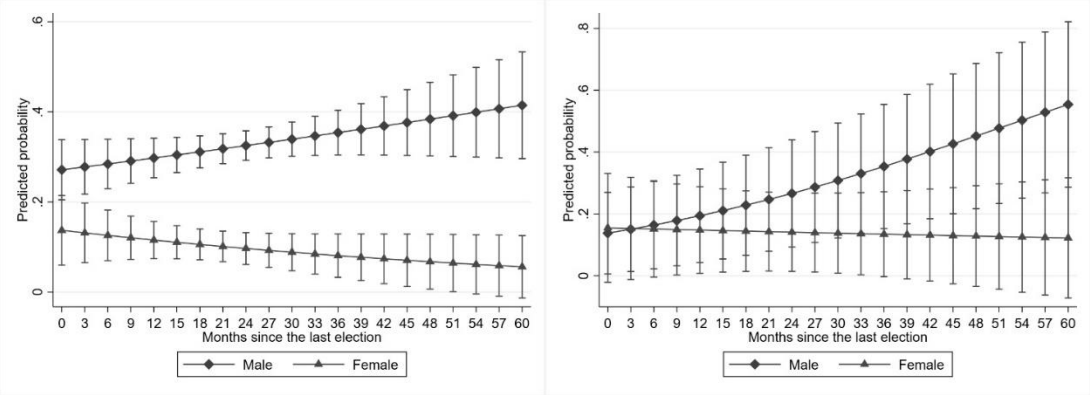
Figure 3. Predicted probabilities for employing attack (left) and being targeted (right) during QTSs in the UK.



Note: Vertical lines indicate confidence intervals (90%).

Moving to incivility usage in attacks, we see that women use incivility less often than men, regardless of the electoral cycle in the UK. However, as is visible in Figure 4, there is merit to H3b. Specifically, closer to elections, as women diverge from gender stereotypical roles by increasing attack behaviour (Figure 3), they also try to increase the protection of such divergence by lowering their usage of incivility. This is unlike men whose incivility increases closer to elections. For example, when the first month after an election is compared to the final month before an election, the average probability of incivility being used in an attack decreases by 57.1% for women (from 0.14 to 0.06) while it increases by 51.9% for men (from 0.27 to 0.41). In turn, regarding H4b, results show how women can be targeted with incivility equally to men, but the increase in receiving uncivil attacks closer to elections is more profound for men, which is in line with H4b. Overall, while expectations regarding H1b–H4b are not confirmed on a level of statistical significance (Appendix J), the evolution of attack behaviour throughout the electoral cycle demonstrated in Figures 3 and 4 shows that there is some ground for the hypothesised outcomes in the UK. This is especially true regarding H3b, with women decreasing and men increasing incivility as the overall attack behaviour increases closer to elections.

Figure 4. Predicted probabilities for employing attack with incivility (left) and being targeted with incivility (right) during QTSs in the UK. Note: Vertical lines indicate confidence intervals (90%).



Robustness checks

To ensure the validity of the results, all binary DVs have been transformed to count DVs that indicate the total number of attacks. Negative binomial regressions are run, and the results corroborate findings from the multi-level logistic regressions (Appendix K.1). In the UK, the theory shows strong support for men employing more and receiving more attacks than women. In Belgium, H1a is close to statistical significance ($p = 0.053$), revealing that male politicians in Belgium likely employ more attacks than women. However, for other hypotheses, no support exists, and the same applies to Croatia, where all hypotheses can be rejected using count DVs.

However, to further strengthen the findings that gender differences drive the attack behaviour of politicians in the UK parliament, I run further tests (Appendix K.2). Namely, I explore the seniority of MPs (i.e., years since the first entry to the parliament) and also their position in the parliament (frontbenchers such as PMs, Cabinet Members, Opposition Leaders, Shadow Ministers, Party Leaders, and Parliamentary Group Leaders, vs. backbenchers who do not hold any official role in a party or the parliament). Adding these controls to the main models further confirms that it is indeed female politicians who are significantly less likely to attack (H1a), and that when they do, they will be significantly less likely to use incivility (H3a). However, adding control for the position (frontbench vs. backbench) does diminish findings regarding targets (H2a/H4a); compared to backbenchers, frontbenchers receive more attacks, which are more likely to be uncivil in nature.

Conclusions

This study contributes to the current negativity literature by providing an overarching theoretical framework that provides us with an understanding of parliamentary attacks from a gender perspective. Namely, in candidate-driven parliaments such as the one in the UK, we can expect attacks to be conditioned on gender, with female politicians attacking less frequently. However, given that female politicians are caught in a double bind by trying to appease expectations of being a woman and a politician, their behaviour during the term is likely to change. As the time during the cycle elapses, women increase agentic behaviour by employing more attacks which may grant them re-election. In turn, while employing more attacks, women lower their usage of incivility as they are likely trying to mitigate possible costs for their divergence from stereotypical gender expectations. This behaviour is distinct from male politicians, who also increase attacks during the term, but their incivility usage increases closer to elections as they face less cost for displaying agentic behaviour. On the other hand, in party-driven parliaments such as those in Belgium and Croatia, we can expect politicians not to conform to stereotypical gender behaviour. Safe in the knowledge that they can rely on their parties to feature issues high on the agenda or acquire ownership of certain issues (which in the long run provides more possibility for re-election through parties), female parliamentarians have greater freedom to not adhere to gender stereotypes regarding attacks and the use of incivility.

Besides contributing to the negativity literature, this study also contributes to the gender literature on female representation. Despite differences in female (descriptive) representation in the parliaments of Belgium and Croatia, in both cases, female representatives behave similarly by not conforming to gender expectations regarding attacks. In contrast, gender-conforming attack behaviour is present in the UK. As such, we can align with the scholarly work that has also found limited support for different patterns of female parliamentary behaviour if the proportion of women in parliaments changes (Childs & Krook, 2008, p. 733). This study highlights the importance of the broader institutional setting (see Lovenduski, 2019) when it comes to studying the political behaviour of politicians based on gender. Therefore, different attack behaviour between men and women across the countries may be rooted in the electoral systems and the different possibilities of securing policy goals and re-election; in Belgium and Croatia, politicians act within and in the interest of their parties supported by gender quotas, whereas in the UK politicians act individually and in the interest of their constituencies, without the security provided by gender quotas.

However, while it is likely that the peculiar exception of the UK is an outcome of its candidate-driven parliamentary system, whereby individuals are more prominent in issue and party competition, it is important to reflect on the limitation that this finding comes from one particular case. In other words, it may be that these peculiar findings of gender-conforming attack behaviour are more likely in the context of UK politics and not necessarily in systems where individuals also seek re-election in single-member districts. As such, given this study's limitations, it is important to investigate whether the findings from the UK apply to other parliamentary systems that are candidate-oriented to ensure the generalisability of the theory. Yet, given the similarities regarding the treatment of female politicians across Westminster-style parliaments (e.g., Collier & Raney, 2018), there are reasons to suspect that findings may be applicable beyond the UK case. Furthermore, this study only focused on a specific format of parliamentary politics (QTSs), neglecting all other forms of debates such as committee sittings. Therefore, future studies should dive deeper into the mechanisms that possibly shape attack behaviour in other parliamentary debates. Lastly, future studies should also explore the content of attacks, which may uncover currently neglected patterns of attack. It may be, for example, that women attack equally to men in Croatia and Belgium, but the content of their criticism might differ vastly.

CHAPTER 3

Attacks and issue competition: Do parties attack based on issue salience or issue ownership?

Abstract

Various studies have been devoted to explaining the conditions under which parties engage in attack behaviour. However, the existing literature has overlooked the *issues* on which parties attack. This study addresses this gap by arguing that the issues on which parties attack others are conditioned on their salience and the parties' ownership. We argue that parties decide to increase attacks on issues that receive high levels of scrutiny in society and in the media (*salience hypothesis*). At the same time, the attention devoted to attacks is also expected to be higher on issues that parties own (*issue ownership hypothesis*). Therefore, attention to attacking others on a salient issue is expected to be the highest for parties that own a salient issue (*congruence hypothesis*). Using data on parties' attacks during question time sessions from Belgium and the United Kingdom, together with a diverse set of measures on salience and ownership, we confirm our expectations in both cases. Parties attack others on salient issues and on issues that they own, and when a party has ownership over a salient issue, it will devote the greatest attention to attacking on that issue. These results provide an understanding of parties' attack behaviour and contribute to the broader issue competition literature.

Reference:

Poljak, Ž. & Seeberg, H. B. (2023). Attacks and issue competition: Do parties attack based on issue salience or issue ownership. *Conditional Acceptance in Political Communication.*

Introduction

Political parties routinely attack their rivals. This affects voters' cynicism (Van't Riet and Van Stekelenburg, 2022), electoral participation (Nai, 2013), and evaluations of parties (Lefevere et al., 2020). Thus, parties' attacks have motivated a classic (Fridkin and Kenney, 2011; Lau et al., 2007; Lau and Pomper, 2002; Roese and Sande, 1993) and rapidly growing research agenda (Somer-Topcu and Weitzel, 2022; Bjarnøe et al., 2023). This research provides intriguing evidence on the conditions that lead parties to engage in attack behaviour, also referred to as negative campaigning (Nai and Walter, 2015; Maier and Nai, 2021). However, despite this progression, the literature is virtually silent on the *issues* upon which attacks take place. Scholars of negative campaigning usually tend to aggregate attacks when it comes to issues, coding attacks on *policy* or *issue* with no information on what this *policy* or *issue* might be (e.g., Dolezal et al., 2017; Hansen and Pedersen, 2008; Nai et al., 2022; Somer-Topcu and Weitzel, 2021; Walter and Vliegenthart, 2010). This blind eye to issues is unfortunate because issues differ substantively in many regards, including salience, media coverage, and public perceptions of relevance (Grossmann, 2013; Soroka, 2002; Jones and Baumgartner, 2005). For instance, crime or migration are issues that are often (though not always) more salient than issues of transportation or defence. We may arrive at radically different conclusions depending on the issue that we study and the time at which we study it.

We know that 'issues matter' from the issue competition literature. Scholars in this area of research have established that parties, driven by their re-election aspirations, try to address issues that are salient and high on the public agenda (Ansolabehere and Iyengar, 1994; Jennings and John, 2009). Furthermore, parties also try to acquire and maintain ownership over issues that the public associates with them (Budge and Farlie, 1983; Petrocik, 1996; Walgrave et al., 2015). Thus, a main takeaway from this literature is that party behaviour differs across issues (e.g., Abou-Chadi et al., 2020; Green and Hobolt, 2008; Dolezal et al., 2013). However, scholars have yet to apply these findings to attack politics.

From the extensive findings in the literature on parties' issue competition, we know that issue salience and issue ownership are the two most central issue attributes that can help to explain party behaviour, and therefore are the natural starting points from which to study attack politics across issues. Yet, to get there, we need to unpack the exact relationship between salience and ownership when it comes to attack politics, and what parties do when salience and ownership are not congruent. For example, left-wing parties may want to attack rivals on social welfare due to their ownership of this issue. However, it may be that citizens and the media have their focus on migration or taxation, which are issues that right-wing parties predominantly own. As such, the high salience of these issues limits the possibilities

for left-wing parties to talk about issues they own. Furthermore, we also do not know whether parties employ similar attack strategies outside of campaigns; that is, on a longitudinal and day-to-day basis.

This study provides (i) a theoretical framework combining political parties' salience (ride-the-wave; agenda-setting) and issue ownership (selective emphasis) strategies to explain the issues on which parties engage in attack behaviour, and (ii) a research design that tests this framework longitudinally and outside campaigns. This paper argues that parties attack on issues that are salient in society and the media, but also on issues that they own. In terms of salience, parties need to be responsive to issues that the public deems important because the cost of ignoring such issues is too high (Klüver and Sagarzazu, 2016). At the same time, when it comes to ownership, parties also need to tackle issues they care about and on which they were elected in the first place (see Borghetto and Russo, 2018). As such, if a party enjoys issue ownership of a salient issue, attacks on this issue are even more likely, due to the congruence of salience and ownership. Thus, we adopt a dynamic approach to the 'issues matter' argument: issue salience and issue ownership can help to explain the degree of parties' attack behaviour across issues and over time on each issue.

To test these hypotheses, we apply a new and extensive data source. We have collected and issue-classified more than 160 hours of debates during parliamentary question time sessions in two diverse western European parliaments, Belgium and the United Kingdom, across more than a decade. In total, we analysed 14,364 speeches and identified 5,769 attacks across multiple issues such as the economy, the environment, migration, social welfare, and housing. This rich data source presents an unparalleled opportunity to investigate the issue-based attack behaviour of political parties with regard to media salience and associative ownership in the case of Belgium, and citizen salience and competence ownership in the case of the United Kingdom. The results from both countries support the paper's overarching argument. Across different types of data, salience predicts attack behaviour across issues, and parties attack more on issues that have high salience in the public and the media ahead of question time sessions. Parties' level of ownership also predicts attacks, as parties attack others more on issues that they themselves own. Lastly, if an issue that is owned by a party is also salient, the party will devote the most attention to attacking on this issue. These findings have important implications for our understanding of parties' attack behaviour across issues, while also contributing to the issue competition literature by showcasing exactly how parties raise issues on the political agenda and maintain their ownership.

What we know – and need to know – about attack politics

Attack behaviour can manifest in various forms (Nai and Walter, 2015), ranging from explicitly and directly calling out rivals and criticizing their poor character or policy competence to more indirect approaches that address societal problems for which the rival is responsible. In this discussion, we primarily focus on the former type, and acknowledge that the latter type involves a larger grey area in terms of attack politics versus mere discussion of an issue.

When launching a direct attack, the choice of issue is often, though not always, the central and primary one. For example, it is challenging to imagine that a liberal party which seeks to reform taxation policy (an issue they typically own) would neglect to attack their rivals on this particular matter. Similarly, parties may initially choose to target their rivals, carefully considering the issues on which they should strike. For instance, a social democratic party aiming to undermine its rivals would strategically determine the issues on which it should launch its attacks. This may involve attacking opponents on salient issues that hold significance for voters (Seeberg, 2020b), such as defence or migration, even if these issues are not traditionally associated with social democrats.

The choice of issue is important regardless of the party's motivation to attack (Strom 1990). Previous research shows that attacking a rival is an effective way to attract voters, both by exposing the shortcomings of the rival (Nai and Seeberg, 2018) and attracting media attention to the issue and increasing its public salience (Haselmayer et al., 2019). Thus, the attacking party carefully selects the issue on which it wants more media attention or salience in order to influence the next election. Furthermore, attacks can trigger policy reform (Seeberg, 2023), and parties' unequal policy motivation across issues will determine the issues on which they choose to attack (for a parallel perspective on party members' diverse motivations to attack, see also Sevenans et al., 2015).

Scholars have only recently begun to explore the relationship between parties' attack behaviour and the specific issues they target (Lefevere et al., 2022). These studies primarily investigate whether parties can influence issue ownership through their attacks (Seeberg, 2020a; Seeberg and Nai, 2021). However, there are two negative campaigning studies that have examined the issues on which politicians launch attacks in the United States and Denmark, revealing that they tend to focus on salient issues important to voters (Damore, 2002; Elmelund-Præstekær, 2011). While this is a fundamental starting point, we need a more comprehensive theoretical framework that goes beyond the campaign context, placing less emphasis on parties' vote-seeking ambitions and more on their policy aspirations.

Furthermore, it remains unclear how issue *salience* and *ownership* interact when it comes to attacks. For example, Damore (2002) argued that both elements have an impact on the choice of issues for attacks, but if salience and ownership are not congruent, it remains unclear whether parties attack each other on salient or on owned issues. In addition, Elmelund-Præstekær's (2011) study implied that salience first needs to be present, after which parties decide whether to positively acclaim themselves (if they own the issue) or negatively attack rivals (if they do not own it). However, the main hypotheses and empirical analysis of the study only observed issue ownership and concluded that stronger ownership spurs more positive campaigns on an issue.

Hypotheses

To gain deeper insights into parties' day-to-day issue-based attack behaviour, the following sections present two hypotheses on salience and ownership (H1 and H2), along with an interaction hypothesis (H3). Specifically, we propose that low salience and weak ownership of an issue render it unappealing for attacking others. However, an increase in issue salience, even with weak ownership, enhances its attractiveness for attack usage (H1). The same principle applies to ownership: as parties' ownership of an issue improves, the likelihood of attacking others on this issue also increases, even if its salience is low (H2). Ultimately, when an issue exhibits both high salience and a party has strong ownership of it, the propensity to launch attacks becomes strongest, leading parties to specifically target rivals on that issue. The causal mechanisms underlying these hypotheses, driven by *policy*- and *vote*-seeking goals, will be elucidated further below, and our framework is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. The propensity to attack on an issue

		Issue salience	
		High	**Low**
Issue ownership	**Strong**	*Strong (H3)*	*Moderate (H2)*
	Weak	*Moderate (H1)*	*Weak (H3)*

Our first proposition is that issue salience increases parties' propensity to attack their rivals on that issue (H1), even when their ownership of the issue is weak. By targeting other parties on salient issues, parties can make a stronger push to place such issues on the party system agenda (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2010). Such a push by a party acting as an agenda-setter can subsequently lead to tangible *policy* changes (Seeberg, 2023). Moreover, attacking rivals on issues that resonate strongly with a significant portion of the public can result in heightened media interest and issue coverage (Meyer et al., 2020), thereby expanding a party's engagement with new *voters*. Recent studies have demonstrated that the salience of issues among voters influences parties' shifts in issue attention (Spoon and Klüver, 2014) and positions (Abou-Chadi et al., 2020). This generates our first hypothesis:

Salience hypothesis (H1): *Parties attack more on salient issues.*

Our second argument asserts that parties strategically attack their rivals on issues on which they enjoy ownership (H2), irrespective of the salience of those issues. This approach is motivated by parties' desire to trigger *policy* changes on issues they genuinely want to address and reform (Egan, 2013; Seeberg 2023; Strom 1990). Such issues may be neglected or given less priority by rival parties within the political system (Seeberg, 2022; Sulkin, 2005). Through their attacks, parties can create a sense of urgency to address their preferred issue (Klüver and Sagarzazu, 2016). Moreover, by attacking other parties on issues they own, parties reaffirm their credentials on the issue among *voters* (Borghetto and Russo, 2018), which is crucial as issue ownership can be undermined or co-opted by competitors (Arndt, 2014; Davidsson and Marx, 2013; Petrocik 1996). Attacking on their own turf enhances voters' perceptions of the party's reliability on the issue and allows a party to reinforce its link to an issue with which voters associate the party. Thus, attacks on issues the party owns can therefore also be *vote*-motivated (Strom 1990). This generates our second hypothesis:

Ownership hypothesis (H2): *Parties attack more on issues on which they have ownership.*

Finally, salience and ownership are most likely connected. Namely, we expect that salience (H1) impacts the influence of issue ownership (H2) on parties' propensity to attack (H3). Thus, if a party owns

a particular issue that is currently salient, we anticipate an escalation in their attack activity on that issue. Specifically, while many parties may increase their attacks on a currently salient issue (e.g., everyone attacks on the issue of the environment due to its salience), certain parties are expected to exhibit a higher level of attack attention compared to others (e.g., green parties intensifying their attacks on the environment even more when it is salient, as they claim ownership of it). In essence, we contend that the congruence of salience and ownership presents parties with a unique strategic window of opportunity (Kingdon, 1995) that can be leveraged to attack on such issues, driven by both their *policy*-seeking and *vote*-seeking objectives (Strom 1990).

Regarding *policy*, although attacks on salient issues may contribute to policy changes, the significance lies in achieving such goals on an issue that a party owns and genuinely cares about (Egan 2013). Regarding *vote*, parties may engage in attacks on salient issues to pursue their *vote*-seeking aspirations, but it becomes even more crucial for parties that own those issues to attain such objectives. The risk lies in the possibility that when an issue gains salience, the general public may shift their support toward parties that do not own the issue. This is especially true if these parties present more compelling policy proposals or portray themselves as more competent in addressing the issue (Arndt 2014; Davidsson and Marx 2013). This places pressure on parties that have ownership over the issue to demonstrate and reinforce their dominance, and they can use attacks to this end. This leads to our third and final hypothesis:

Congruence hypothesis (H3): *The effect of salience is stronger if parties have higher ownership of a salient issue.*

The applicability of these general expectations may of course vary across parties. Studies on negative campaigning have established that opposition parties, lacking the advantages enjoyed by the incumbent, tend to attack more (Nai and Walter, 2015). While the government can rely on its actual policy changes to bolster its record, opposition parties can only attack this record (or the lack thereof) to make their case. Conversely, opposition parties also then have more flexibility in choosing which issues to attack (Bevan et al., 2023). Furthermore, it is reasonable to expect that niche parties, with their narrower issue profiles, would be more inclined to attack rivals on issues they own (Wagner and Meyer, 2014), unlike mainstream parties that handle more diverse issue portfolios.

Furthermore, while attacks primarily occur between opposition and government parties, it is also possible that coalition parties or parties in the opposition will attack each other. Such cases of internal attacks are also likely to be centred on salient and owned issues for the purpose of helping the attacking party stand out in the crowd (Sagarzazu and Klüver 2016). Whether the goal is to secure objectives within a party or a cabinet, or based on *policy*-seeking (Martin and Whitaker, 2019) or *vote*-seeking aspirations (Kam, 2009), the underlying logic remains the same – maximising the likelihood of achieving these objectives by attacking others on appealing issues.

Methodology

Cases

We test our hypotheses in Belgium and the United Kingdom. The main reason for selecting these two countries is their very different party systems. Belgium has a fragmented multi-party system where various parties engage in conflict with each other. In contrast, the United Kingdom has a party system where the majority of party competition takes place between the two main parties (e.g., Prosser, 2018), which has also been the focus in a number of previous studies (e.g., Bevan et al. 2023; Seeberg 2020b, 2023). These differences likely have implications for attack behaviour as a means for achieving parties' goals, as outlined in the theory section above (see also Nai and Maier, 2022; Walter, 2014a).

Parties in Belgium may devote attention to a few particular issues in their party communications (see e.g. Walgrave and De Swert, 2007) due to the fragmented nature of the party system, where the parties tend to seek out their own space on the political spectrum. Furthermore, due to coalition politics, Belgian parties do not address every possible issue in order to avoid challenging a coalition partner. In the United Kingdom, on the other hand, the two main parties, unrestrained by coalition politics, need to devote their attention to a wide selection of issues while simultaneously trying to preserve or claim ownership over these issues. For example, by neglecting a specific issue, a party in the United Kingdom may face important vote losses among those voters who are concerned about the issue. These significant differences in party competition provide a robust setting within which to test our hypotheses, as any similar patterns found across the two cases would indicate a more general trend.

We test our hypotheses during question time (QT) sessions in the (federal) parliaments of Belgium (*Vragenuur*) and the United Kingdom (*Prime Minister's Questions, or PMQs*). There are several reasons for working with QT. QT takes place regularly as part of day-to-day politics, allowing us to study attack

behaviour longitudinally in between campaigns. Moreover, QT is the most watched parliamentary debate and receives considerable media coverage and voter attention (Salmond, 2014), making QT a better ground for testing our hypotheses compared to other parliamentary activities. Furthermore, politicians themselves deem QT relevant and are prone to promote their QT activities on social media (Soontjens, 2021). This highlights the relevance of studying attack behaviour on issues during QT, as such behaviour is likely to extend to other political venues, including the news and social media (Peeters et al., 2021; Bjarnøe et al. 2023). Therefore, it comes as no surprise that QT has been heavily explored in the issue competition literature as a venue in which parties address issues that are currently salient (Vliegenthart et al., 2016) to maintain issue ownership (Otjes and Louwerse, 2018; see also Bevan et al. 2023, Bevan and John 2016; Borghetto and Russo 2018; Seeberg 2020b, 2023).

However, the structure of QT in both countries is different, further amplifying the strength of the most-different-design logic. In Belgium, QT takes place weekly, and both majority and minority parties ask questions in groups based on topics. For example, if several parties put forth questions regarding the economy, these questions are grouped into one slot in which the parties ask questions, designated ministers provide answers to all questions at once, and every MP who asked a question can rebut these answers. In turn, if only one party puts forth a health question, there is an additional slot with only one question, answer, and rebuttal. Parties are granted an equal share of questions, usually around two to three, regardless of their seat share in parliament, leading to strong party control during QT in Belgium (De Vet and Devroe, 2023).

The structure of QT in the United Kingdom, specifically PMQs, is significantly different. Every week, majority and minority MPs can question the PM on issues that the PM is responsible for; however, topics can vary and may go beyond the PM's portfolio (Serban, 2022). The selection of MPs who are allowed to ask questions (usually fifteen) is determined by a random shuffle. This procedure ensures that the two main parties in the UK dominate during these debates. The PM is required to answer each question, after which MPs are not allowed a rebuttal. However, opposition leaders in the UK have secure slots to ask several questions (usually six), allowing them to provide rebuttals to the PM's answers. Therefore, attack behaviour in PMQs can take place along party competition lines between the government and opposition (see more in Bevan and John, 2016). Even in cases of intra-party dissent, such attacks are typically approved by the party leadership to preserve the integrity of a party (Proksch and Slapin, 2012).

Raw Data

We study attacks employed during QT by sampling one QT per month during the eleven years starting with January 2010 and ending in December 2020. We need a prolonged period to ensure variation in issue salience (issue ownership is more stable; see below) and to cover multiple election periods. We capture different moments in time during four electoral cycles in Belgium and five in the United Kingdom.

In total, our sample consists of 103 QT sessions from Belgium (each containing multiple questions) and 115 PMQ sessions from the United Kingdom, representing almost one-third of all QT sessions in the studied period (30.4% in Belgium and 32.7% in the UK). We use raw *QuestionTimeSpeech* data (Poljak and Mertens, 2022), which has all speech contributions that were made during the sampled QTs. These include both formal (questions, answers, points of order, etc.) as well as informal (interruptions, speakers' interventions, etc.) speech contributions. Therefore, unlike the majority of studies on QTs, which tend to work with questions as the units of observation (see Borghetto and Chaqués-Bonafont, 2019), we work with a diverse set of features in QTs, including answers[11] to questions, points of order, and interruptions, in which attacks can take place. At the start of each UK PMQ, the PM is asked to list their engagements; these are protocol speeches and cannot have attacks, and were therefore dropped from the data. In total, our sample of speeches consisted of 6,634 speeches across the 103 QTs in Belgium (average N of words in a speech: 228.7 for the government and 217.2 for the opposition), and 7,731 speeches across the 115 PMQ sessions in the United Kingdom (average N of words in a speech: 91.9 for the government and 82.8 for the opposition).

Coding process

Once all speeches were collected, we proceeded with manual content coding. As preparation, we did a six-week training with our team of four coders, reaching satisfactory Krippendorff's alpha scores in the final two weeks for all our variables of interest, such as *attacks* and *issues* (see *Appendix – Coder training*).

The main goal of the content analysis was to code each speech based on whether or not a speaker engaged in attack behaviour. In our codebook, we defined attacks as all criticism directed toward formal

[11] Examining attack behaviour in answers to questions is important, as recent studies conducted in both Belgium and the United Kingdom reveal that parties frequently deviate from the specific issues they are being questioned on (Poljak, 2023). This highlights the significance of analysing attack behaviour originating from the cabinet in answers to questions, as it often involves a different set of issues.

political actors, on their traits as well as on their policies and how they handle them (see Geer, 2006). These attacks can be directed towards a variety of actors, including individuals (e.g. the Prime Minister), groups of individuals (e.g. frontbenchers), parties (e.g. Conservatives), or a group of parties (e.g. the coalition government). As such, each coder was required to carefully read each speech contribution, looking at whether there was (i) a *criticism* (ii) that was explicitly connected to a *political actor*. Attacks on non-formal political actors such as foreign politicians, non-governmental organisations, etc. were not coded, nor did we code criticisms that were not explicitly attributed to political actors.

While keeping this focus on direct attacks with an explicit target, we acknowledge that attacks may also be indirect, e.g., by referring to a societal problem such as crime or unemployment that needs a solution without mentioning a target. Such indirect attacks are prevalent but less potent in terms of the attacking party hurting the target party, and also trickier to code because at some point such statements become a discussion of an issue more than an attack. Thus, including indirect attacks might lead us to overreport attacks in our analysis. We prefer to adhere to a narrower definition of attacks that provides a more conservative test of our hypotheses. In Appendix L.1, we compare attacks to non-attacks according to our definition.

Once coders identified an attack in a speech, they were required to indicate how many actors were attacked. As such, in instances where Minister A and Minister B were explicitly criticised, we considered these to be two attacks in one speech. All of these attacks were then further coded, including the issue on which these actors were criticised. To do this, we used the Comparative Agendas Project master codebook, which includes 21 major policy areas (such as the economy or international relations). Therefore, for one speech contribution in which Minister A is attacked on food banks and Minister B is attacked for high waiting times in hospitals, the first attack was coded as an attack on social welfare (code 13 in the CAP codebook) while the second one was coded as an attack on health (code 3). Examples of attacks on issues are available in Table 2 (see also *Appendix – Examples of coding* for other examples and non-attacks).

Table 1. Examples of attacks

Country	Issue	Attacks
Belgium	Immigration	Is that a reason **not to help or give food to war refugees** (ISSUE), as the **CD&V governor** (ACTOR) had asked, or to set up a kind of mini-Guantanamo prison, as the **mayor of Knokke** (ACTOR) has said? **No definitely not! It's about people, not animals** (CRITICISM). Wouter De Vriendt, Groen, 25.02.2016
	Defence	**Madam MP** (ACTOR)**,** the way in which your question is posed shows **an imperfect or incomplete knowledge** (CRITICISM) of the way the government deals with this issue. I want to highlight a first point. In December, we decided to take an important step forward with many European partners in the field of **defence** (ISSUE). Charles Michel, MR, 08.02.2018
UK	Law and Order	**The Prime Minister** (ACTOR) **does not seem to have very much control over world events, but she should at least be able to get a grip** (CRITICISM) on the **child abuse inquiry** (ISSUE) that she set up. In two years, it has lost not only three chairs, but now eight senior lawyers, the latest citing further concerns about competency and leadership. Lisa Nandy, Labour, 16.11.2016
	Health	Under the previous **Labour Government** (ACTOR) the **national health service** (ISSUE) **lost hundreds of millions of pounds because the cost of treating foreign patients was not properly recovered** (CRITICISM). Henry Smith, Conservative, 24.10.2012

Note: *Speech* shows only a part of a speech that contains an attack. More examples (including non-attacks) are available in *Appendix – Examples of coding*.

Overall, 2,060 (31.1%) and 2,245 (29.0%) speeches included at least one attack on one of the 21 major policy areas in Belgium and the United Kingdom respectively, and the overall number of attacks on these policies was 2,986 in Belgium and 2,783 in the United Kingdom. The share of attacks in speeches per QT does not change significantly throughout the years (the yearly average of attacks is 32.3% in Belgium and 30.9% in the United Kingdom). As such, parties tend to devote slightly less than a third of their speeches during QT to attacking others on major policy issues, while the majority of what is said at QT is not devoted to explicitly criticising others on issues. This indicates that parties do not *only* use QT to attack; rather, they likely calculate when to go negative and on what issues. Furthermore, there is also great variety in terms of issue salience in attacks (see Figure L.1 in Appendix L). For example, while the most attention was given to attacking others on the economy in our sample (18.1% of all attacks in Belgium and 23.4% in the United Kingdom are on the economy), during 31 QTs in Belgium and 17 PMQs in the UK, no attacks on the economy were made (see later Figure 1). This highlights the point that parties are strategic in their issue attack calculations.

Final data

The coded raw data were transformed into party-issue data to facilitate the testing of our hypotheses. We generated data where each observation constitutes the (non-)attacker party on a particular issue (for example, Labour-Health) during a particular QT. As such, these party-issue observations are nested in a specific QT in a country.

For Belgium, we focus on seven issues for which we have available data on issue ownership (Economy; Labour; Environment; Immigration; Law and Order; Social Welfare; and Defence) and focus specifically on the six Flemish parties (Christian Democrats; Green; National; Liberal; Radical Right; and Socialist) due to the availability of data from Flanders regarding the salience of these issues. Therefore, for each QT in Belgium in our sample, we usually have 42 observations (7 issues x 6 parties). If a specific party did not take part in a particular QT – that is, no one from that party made speech contributions – these observations were dropped (final N = 4,305).

For the United Kingdom, again based on data on ownership, twelve issues are covered (Economy; Health; Labour; Education; Environment; Immigration; Transportation; Law and Order; Social Welfare; Housing; Defence; and International Relations), and we focus on the two major parties (Conservative and Labour). Therefore, for a PMQ that took place in a specific month, 24 observations are included (12 issues x 2 parties). Both main parties were active at every PMQ in our sample (final N = 2,760).

Variables

Attack attention is the main dependent variable, indicating how much attention was devoted to attacking others on a particular issue in a certain QT. Thus, aggregation of attacks takes place on the level of a party nested in a QT, observing how many attacks were made on an issue across all speeches this party made in a QT and dividing the number of attacks on an issue by all attacks this party made. For example, if Labour issued ten attacks during a sampled PMQ in the United Kingdom from March 2020, and out of these ten, three were on health, then the value of this variable is .33 for the Labour-Health observation on this PMQ. Shares in this variable are calculated by looking at all 21 major policy topics from the CAP codebook. Therefore, while we do not study attacks on the issues of, for instance, transportation in Belgium or civil rights in the United Kingdom as they are not included in the ownership data, in cases where a party attacked on these issues during a QT, these attacks are used to calculate the share of attack attention towards a particular issue that *is* included. Note that for parties that made no attacks at a

particular QT, we keep the value of this variable at zero for all their observations during this QT, as we see this as a strategic decision not to engage in attacks on any of the issues.[12]

To strengthen the validity of this measure, we only analyse the actual attention to an issue within attacks that are made by parties during a particular QT and not the attention parties devote to issues in all of their speeches (Proksch and Slapin, 2010) or parliamentary questions (Borghetto and Chaqués-Bonafont, 2019). This is important as only one-third of what is said during QT can be considered attack behaviour, meaning that during QT sessions, parties also demonstrate neutral (Party A asking a genuine question on an issue) or positive behaviour (Party A praising itself on an issue). This becomes even more evident when comparing the level of issue attention in attack speeches versus non-attack speeches (Appendix L.1). Namely, parties tend to allocate varying degrees of attention to issues depending on whether they are engaging in attacks or not.

We use shares due to the different possibilities for parties to attack. For example, governing parties can sometimes have an advantage as they can attack in both questions and answers, while small opposing parties can only attack in questions. Therefore, while governing parties can issue ten attacks, an opposing party may be able to issue only five, but all of these attacks may be on the same issue, meaning that both parties paid equal attention to an issue in their attacks. As such, working with shares allows us to make equal comparisons across parties.[13]

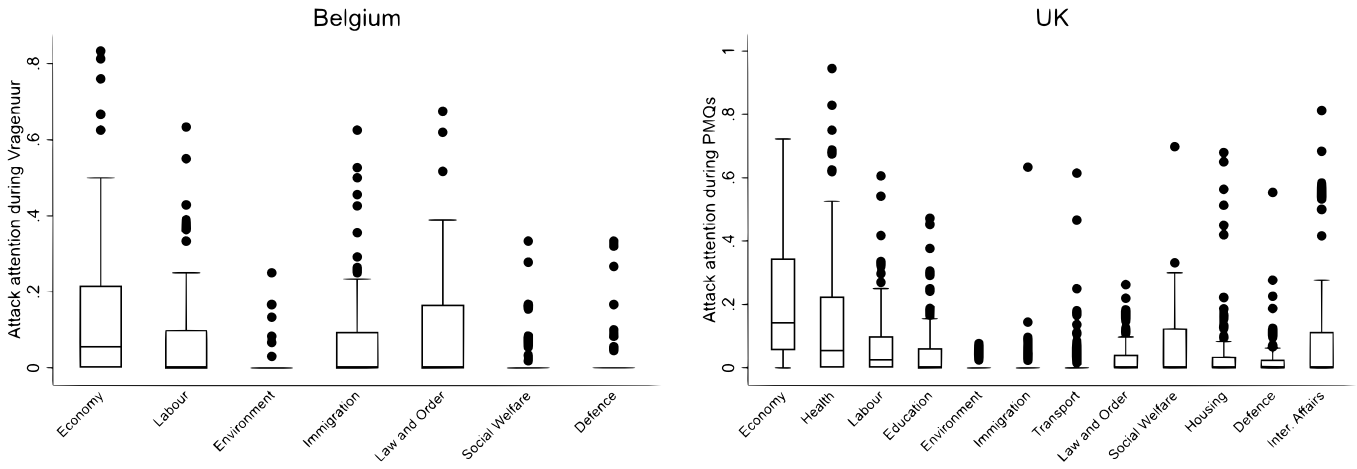
[12] Generating all possible party-issue observations and keeping non-attacks on issues naturally leads to skewed outcomes in our data (90.9% of party-issue observations in Belgium have no attacks; 72.5% in the United Kingdom). To avoid possible biases this may cause in our analyses, we make sure to control for differences in issues and party-issue observations (see the *Method* section), and we further test our expectations using several other methods appropriate for skewed continuous measures (e.g. Boulton and Williford, 2018) in the Appendix F.8.

[13] However, we do test our expectations using the count dependent variable indicating the overall number of attacks a party employed on an issue (Appendix F.7).

Table 3. Descriptive statistics

		N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Min	Max
Belgium	**DV: Attack attention**	4,305	5.9	20.88	0	100
	IV: Issue salience	4,305	4.91	4.44	0	30.98
	IV: Issue ownership	4,305	14.48	19.7	0.21	91.2
UK	**DV: Attack attention**	2,760	6.71	15.27	0	100
	IV: Issue salience	2,760	17.85	14.02	0.5	72
	IV: Issue ownership	2,760	24.99	7.45	9	52

Figure 1. Boxplots showing the spread of the average attack attention on issues per QT in Belgium (left) and the UK (right)



Descriptive statistics, displayed in Table 3, indicate that parties in Belgium and the United Kingdom usually attack rivals 6% and 7% (respectively) of the time across the issues that we include in the analysis. However, looking at the standard deviation, we see that they sometimes go as far as attacking on a specific issue in 27% and 22% (respectively) of their attacks during QTs. This is further visible in Figure 1, which demonstrates the spread of the average attack attention during QT per issue. For example, attacks barely take place on issues such as the environment and defence in either country, yet there are several QT sessions in our sample where these issues receive a significant share of attack attention,

sometimes as much as above 50% of all attack attention by the parties. This underlines the importance of considering issue selection when studying parties' attack behaviour.

Issue salience is the first main independent variable and indicates how much salience an issue has prior to a QT session. For Belgium, we make use of the Electronic News Archive (ENA) dataset, covering all news stories featured in the 7 p.m. primetime news by the major public (VRT) and private (VTM) TV broadcasters in Flanders, making it a good proxy for voters' perceptions of issue salience as well (e.g. McCombs, 2014). ENA data codes each news item in primetime news by a special issue codebook, which we re-coded according to the CAP master codebook (see Appendix L). To ensure that the variable captures pre-existing issue salience ahead of QTs, the salience of issues in the Flemish primetime news is lagged for a week ahead of QTs. Therefore, given that QTs in Belgium take place every Thursday at noon, we look at all news items and issues that appear in the news from Thursday last week to Wednesday evening right before a QT. Therefore, if there were 100 news items featured in the news during the week ahead of a QT, and five items were on health, we calculate that this issue has a salience of .05 in Belgium at the moment QT takes place.

For the United Kingdom, we use the Ipsos MORI Issues Index to calculate issue salience. These are monthly surveys of a representative sample of the British public, asking: *What would you say is the most important issue facing Britain today?* Again, to make sure that the variable measures pre-existing salience ahead of PMQs, we look at the Ipsos MORI Issues Index a month ahead of the PMQs. Therefore, for a PMQ that took place in May 2013, we use the Issues Index from April 2013. The salience of issues is calculated by looking at the share of people who mentioned an issue as one of the most important. Therefore, if 10% of respondents in April 2013 said the economy was an important issue today, we attribute a salience of .10 for the PMQ in May 2013.

Using data on issue salience in the media in Belgium and data on issue salience for the public in the United Kingdom does mean that *salience* is measured somewhat differently between our two cases, with Belgium having a more convincing measure. While this difference is a product of data availability, we see it as an advantage of our dataset, as it allows us to see whether salience in the media *and* salience among citizens lead to similar outcomes, which would confirm our expectations that *salience* in general plays a role in attack behaviour.

Regarding descriptive results, the average salience of issues in Belgian news ranges from no salience at all to slightly above 9%, but some issues reached almost a third of the news attention in certain weeks (see Standard Deviation in Table 3). On the other hand, issues in the United Kingdom range from

being seen as important by 3.9% of British citizens all the way to 31.9% on average, and some issues were sometimes seen as important by an absolute majority of citizens. This variation in salience is furthermore demonstrated in Appendix L, showing how issue salience dynamically changes through time. For example, despite international relations generally being a low-salience issue in the United Kingdom, following the 2016 Brexit referendum, its salience increased significantly (Appendix L). On the other hand, the issue of migration generally is a low-salience issue in Belgium, but in 2018 the UN's Global Compact for Migration caused political turmoil in Belgium, and its salience too increased significantly.

Issue ownership is the second main independent variable. This variable is generated using Election Surveys from 2009 and 2014 for Belgium and Ipsos MORI polling data on the *Best Party on Key Issues* (2007-2020) for the United Kingdom. In both datasets, citizens link parties with issues, which is then used to calculate the level of ownership parties have concerning these issues (in Belgium, Flemish citizens indicated ownership for Flemish parties as only they can elect them).

Therefore, this variable represents the share of respondents that attribute an issue to a party, and it can theoretically range from 0 (no ownership; no one linked a party to an issue) to 100 (total ownership; everyone linked a party to an issue). For this measure, citizens in both countries are limited to choosing only one party per issue (or selecting *all*, *none* and *don't know*). In Belgium, citizens associate parties with issues. In the United Kingdom, however, citizens link parties based on competence, and these measurements are taken more frequently. This variation in measuring ownership across the two cases adds robustness to our approach, as similar patterns would indicate that ownership in general has an impact, irrespective of whether it is measured as association or competence (Walgrave et al., 2015), or measured often or rarely. This allows for a more comprehensive analysis of the relationship between ownership and attack behaviour. Since the relative size (0-100) of issue ownership can vary across the different party systems in our analysis, we provide an additional test in Appendix O.7 where the party with the largest share of respondents attributing an issue to the party is coded 1 (0 otherwise). This does not change our conclusions.

Given that ownership data is longitudinal and covers different years, we assign a share of ownership on a particular date to a party based on the data closest to this date (going back in time) and keep this share of ownership constant until the next available observation of ownership (see more in Appendix M). This is an acceptable approximation since research shows a rather high level of stability for ownership (Seeberg, 2017).

Due to the party system differences explained above, we see that average ownership is higher in the United Kingdom (25%), where only two parties engage in issue competition, compared to Belgium (14.5%), where various parties compete against each other. However, we also see that in Belgium, because the multi-party system covers a variety of ideologies, a party can certainly be the dominant owner of a particular issue, as maximum ownership can reach above 90%. This is unlike the United Kingdom, where the two main parties have to tackle a variety of issues, resulting in maximum ownership levels of only 50%.

We furthermore demonstrate variation within and between parties in Appendix M (Table M.3). While most parties in each country tend to enjoy similar shares of ownership across issues, it is clear that certain parties enjoy longitudinal ownership of particular issues (in line with Seeberg, 2017). For example, the Flemish Green party in Belgium is the predominant and constant owner of the environment (87% to 91%; see Replication materials), while the Flemish Radical Right party enjoys high and stable ownership of immigration (41% to 48%). In the United Kingdom, law and order is predominantly owned by the Conservative Party (28% to 33%), while the issue of health is owned by the Labour Party (33% to 46%). These figures demonstrate that although parties in each country can and do consistently own certain issues over time, the share of issue ownership is substantially lower for British than Belgian parties.

Method

We employ mixed-effects multi-level regressions to test our hypotheses. We opt for multi-level models due to the hierarchy in our data, where party-issue levels are observed on a higher level of QT. In our models, QT sessions are inserted as a random intercept. Furthermore, given that our data has a panel structure, with party-issue observations reappearing through time in QT, we also insert party-issue observations (Conservatives-Economy; Conservatives-Migration; etc.) as a random intercept which we cross with QT sessions. This ensures that our models account for the fact that these observations reappear through time and should not be treated as independent observations. Therefore, we do this to ensure that the results are not skewed in a specific direction because a certain party on a certain issue may be regularly more or less negative during QT sessions, while in reality, they constitute one specific party-issue relation that exists through time.

Besides our main variables of interest, we also include several controls in these models which have previously been shown to impact attack behaviour (Nai and Walter, 2015). These include the status

of the party that attacks (government vs. opposition, although not in the United Kingdom as Conservatives were in government for most of the period under study, which is controlled through our model specifications), electoral cycle (how many months have passed since the last election: 0 to 59 months), yearly controls, and fixed-effects on issues, as each issue has its own attributes and dynamics (Figure 1; Appendix L; Soroka, 2002). Given the importance of coalition politics in Belgium, we also control for the fact that on some issues, some parties have a minister in office specifically for this issue, while other parties do not (see the list of these ministers in Appendix N). Lastly, we also include a control for niche parties in Belgium (Greens; Radical-Right) as these types of parties are more likely to address a smaller number of issues compared to larger mainstream parties (Wagner and Meyer, 2014; Klüver and Spoon, 2016). We run our models separately in each country, as the inclusion of fundamental control variables such as niche vs. mainstream would not be possible in pooled models due to a lack of data on third parties from the United Kingdom.

Results

We test our hypotheses in Table 4. In Models 1 (Belgium) and 3 (UK), we test whether greater salience of an issue invites parties to attack more on this issue (H1) and whether parties are more likely to launch attacks on issues on which they have ownership (H2). Our estimations provide evidence in support of H1 and H2, with positive and statistically significant coefficients for issue salience (0.485, $p < 0.00$ in Model 1; 0.258, $p < 0.00$ in Model 3) and issue ownership (0.049, $p < 0.05$ in Model 1; .0.159, $p < 0.01$ in Model 3). Thus, if the salience of an issue increases, parties increase their attacks on this issue compared to other issues. Moreover, parties employ more attacks on issues they own. As such, across considerable differences in the operationalisation of issue salience and ownership between Belgium and the United Kingdom, and despite notable variation in party systems, we reach similar conclusions in both countries.

H3 is tested in Models 2 (Belgium) and 4 (UK). We expect that attacks are particularly likely on salient issues on which the party has ownership. To test this multiplicative effect, we estimate the interaction effect between lagged issue salience and issue ownership. In these models, the interaction effect of lagged salience and ownership is positive and statistically significant in both countries (0.874, $p < 0.05$ in Model 2; 0.800, $p < 0.05$ in Model 4): higher salience of an issue at *t-1* combined with high issue ownership results in a higher share of attacks on this issue at *t,* confirming H3. Thus, congruence in issue attributes (salience + ownership) makes some issues extraordinarily attractive as arenas for attack politics. Furthermore, we conducted additional tests to examine the differences between government and

opposition parties (Appendix O.1), as well as between niche and mainstream parties (Appendix O.4). Specifically, we found that all types of parties intensify their attacks on issues that exhibit high salience and that they own. However, following our theoretical assumptions, some of these effects are more pronounced for opposing parties (UK) and niche parties (in Belgium).

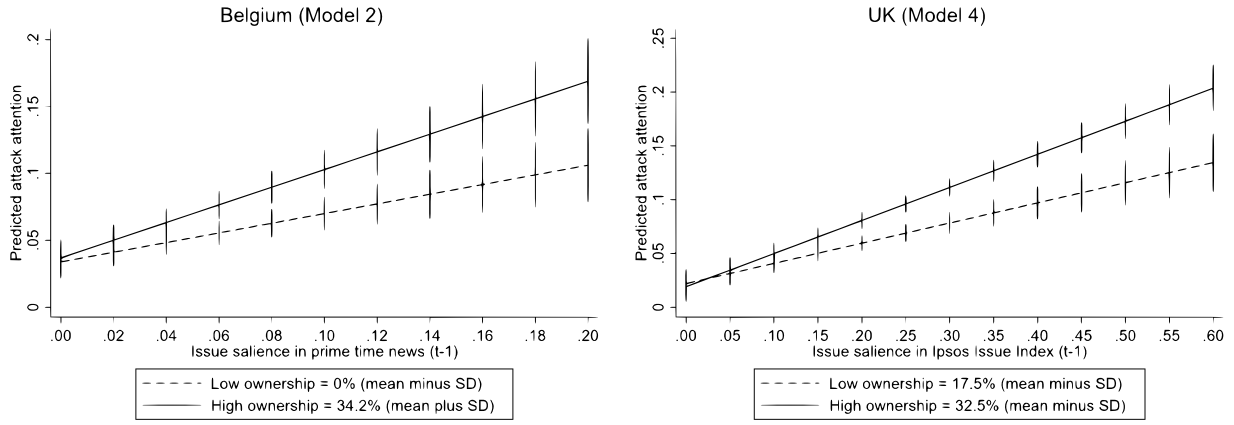
Table 4. Multi-level mixed-effects regression outputs using attention devoted to attacking others on an issue during QT as the dependent variable

	Belgium		**UK**	
	Model 1 Base	**Model 2 Interaction**	**Model 3 Base**	**Model 4 Interaction**
	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)
Independent variables				
Issue salience (t-1)	**.485 (.086) *****	.361 (.105) **	**.258 (.026) *****	.047 (.087)
Issue ownership	**.049 (.022) ***	.008 (.029)	**.159 (.049) ****	-.019 (.087)
Issue salience (t-1) x Issue ownership		**.874 (.421) ***		**.800 (.314) ***
Control variables				
Electoral cycle	.000 (.000) †	.000 (.000) †	.000 (.000)	.000 (.000)
Party status (ref. opposition)	-.031 (.009) **	-.032 (.009) **		
Having a minister (ref. no)	.005 (.011)	.005 (.011)		
Niche party (ref. mainstream)	-.013 (.011)	-.014 (.011)		
Constant	.058 (.025) *	.065 (.025) *	.080 (.022) ***	.124 (.028) ***
N (observations)	4,305		2,760	
N (QTs)	103		115	
N (min. party-issue obs. per QT)	35		24	
N (max. party-issue obs. per QT)	42		24	
AIC (empty model)	-1.476 (-1.418)	-1.478 (-1.418)	-3.069 (-2.948)	-3.073 (-2.948)

Note: †p<0.1 *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.00; year dummies and issue fixed-effects included in every model; t-1 in Belgium is a weekly lag, and in the UK a monthly lag, of salience

Figure 2 visualises our findings on "salience x issue ownership" from Model 2 (Belgium) and Model 4 (UK) using predicted values of attention to attacking on a particular issue based on the salience of this issue (min./max. from Table 3) and realistic ownership scores (mean -/+ SD from Table 3). The main takeaway is that as the salience of an issue increases (on the x-axis), parties also employ more attacks on this issue (y-axis). Furthermore, attacks on issues differ systematically depending on whether or not the party has issue ownership. The lines in both Belgium and the United Kingdom are slightly steeper on issues on which the attacking party has high issue ownership and above the lines where the party has low ownership. This implies that salience motivates attacks even more if the party also owns the issue.

Figure 2. Predicted attack attention on an issue based on issue salience and realistic low and high ownership scores.



Note: Vertical lines indicate 90% confidence intervals holding other variables at their mean.

More precisely, in Belgium, an above-average salience of 10% on an issue during the primetime news ahead of a QT session in combination with a high ownership score results in an estimated 10.2% of attacks allocated to this issue (almost two percentage points above the average predicted attention of 8%), while no ownership results in 6.9% of the attention. In the United Kingdom, an issue at above-average 32% salience ahead of PMQs that the attacking party owns implies that the party devotes an estimated 11.7% of its attacks to this issue (almost two percentage points above the average predicted attention of 9.8%). In turn, if a party has no issue ownership, it only devotes 8.1% of its attacks to this issue. These are substantial effects (an increase in attack attention of 32.3% in Belgium and 44.4% in the United Kingdom), especially considering that certain issues reach far greater salience and that certain parties enjoy far stronger/weaker ownership over issues.

Robustness checks

To assess the robustness of our findings (see Appendix O), we ran several additional models, such as using a different operationalisation of the dependent variables as a count of attacks, the issue ownership variable as a categorical variable, or employing different modelling strategies. Overall, our findings do not change in the large majority of these tests and confirm that salience and ownership, and especially their congruence, lead to an increase in parties' attack behaviour on such issues.

Conclusion

Political parties' attacks on rivals are a major ingredient in modern politics. This is reflected in a large and still growing literature on attack politics. We add to this endeavour by showing that parties attack more on attractive issues: namely, the salient and owned issues that might both prompt policy changes that the attacking party wants and attract voters to the attacking party. The influence of salience and issue ownership shows that parties deliberately pick their issues for attacks. This underlines that attacks are a powerful and appealing type of communication for political parties – they launch attacks carefully on selective issues to further their issue strategies. This conclusion rests on extensive analysis and various robustness checks across 14,364 parliamentary speeches and 5,769 attacks across multiple issues in two very different political systems – Belgium and the UK – with diverse indicators over an extended period of time.

Our findings speak to previous studies that show that attacks draw media attention (Haselmeyer et al., 2019), speak to the cognitive structure of voters ('negativity bias', Lau, 2007; Soroka, 2014), and provoke rival party attention, and therefore help a party elevate issues to the party system agenda (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2010). Against this backdrop, it is unsurprising that parties tend to attack on their preferred issues, since attack politics is part of parties' issue competition in which they try to push their preferred issues and reaffirm their issue ownership. Yet issues constitute an orthogonal dimension in the study of attack politics, which has mostly focused on attack degrees, types, and choices of targets (Nai and Walter, 2015). We demonstrate that parties not only strategize about who will be the target of their attack or what type of attack should be utilised, but also about the issue over which the attack should take place.

By showing that issues matter, we furthermore aim to reach out to a large scholarship that studies voter reactions to party communication (e.g. Slothuus, 2010). While the findings of these studies are fundamental for understanding the impact of elite communication on the mass public, our study raises the possibility that much of this line of research is not sensitive enough to the attributes of the issues selected for hypothesis testing, and is too concerned with studying peripheral issues in order to avoid pre-treatment. Such studies might easily under- or overestimate the communication effects by not considering issue attributes such as issue salience and issue ownership.

Our study focuses on the issue determinants of attacks. Moving forward, the natural next step is to focus on the issue determinants of positive campaigning (vs. negative campaigning) while also exploring

targets of attacks (which may occur at the intra-coalition or intra-party level). Furthermore, knowing the backlash that attack politics can have on voters' party choice, it is important to explore how advantageous is it for parties to attack on salient and owned issues. For example, attacking on issues that rival parties own may be a more beneficial strategy, allowing a party to diminish the target party's ownership support (Seeberg and Nai, 2021). This makes it important to explore how attacks on various issues may lead to different voter reactions.

CHAPTER 4

Parties' parliamentary attack behaviour throughout the electoral cycle

Abstract

Studies examining parties' attack behaviour, also called negative campaigning, largely neglect temporal dynamics. Therefore, this paper examines how the electoral cycle, the period between two elections, impacts parties' attack behaviour in parliaments. We argue that parties attack all the time but that the (i) level, (ii) type, and (iii) nature of attacks are affected by the electoral cycle as parties adapt their objectives. Analysing longitudinal data on parties' attacks in the parliaments of Belgium, Croatia, and the UK (2010-2020), we find that when elections draw closer parties' use of attacks, trait attacks, and uncivil attacks increases. We also find support for the notion that not all parties' attack behaviour is equally impacted by the electoral cycle, as parties differ in sensitivity to the electoral cycle based on risk acceptance. Overall, the impact of the electoral cycle on parties' strategic choices in general, and attack behaviour specifically, should not be ignored.

Reference:

Poljak, Ž. & Walter, A. (2023). Parties' Parliamentary Attack Behaviour throughout the Electoral Cycle. *Party Politics.* Advance online publication. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/13540688231188476

Introduction

In their fight to win votes, political parties frequently resort to negative campaigning. Negative campaigning is a strategy parties use to diminish the electoral attractiveness of the political opponent(s) by criticising them both on policy as well as traits.[14] The opposite strategy is positive campaigning where parties praise themselves to increase their electoral attractiveness (Geer, 2006). Negative campaigning can have unintended electoral consequences for the attacking party, such as alienating (part of) their voter base and electorally benefitting other (third) parties, respectively referred to as backlash and second-preference boost effects (e.g. Walter and Van der Eijk, 2019; Galasso et al., 2020). In addition, negative campaigning can deteriorate the relationship between the attacking and the targeted party. Consequently, this diminishes cooperative behaviour between parties in parliament, such as supporting each other's legislative proposals or government cooperation in party systems with a practice of coalition government (Dodd and Schraufnagel, 2012; Walter and Van der Brug, 2013; Walter et al., 2014). Thus, as negative campaigning is not without risks, parties engage in a cost-benefit analysis before attacking an opponent (Nai and Walter, 2015).

Research explaining the use of negative campaigning has primarily focused on characteristics of politicians, parties, elections, and systems but has not paid much attention to the temporal dimension of attacks, in particular the election cycle, i.e. the time between two consecutive elections.[15] The practice of studying parties' attack behaviour in a relatively static way stems from the scholarly emphasis on negative campaigning in the context of (official) election campaigns, often examining attack behaviour in the weeks preceding election day. This emphasis is somewhat surprising considering the popular notion of permanent campaigning, which assumes that parties increasingly "pursue actions consistent with election campaigning in non-electoral periods to maintain a positive image among the public and thus enable future electoral successes" (Joathan and Lilleker, 2023, 68). Therefore, we assume that political parties also attack opponents at other moments in the electoral cycle.

Moreover, work in the field of party politics increasingly shows that parties' behaviour changes throughout the electoral cycle. For instance, at different moments within the electoral cycle parties have

[14] We use the terms negative campaigning and attack behavior interchangeably throughout the manuscript.

[15] Notable exceptions are studies examining within the time frame of an official election campaign how proximity to election day affects parties' use of negative campaigning (e.g. Damore, 2002; Nai and Sciarini, 2018; Walter et al., 2014).

different issue strategies, levels of responsiveness to past election losses, and varying levels of cooperative behaviour (Berz and Kroeber, 2023; Seeberg, 2022; Schwalbach, 2022; Somer-Topcu, 2009). The changes in parties' behaviour reflect parties' shifting priorities throughout the electoral cycle (e.g. Müller and Louwerse, 2020; Schwalbach, 2022; Seeberg, 2022). Therefore, it is likely that parties' attack behaviour also varies throughout the electoral cycle. To fully understand negative campaigning, we should thus examine the impact of the electoral cycle on parties' attack behaviour.

We argue that the electoral cycle is an important characteristic of the institutional context in which parties operate. The electoral cycle impacts parties' objectives, i.e. vote, office, and policy. Consequently, the moment in the electoral cycle affects the strategic choices parties make, including parties' usage of negative campaigning. Negative campaigning is generally considered a vote-seeking strategy (e.g. Walter and Van der Brug, 2013; Somer-Topcu and Weitzel, 2022). We theorise that as time since the last election elapses, parties' behaviour is increasingly motivated by vote-seeking objectives, thereby stimulating parties' use of negative campaigning. However, not all parties are equally influenced by electoral incentives and willing to take risks to win votes (Meyer and Wagner, 2013; Walter and Van der Brug, 2013). In addition, the costs and benefits of negative campaigning vary for different types of attacks. Compared to policy attacks and civil attacks, trait attacks and uncivil attacks are generally considered costlier as they are more disliked both by voters and political elites (Hopmann et al., 2018; Fridkin and Kenney, 2011). Therefore, as the end of the electoral cycle draws closer, we expect all parties, but in particular risk-acceptant parties, to increase their attacks and use more trait and uncivil attacks.

We test these expectations by examining parties' attack behaviour during Question Time sessions in the Belgian, Croatian, and UK parliament between 2010 and 2020. We find that the electoral cycle significantly impacts parties' use of negative campaigning, the level as well as the types and the nature of attacks. Later in the electoral cycle, when parties are more vote-seeking, their overall use of negative campaigning increases, parties' use of policy attacks decreases while parties' use of trait attacks and uncivil attacks increases. We find partial evidence for the notion that not all parties are equally affected by electoral incentives and willing to take risks to gain votes. The electoral cycle has a significantly larger impact on parties that are losing in the public approval polls than on parties that are gaining in the polls. The results also show that party characteristics explain the significant differences in base levels of attack behaviour throughout the electoral cycle. Opposition parties use more attacks overall, more policy attacks, and more uncivil attacks than government parties. Ideologically radical parties use more uncivil attacks than mainstream parties.

This study contributes to both the field of political campaigning as well as legislative studies. First of all, this study shows that the electoral cycle significantly impacts parties' attack behaviour and that the electoral cycle cannot be ignored in the process of building a general theory on negative campaigning. Second, the study brings more empirical evidence suggesting that parties' objectives are not stable and that parties' priorities shift throughout the electoral cycle affecting the strategic choices that they make, including the decision-making calculus regarding negative campaigning. Third, we show that the electoral cycle does not affect all parties' attack behaviour equally, indicating the importance of exploring heterogeneous effects. Finally, we show that the integration of both lines of literature provides a strong theoretical approach to the examination of parties' attack behaviour in parliament.

Party Objectives, Electoral Cycle and Attack Behaviour

Parties' strategic behaviour is guided by three political objectives, namely, *office*, *policy*, and *votes* (Strøm and Müller, 1999).[16] Votes refers to maximizing the share of votes won in an election and vote maximisation has no intrinsic value but is an instrument to fulfil office- and policy-seeking objectives. Policy refers to influencing public policy and office refers to the goods and status received when in office. Although policy and office can be the end goal, they are also means for gaining access to office or policy influence. Scholars agree that no party is purely office-, policy-, or vote-seeking and that these objectives are conflicting at times, consequently, parties must make trade-offs (Strøm, 1990).

Parties' objectives are also not stable and are affected by numerous factors, including the institutional setting in which parties operate, such as the party system and the electoral cycle (Strøm and Müller, 1999). For instance, in party systems with a majoritarian government, a party that wins the elections gains access to office and policy influence. In party systems with a practice of coalition government, winning votes does not always guarantee government participation and policy influence. In a party system with minority governments, governing parties share policy influence with opposition parties more than in a party system with majority governments, and thus gaining office is less of a prerequisite for policy influence (Strøm, 1990). Parties' objectives are also affected by the electoral cycle. Closer to the elections parties tend to be mainly driven by vote-seeking objectives to obtain office and policy influence, and it is in routine periods within the electoral cycle that parties are more policy-seeking.

[16] We acknowledge that some scholars criticize this framework of Strøm and Müller (1999) and argue that parties are also driven by other political objectives such as intraparty democracy (Harmel and Jande, 1994).

Consequently, the extent to which parties are office-, policy, and vote-seeking differs across parties, throughout the electoral cycle, and across party systems (Pedersen, 2012).

A widely used party strategy is negative campaigning. We define negative campaigning as any type of critique, both policy- and trait-based, directed towards political opponents (Geer, 2006), which can include coalition partners (Martin and Vanberg, 2004; Martin and Whitaker, 2019) and party colleagues (Kam, 2009; Proksch and Slapin, 2012). These attacks can be civil or uncivil (Brooks and Geer, 2007). We define uncivil attacks as attacks that defy social norms on interactions in the domain of politics (Walter, 2021). Please note that trait-based attacks are not necessarily targeting the traits of an individual politician but can target the traits of a party. In addition, both policy and trait attacks can be civil or uncivil.

First of all, parties engage in negative campaigning to diminish the electoral attractiveness of a political opponent. By diminishing the electoral attractiveness of a political opponent parties hope to decrease the opponent's voter support and sometimes indirectly increase their own voter support. In this first scenario, parties generally attack political opponents that are ideologically close and with whom they share a voter base (Walter, 2014a; Walter and Van der Eijk, 2019).

Second, parties engage in negative campaigning to strengthen their ideological profile by clarifying to voters how they are ideologically different from political opponents (Walter, 2014a). In this second scenario, parties not only attack ideological neighbours but also parties that are positioned at the other end of the ideological spectrum, i.e. so-called ideological enemies (Walter, 2014a). Although in multiparty systems with a practice of coalition government, government parties might generally present themselves as a united front, in the runup to elections they often engage in attack behaviour to signal to voters their ideological differences as cross-party cooperation can blur the lines between parties in the mind of voters (Fortunato, 2021; Haselmayer and Jenny, 2018). Recent work also suggests that the coalition mood, i.e. the working atmosphere among coalition parties, declines over the electoral cycle (Imre et al., 2023).

Third, parties engage in negative campaigning to gain media coverage to communicate their campaign messages to voters or influence the campaign agenda (Van Aelst and Walgrave, 2016; Walter and Vliegenthart, 2010; Dolezal et al., 2017). Negative campaigning helps parties to secure media attention due to the negativity bias in the press (Soroka and McAdams, 2015; Haselmayer et al., 2019). Parties' use of negative campaigning to gain media coverage is affected by the overall importance of free publicity relative to paid publicity in the context they operate and the other resources available to these

parties to communicate to voters or gain media access (Dolezal et al., 2017). Parties always strive for media coverage, but in particular in the run-up to the elections.

The use of negative campaigning is also inherently linked to specific parties due to their role and nature (Dolezal et al., 2017; Walter and Van der Brug, 2013; Cassell, 2021). Opposition parties are expected to oppose the government and thus criticise the government (Hix and Noury, 2016). In addition, populist parties originated out of discontent with the status quo, so their supporter base expects them to criticise the establishment (Cassell, 2021). Populist parties also have less respect for established social norms of interaction and official rules or practices of engagement in parliaments and are therefore more likely to make use of uncivil attack behaviour (Marien et al., 2020). As elections are never truly out of sight (Joathan and Lilleker, 2020) and negative campaigning not only serves to materialise vote-seeking objectives (Otjes and Louwerse, 2018), attack behaviour is never completely absent, i.e. a baseline level of attack behaviour. However, we will argue that the (i) level (ii) type and (iii) nature of these attacks are likely to differ throughout the electoral cycle.

An abundance of studies has examined negative campaigning and its various forms during official election campaigns showing how such behaviour is driven by vote-seeking objectives and sometimes limited by office-seeking and policy-seeking objectives (Walter et al., 2014; Hansen and Pedersen, 2008; Haselmayer and Jenny, 2018). Regardless of the large body of work examining the use of negative campaigning, not much attention has been paid to the temporal dynamics of attack behaviour, specifically the effect of the electoral cycle (see footnote 2). Most research studies parties' attack behaviour in a relatively static fashion during (official) campaigns, which generally last a couple of weeks in a non-U.S. setting. The field of negative campaigning thereby neglects that parties also attack in-between elections and thus outside of official campaigns (e.g. Ketelaars, 2019) and the impact of the electoral cycle on negative campaigning. Several recent studies indicate that the electoral cycle may affect parties' attack behaviour, suggesting that parties clash on the same issues more towards the end of the electoral cycle (Seeberg, 2022) or that in systems with a practice of minority governments opposition parties use more negative sentiment closer to the elections (Schwalbach, 2022). Please note that we do not consider sentiment of speech (e.g. the use of negative words) the same as negative campaigning (critique directed at a political opponent).

Building upon this work, our central argument is that parties' attack behaviour evolves throughout the electoral cycle in response to changes in the priority of their goals. Precisely, we expect that the importance of seeking votes increases as the time during the electoral cycle elapses. This makes parties

employ different cost-benefit analyses on (i) whether to attack and what (ii) type and (iii) nature of attacks to use. We also expect that the impact of the electoral cycle on parties' negative campaigning decision calculus differs across parties as not all parties are equally affected by electoral incentives and risk acceptance. In the following paragraphs, we outline our expectations in greater detail.

With recent elections in mind and the next elections far ahead, parties' behaviour is less vote-seeking and subsequently less focused on party competition early in the electoral cycle. Parties can focus on cooperating on policy and be responsive to real-world problems (Ansolabehere and Iyengar, 1994). Naturally, parties' policy success in the early days of the cycle can be used to achieve re-election later in the cycle. As time during the electoral cycle elapses, all parties' behaviour becomes more vote-seeking. To diminish the opponent's electoral attractiveness, strengthen their ideological profile, and/or gain media coverage, parties can decide to make (more) use of negative campaigning. Closer to the elections the potential benefits of negative campaigning become more important to parties and increase their willingness to risk the potential costs of negative campaigning, i.e. losing voter support, unintended increase in voter support for a 'third' party, or limiting chances of elite cooperation (Walter and Van der Eijk, 2019; Galasso et al., 2020; Dodd and Schraufnagel, 2012). Consequently, we formulate the following hypothesis:

Attack Level Hypothesis (H1): Parties attack more at the end than at the beginning of the electoral cycle.

As elections draw closer we also expect a change in the type and nature of attacks that parties use to target opponents. The costs and benefits vary for different types of attacks. Compared to policy attacks and civil attacks, trait attacks and uncivil attacks are generally considered costlier as they are more disliked both by voters and political elites (Hopmann et al., 2018; Fridkin and Kenney, 2011). These attacks are more likely to cause voter backlash or deteriorate the relationship between the attacking and the targeted party (Dodd and Schraufnagel, 2012; Walter and Van der Brug, 2013; Hansen and Pedersen, 2008). Given that the potential benefits of negative campaigning increase closer to the election, as does the willingness to take risks, parties are more willing to engage in riskier attack behaviour, i.e. use more trait and uncivil attacks.

In the run-up to elections when political parties engage in all kinds of media attention-seeking behaviour, including attack behaviour, the need to stand out increases. Despite the media's negativity

bias, the use of negative campaigning closer to an election may be insufficient to secure media coverage as attack behaviour is too widespread. Therefore, parties might resort to attacks that are less common and perceived as more aggressive by both the public and elites as they yield more media attention (Mutz, 2015). Mechanisms that provide media access to politicians are significantly different in routine compared to campaign times (Van Aelst and De Swert, 2009; Falasca, 2014).

In addition, at elections, voters not only vote for a party on their future or past policy plans, but also for the traits of that party, such as competence and integrity. Furthermore, voters may also vote for a politician representing a party. Although the need and room for personalised campaigning towards election day is strongly related to institutional characteristics, such as the electoral system and party system institutionalisation, we expect towards the end of the electoral cycle more discussion on whether the party and/ or party representative is suitable for the job at the cost of policy dialogue. Consequently, increasing the use of trait attacks and decreasing the use of policy attacks. Thus, we formulate the following three hypotheses on the impact of the electoral cycle on the type and the nature of attacks.

Policy Attack Hypothesis (H2): Parties use less policy attacks at the end of the electoral cycle than at the beginning of the electoral cycle.

Trait Attack Hypothesis (H3): Parties use more trait attacks at the end of the electoral cycle than at the beginning of the electoral cycle.

Nature of Attack Hypothesis (H4): Parties use more uncivil attacks at the end of the electoral cycle than at the beginning of the electoral cycle.

Although all parties towards the end of the electoral cycle are expected to engage in more vote-seeking behaviour, not all parties are equally influenced by electoral incentives and risk acceptance (e.g. Meyer and Wagner, 2013; Walter and Van der Brug, 2013). Some parties are more risk-acceptant than others and therefore more likely to use attack behaviour in the face of elections. According to prospect theory, risk behaviour is more likely when an actor is at a loss (Kahneman and Tversky, 1979). Parties that are more affected by electoral incentives and are prone to risk can include parties losing in the public approval polls (Skaperdas and Grofman, 1995), opposition parties, and ideologically radical parties (Walter et al., 2014).

Risk Acceptant Parties Hypothesis (H5): The impact of the electoral cycle on parties' attack behaviour, i.e. level, type, and nature of attacks, is larger for risk-acceptant parties than for risk-averse parties.

Methodology

Cases

This study examines parties' attack behaviour in Belgium, Croatia, and the United Kingdom (UK) throughout several electoral cycles in the period from January 2010 to December 2020 (2021 for Croatia).[17] This period captures 4 electoral cycles in Belgium and 5 electoral cycles in Croatia and the UK (see more details in *Appendix – Coder training*). Our case selection is based on party-system differences which affect parties' trade-off between *vote-*, *office-,* and *policy*-seeking objectives and thus their strategic behaviour, including attack behaviour (Strøm and Müller, 1999). Several studies suggest that parties attack more in two-party systems than in multiparty systems as negative campaigning is a less risky strategy in two-party systems due to parties having to make less of a trade-off between their political goals (Walter, 2014b; Walter et al., 2014).

Furthermore, different party systems bring about different parties, such as the presence or absence of an anti-establishment party. We argue that party characteristics matter for the use of negative campaigning and the impact of the electoral cycle on attack behaviour. Therefore, by selecting different party systems we enable drawing conclusions that travel to other party systems. Belgium has a multi-party system, that has multiple (and stable) competing parties and a practice of coalition government (see Casal Bértoa and Enyedi, 2021). This also includes radical right and radical left parties that are present in parliament. In direct contrast to this is the British party system (see Lijphart, 2012) which has two major competing parties and most of the time a single-party government. This makes it difficult for third parties, including ideologically extreme ones, to participate as equals in parliamentary party competition (see e.g. Thompson, 2018). Finally, the Croatian party system is a case between these two extremes where multiple parties are grouped in two competing blocks, generally resulting in a coalition government consisting of parties within one of these blocks (see Nikić Čakar and Krašovec, 2021). Consequently, third parties in

[17] We include an extra year for Croatia case due to the low frequency of QTs. However, while 2021 is included in all main models reported in this paper, we repeated all tests excluding 2021 from Croatia. Sensitivity analyses show that including or excluding 2021 is not impacting our main results and findings in any way.

Croatia, primarily mainstream ones, can play a significant role within parliamentary venues as major parties need them to form a government.

We examine attack behaviour in parliamentary question time sessions (QTs), specifically *Vragenuur* in Belgium, *Aktualno prijepodne* in Croatia, and *Prime Minister's Questions* (PMQs) in the UK. In all three countries, QTs are an established regular (weekly or quarterly) format of parliamentary debates during which Members of Parliament (MPs) of all parties can question the government[18], which allows for a systematic examination of parties' attack behaviour in election cycles across countries and across time. In addition, QTs receive the most media coverage of all parliamentary debates (Salmond, 2014) and the questions asked are largely symbolic (Van Aelst and Vliegenthart, 2014). Various scholars perceive QTs as a permanent campaign forum (Otjes and Louwerse, 2018; Osnabrügge et al., 2021; Seeberg, 2020b; Soontjens, 2021) that also reflect what parties debate about in other communication venues, such as in the traditional news or on social media (Peeters et al., 2021; Soontjens, 2021).

Data collection and operationalisation

We sampled QTs by randomly selecting one for each month. The sample of 261 QTs consists of 103 QTs for Belgium, 115 QTs for the UK, and 43 QTs for Croatia. The sample includes approximately a third of the complete QT population for Belgium and the UK, respectively, 30.4% and 32.7%. The sample for Croatia includes the full population of QTs due to their low frequency (see footnote 5). The selected QTs were analysed using transcripts scraped from official parliamentary websites. Each *speech act* in these transcripts counts as an observation. A speech act starts the moment a person begins to speak and finishes when this person ends or is interrupted. The data collection includes all questions, answers, points of order, Speaker's interventions, and interruptions, but excludes protocol speeches, such as the Speaker

[18] The structure of these QTs differ across parliaments. In Belgium, every week all parties are granted slots to ask questions to the cabinet members. These questions are grouped based on a topic and are answered by the responsible cabinet member. Once the answer to a particular group of questions is given, all MPs who asked questions in this group are also granted the opportunity to respond. In Croatia, parliamentary size determines the number of questions a party can ask a cabinet member every quarter (i.e. four times per year). As such, in Croatia, QTs are dominated by the two main parties in which questions are asked individually by MPs to a specific cabinet member who responds immediately and receives a rebuttal from the MP who posed a question. Finally, in the UK, the distribution of questions is decided by a random shuffle which generally favours the two largest parties. Questions are asked to the PM every week, and once the PM answers the question, no rebuttal is possible except for the Leader(s) of the Opposition who can ask questions on every QT and rebuttal the PM's answers (Serban, 2020).

giving the floor in Croatia and MPs asking the Prime Minister (PM) to list her/his engagements at the start of every PMQ in the United Kingdom. In total, the dataset consists of 20,044 observations.

Each of these observations was manually coded. All coders were trained for six weeks, which resulted in satisfactory Krippendorff's alpha scores (see *Appendix – Coder training*). Coders indicated for each speech act whether (i) the politician attacks, and if yes, whether the attack (ii) includes policy criticism, (iii) trait criticism, and (iv) uncivil criticism. Attacks are operationalised as any instance of a political actor criticising another political actor, including actors from the same group.[19] We coded attacks targeting formal individual and group actors, such as PMs, Party Leaders, Ministers, parties, coalitions, and governments. We did not code attacks targeting informal actors, such as foreign politicians, unions, and non-governmental organizations. We operationalise policy attacks as criticising the opponent's prospective or retrospective policy plans, and the realisation and execution of these policy plans. We operationalise trait attacks as criticising the opponent's traits, such as competence and integrity. Political incivility was operationalised as any attack including name-calling (e.g. calling a minister Grinch), mocking (e.g. comparing a policy to Pinocchio's nose), or insulting language (e.g. saying that someone is disgusting). See Table 1 for examples illustrating the coding scheme while descriptive statistics of parties' average attack behaviour in a QT session are reported in Appendix P.

Table 1. Coding scheme examples

ATTACK TYPE	SPEECH ACT
Policy **Civil**	*The Prime Minister will also know that this House passed legislation that excludes those injured by their own hand.* ***But the innocent victims have not yet been able to benefit from this scheme, not least because of the actions of Sinn Féin, who are blocking the next steps to implementation.*** Jeffrey Donaldson, DUP, 10.6.2020
Policy **Uncivil**	*I was thinking of raising with the Prime Minister* ***the Conservatives' so-called long-term economic plan—like Pinocchio's nose, it grows longer and less attractive by the day (…)*** David Blunkett, Lab, 11.3.2015
Trait **Civil**	***One word can sum up that answer: weak. It is not advice that is required, but some leadership. (…)*** David Cameron, Con, 17.3.2010
Trait **Uncivil**	*(…) I have had a quick scan of the Radio Times.* ***Which of these films would he fancy: "The Grinch Who Stole Christmas", starring the Chancellor of the Exchequer; "The Muppet Christmas Carol", starring the Lib Dem members of the Cabinet; or "It's Not a Wonderful Life for the Poor", starring himself?*** Kevin Brennan, Lab, 19.12.2012

[19] Intra-party attacks constitute less than 1 per cent of all attacks in Belgium and Croatia and in the UK they make up 2.5 per cent of all attacks.

Policy and Trait Civil	*The Times Educational Supplement recently published a feature article stating how effective the pupil premium would be. Does the Deputy Prime Minister share* ***my frustration at the fact that the Labour party appears to be more interested in scoring partisan points than in supporting the coalition Government's serious attempts***— Stephen Lloyd, LD, 10.11.2010
Policy and Trait Uncivil	*This is the* ***height of arrogance from a Government set on running the clock down. Just 44 days from a no-deal scenario, the Prime Minister is hamstrung by her own party and rejected by European leaders. The Prime Minister must stop playing fast and loose. Businesses are begging for certainty; the economy is already suffering. Prime Minister, you have come to the end of the road, rumbled by your own loose-lipped senior Brexit adviser.*** Ian Blackford, SNP, 13.2.2019

Note: All examples displayed are from the UK. For examples from Belgium and Croatia, see Appendix Q.

For the purpose of hypotheses testing, we constructed four binary dependent variables indicating: (i) whether a politician attacks (1=Yes; 0=No) and if yes, whether this attack included (ii) policy criticism (1=Yes; 0=No), (iii) trait criticism (1=Yes; 0=No) and (iv) uncivil criticism (name-calling, mocking or insulting language) (1=Yes; 0=No). Our main independent variable is proximity to the end of the electoral cycle which is measured as the number of months since the last election. For example, number 12 is assigned to a QT observation 12 months after the last elections (for a similar measurement see Borghetto and Belchior, 2020; Pardos-Prado and Sagarzazu, 2019; Seeberg, 2022).[20]

To test our risk acceptance hypothesis (H5), our data also includes variables on party's status (0=Opposition; 1=Government), ideological extremity (adaptation of the variable *lrgen* from the Chapel Hill Expert Survey[21]; see Jolly et al., 2022), and public approval in polls[22]. Opposition parties that lack incumbency perks of *office* and *policy* success throughout the electoral cycle find themselves in a loss situation as proximity to elections increases. This makes them particularly prone to risk-taking by employing different strategies at elections (e.g. Crabtree, 2020) and potentially attacking retrospective decisions taken by governing and mainstream parties that enjoyed gains throughout the electoral cycle

[20] The variable proximity to the end of the electoral cycle can also be operationalised as proximity to the end of the parliamentary term or the actual election date. These alternative measures are used to assess the robustness of our results (see Appendix G).

[21] We created a new variable measuring a party's ideological distance from the centre, using the standard left-right scores that range from 0 (radical left) to 10 (radical right). Thus, the higher the value the more ideologically extreme the party.

[22] This is a lagged variable that measures parties' public approval ratings on the basis of aggregated voters' voting intentions a month before a sampled QT (e.g. public approval in April is attributed to parties for QT in May). For Belgium, we use data from opinion polls that were conducted by various agencies (mostly Ipsos) and reported by TV networks in Belgium (VRT; RTBF; VTM; RTL). For Croatia, we include public approval ratings for the two main parties (HDZ and SDP) based on polls from PromocijaPlus which are regularly reported on RTL news. Finally, for the UK, we include data for the two largest parties (Conservative Party and Labour Party) from Ipsos MORI polls that were reported in the *Evening Standard* newspaper.

(Müller, 2022). Furthermore, parties that are losing in public approval polls might be more willing to engage in negative campaigning regardless of its potential backlash effect (Skaperdas and Grofman, 1995). Ideologically extreme parties are at a loss as they are unlikely to be part of the government, and might be more willing to take the risks of negative campaigning. In addition, the cost in terms of voter backlash will be lower for these ideologically extreme parties as their voter base expects them to criticize the established parties.

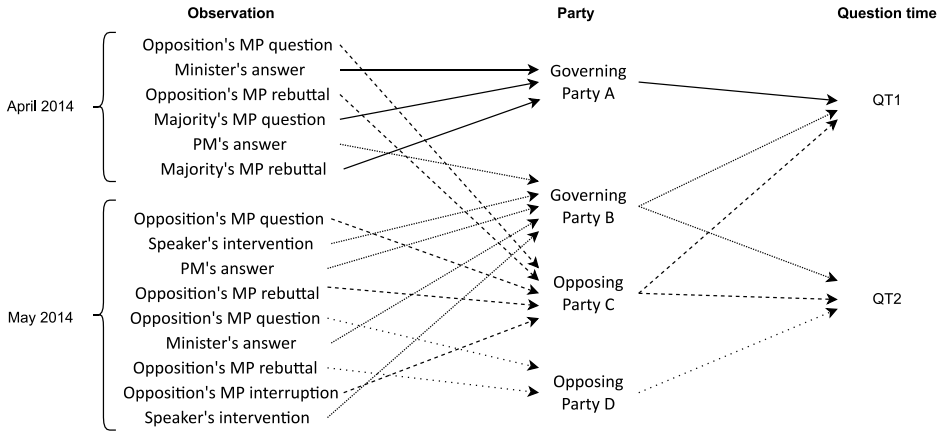
Method

We analyse our data using multilevel logistic regressions given the hierarchical structure of data and binary dependent variables. Since our observations are politicians' speech acts (one speech unit = one observation) nested within parties and QTs, the model consists of two levels: parties (e.g. speech unit belongs to party A; N = 39) and QTs (e.g. speech unit spoken in QT 1; N = 261). To control for the fact that parties reappear and are not unique observations for each QT, we employ a multi-membership modelling strategy (appropriate for panel data; see Chung and Beretvas, 2012) which crosses parties with QTs in which they participate (see Figure 1 for a visual representation of the modelling strategy). We dropped observations of parties not included in the CHES dataset.[23] Depending on the dependent variable, the number of observations in the analyses varies between 18,612 speech units and 6,218 attacks. The main models presented in the manuscript do not include the control variable public approval. Including the variable public approval reduces the number of observations substantially and even drops parties from the model.[24] The extended models including the variable public approval are reported in Appendix S. Lastly, all our models include variables on the politician's gender (0=Man; 1=Woman), and year dummies.

[23] With this approach, we lose 1,432 (7,14%) observations out of 20,044. These observations usually included speech acts made by independent MPs and MPs from (short-lived) parties with low share of seats in the parliament (e.g. MLD in Belgium, HGS in Croatia or UUP in the UK). Sensitivity analyses show that including or excluding these observations is not impacting our main results and findings in any way.

[24] Including the public approval variable results in a drop of 6,074 (32.6%) observations out of 18,612 as we lack public approval data in Belgium between 2010 and 2014 while for Croatia and the UK we do not have approval data for small parties in the parliament (see also footnote 9).

Figure 1. A multi-level model crossing levels of parties with QTs



Note: A hypothetical scenario of two governing, two opposing parties, and two QTs. Parties A and D only participate in one QT and parties B and C participate in both QTs.

Results

To what extent and in what way does the electoral cycle affect parties' attack behaviour? The results of our multilevel logistic regression analyses are reported in Table 2. The findings show significant changes in parties' use of attacks, trait attacks, and uncivil attacks throughout the electoral cycle. As time elapses throughout the electoral cycle, the probability of parties' overall use of attacks, trait attacks, and uncivil attacks in QTs increases. We do not find a significant effect of the electoral cycle on the use of policy attacks, i.e. parties' use of policy attacks does not significantly increases or decreases throughout the electoral cycle. The latter also suggests that the rise of trait attacks does not come at the cost of policy attacks. The results support H1, H3, and H4, but not H2.

Overall, we find empirical evidence that the electoral cycle affects parties' attack behaviour in parliaments, which we argue reflects changes in the importance of parties' goals. The closer to elections parties and their representatives are, the more vote-seeking they become. Furthermore, similar to previous work on negative campaigning, we find that party characteristics affect the base levels of parties' attack behaviour (e.g. Elmelund-Præstekær, 2010; Walter and Van der Brug, 2013; Goovaerts and Turkenburg, 2022). Opposition parties have higher overall use of attacks and uncivil attacks than governing parties consistently through time while ideologically extreme parties use more uncivil attacks compared to mainstream parties.

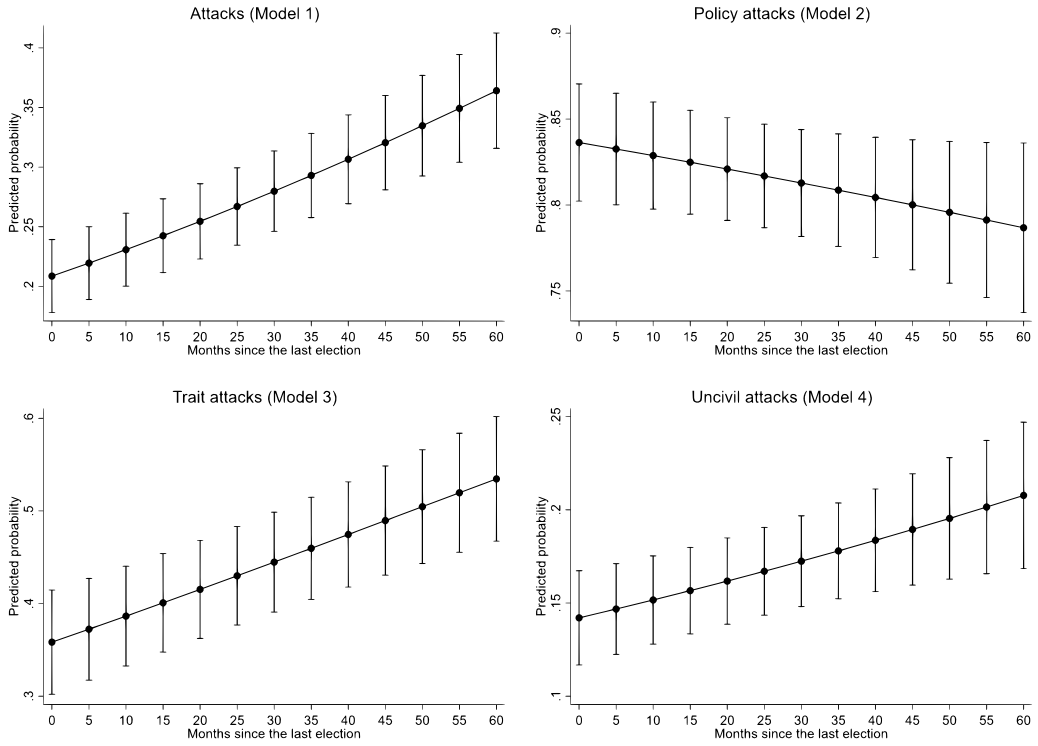
Table 2. The effect of the electoral cycle on parties' use of attacks, trait attacks, policy attacks, and uncivil attacks in QTs

	MODEL 1 DV1: Use of attacks (1=Yes)	MODEL 2 DV2: Use of policy attacks(1=Yes)	MODEL 3 DV3: Use of trait attacks(1=Yes)	MODEL 4 DV4: Use of uncivil attacks (1=Yes)
	Coef. (S.E.)	Coef. (S.E.)	Coef. (S.E.)	Coef. (S.E.)
IVs				
Electoral cycle	**.012 (.002) *** **	-.005 (.003)	**.012 (.002) *** **	**.007 (.002) ** **
Opposition (ref.)				
Government	-2.044 (.056) ***	-.692 (.093) ***	.014 (.084)	-.438 (.099) ***
Ideological extremity	.362 (.758)	-.186 (.928)	1.023 (.967)	2.511 (.730) ***
Man MP (ref.)				
Woman MP	-.197 (.043) ***	.289 (.083) **	-.358 (.068) ***	-.452 (.086) ***
Belgium (ref.)				
Croatia	.181 (.202)	-.094 (.276)	.044 (.268)	-.699 (.224) **
UK	-.061 (.250)	-.597 (.301) †	.206 (.320)	-.037 (.232)
Constant	.110 (.251)	1.961 (.348) ***	-.908 (.326) **	-1.897 (.285) ***
Variance (Parties)	.437 (.082)	.475 (.104)	.554 (.107)	.343 (.080)
Variance (QTs)	.349 (.026)	.548 (.051)	.399 (.041)	.338 (.054)
N (total)	18,612	6,218	6,218	6,218
N (QTs)	261	261	261	261
N (min. per QT)	29	7	7	7
N (max. per QT)	168	82	82	82
AIC (empty model)	20.338 (0= 22.385)	6.416 (0= 6.726)	8.218 (0= 8.538)	6.085 (0= 6.405)

Note: Models are multilevel logistic regression analyses. The dependent variables are all dichotomous (1=Yes; 0=No). All models include year dummies, but these are not displayed. Models with the variable public approval included are available in Appendix S. †p<0.1; *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

The findings are clearly visible in Figure 2, which presents the post-estimated predicted probabilities of our regression analyses. Firstly, the top left graph shows that a party's probability of attacking in a speech act increases by 74.5% (from .209 to .364) throughout the electoral cycle when comparing their behaviour in the first QT after an election with the last QT before an election. Secondly, the probability of using policy attacks decreases by only 5.9% (from .836 to .787), while the probability of trait attacks and uncivil attacks increases respectively by 49.2% (from .358 to .535) and 46.3% (from .142 to .208) comparing parties' behaviour in QTs at the start with the end of the electoral cycle. Overall, Figure 2 shows that these shifts in parties' use, type, and nature of attacks throughout the electoral cycle are not only significant but also substantial in size.

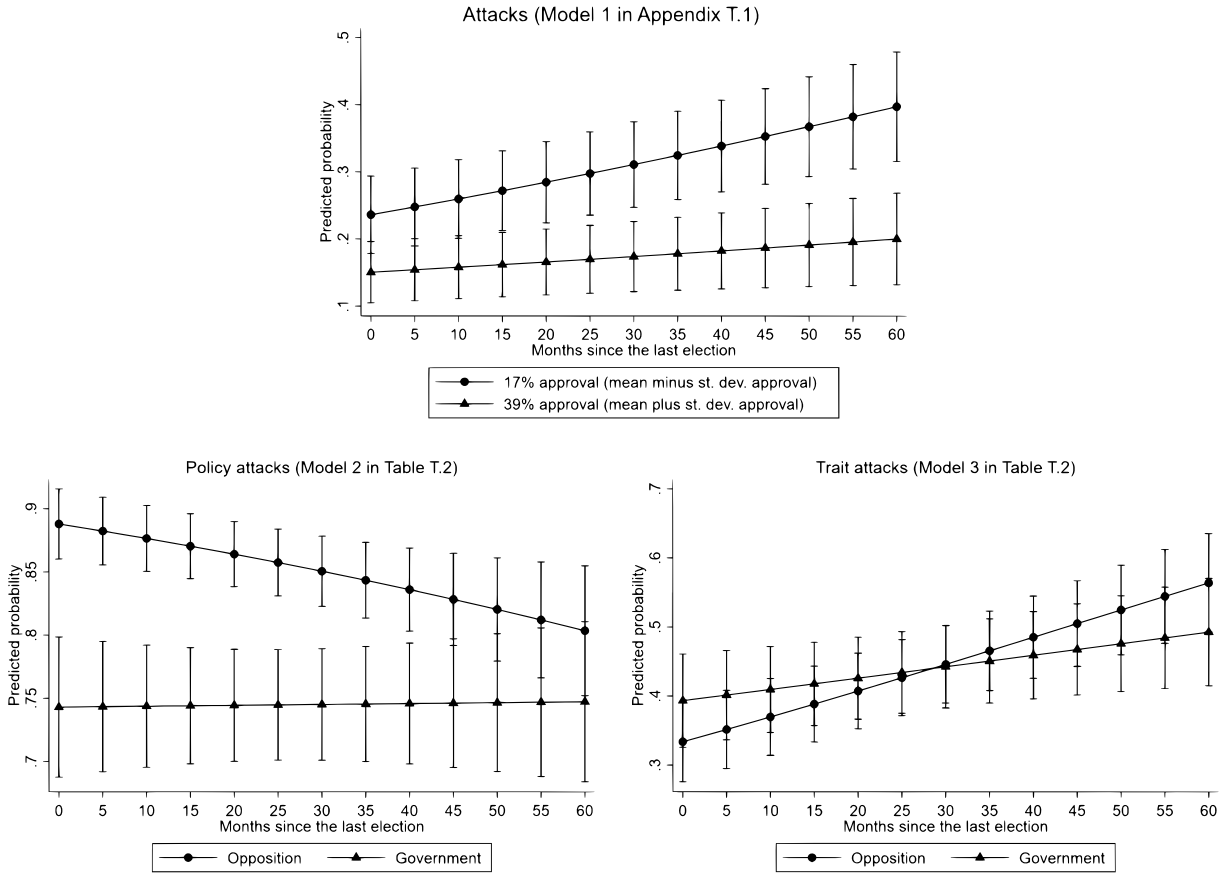
Figure 2. Predicted probabilities of parties' use of attacks and their types (policy/trait) and nature (incivility) during the electoral cycle



Note: Vertical lines indicate 90% confidence intervals holding all other variables at their mean

Furthermore, we find some evidence for H5, the notion that not all parties' attack behaviour is equally affected by the electoral cycle and that the electoral cycle affects risk-acceptant parties' attack behaviour more than risk-averse parties (Appendix T.1; T.2; T.3). Namely, parties losing in polls are more prone to attack closer to an election (top in Figure 3). Interestingly, both governing and opposing parties show an increase in attack behaviour, but the effect is significantly stronger for governing parties. This may be attributed to the need for coalition parties to differentiate themselves from each other (Imre et al., 2023; Fortunato, 2021). Moreover, both governing and opposing parties increase their use of trait attacks towards the end of the electoral cycle, but the effect is significantly stronger for opposition parties (right-bottom in Figure 3). This increase in trait attacks comes at the expense of policy attacks for opposing parties (left-bottom in Figure 3). Lastly, when it comes to parties' ideological extremity, we do not find that the electoral cycle has a different effect on parties' attack behaviour, conditional on their level of ideological extremity.

Figure 3. Predicted probabilities of attacks when interacting electoral cycle with public approval (above) and probabilities of policy/trait attacks when interacting electoral cycle with party status (below)



Note: The full regression output for all graphs is available in Appendix T.1 and Appendix T.2 (for above: Table T.1; for below: Table T.2). Vertical lines indicate 90% confidence intervals holding other variables at their mean.

Robustness checks

We also conducted sensitivity analyses to check the robustness of our findings (Appendix U.1; U.2; U3; U4). We found that the effects of the electoral cycle on parties' attack behaviour are consistent across different operationalisations of the electoral cycle variable and that the electoral cycle of second-order elections during the study period did not affect the impact of the first-order election cycle on parties' negative campaigning in parliament. We also performed jack-knifing, dropping one country and electoral cycle at a time. The results supported hypotheses H1, H3, and H4 across all countries and electoral cycles, including H2 when the period of Michel government in Belgium (2014-2019) is omitted. Moreover, when we include the control parties' standing in public approval polls in our main models using the smaller dataset, the effect of the electoral cycle on parties' attack behaviour is similar, including for parties' use

of policy attacks (H2). The probability of using policy attacks significantly decreases by 11.5% (from .845 to .747) comparing parties' behaviour in QTs at the start with the end of the electoral cycle (see Appendix S).

However, it is worth noting two country exceptions. Firstly, in Belgium, incivility was generally used consistently regardless of the electoral cycle. We posit that two factors account for this finding. On the one hand, the substantial presence of populist and extremist parties in parliament, including both the right and left of the ideological spectrum, contribute to the persistent use of uncivil rhetoric, as their usage of incivility does not come with significant repercussions. On the other hand, the necessity for mainstream parties to form and maintain broad coalitions contribute to their minimal use of incivility throughout the electoral cycle. Secondly, in the UK, public approval did not impact parties' use of attacks throughout the electoral cycle. Instead, it was the opposition parties that predominantly took risks by increasing trait attacks closer to elections. We attribute this to the importance of office goals, which can be achieved by winning an election in the UK unlike in Croatia and Belgium (see also Walter et al., 2014).

Conclusion

This study brings a better understanding of how institutional characteristics such as the electoral cycle, i.e. the period between two consecutive elections, affects parties' attack behaviour in parliament and helps to build a general theory on negative campaigning. Firstly, this study makes a theoretical contribution as it provides grounds for understanding parties' incentives to engage in negative campaigning from a longitudinal time frame. In doing so, we built upon previous studies that claim that parties' objectives shift throughout the electoral cycle affecting parties' strategic behaviour (Müller and Louwerse, 2020; Schwalbach, 2022; Seeberg, 2022). Specifically, we argued that vote-seeking goals become increasingly important to parties closer to elections, which affects parties' decision calculus on negative campaigning, which is generally considered a vote-seeking strategy. Closer to the elections the potential benefits of attack behaviour increase as well as parties' willingness to take a risk. Therefore, when the election draws closer parties not only engage more in negative campaigning but also in riskier attack behaviour, especially parties that are more affected by electoral incentives and risk acceptance. Secondly, this study contributes to the literature on negative campaigning and parliamentary behaviour as it is one of the first studies to empirically examine parties' attack behaviour throughout multiple

electoral cycles. Work on attack behaviour often ignores temporal dynamics, including the electoral cycle, and tends to analyse parties' behaviour in short-term and static campaign periods.

The research results suggest that parties indeed become more vote-seeking and not only attack more but engage in riskier attack strategies, such as trait attacks and uncivil attacks towards the end of the electoral cycle. In addition, this demonstrates that the notion of permanent campaigning is not consistently present throughout the electoral cycle in parliamentary question time sessions, despite their high media coverage and exposure to citizens. That is, parties exhibit less campaigning-oriented behaviour in the early stages of the electoral cycle. Lastly, not all parties are equally affected in their attack behaviour by the electoral cycle. We find evidence that risk-averse parties, especially those losing in the public approval polls and parties in the opposition, are more likely to engage in riskier attack behaviour towards the end of the electoral cycle.

Still, our study is not without shortcomings. Firstly, we focused on a specific set of parliamentary sessions, namely QTs. It is plausible that parties' attack behaviour in these sessions differs from broader plenary debates and committee sessions (see Karlsson et al., 2022). We do not expect the impact of the electoral cycle on parties' attack behaviour to disappear if different parliamentary sessions are examined, but studying QTs potentially overestimates parties' use of attack behaviour: QTs are designed to scrutinise the government and are the parliamentary sessions which receive the most media attention. The field would furthermore benefit from examining the impact of the electoral cycle on parties' attack behaviour in other venues such as press releases or social media. In addition, we only examined parties' attack behaviour in three different countries. To further advance the theory on negative campaigning, it is crucial to examine parties' attack behaviour in electoral cycles across a wider range of countries. More cases could shed light on how other contextual characteristics, apart from the electoral cycle, affect parties' use of negative campaigning or interact with the electoral cycle.

CHAPTER 5

The impact of public approval on the use of negativity throughout the electoral cycle

Abstract

The literature has found that politicians who lag behind in public approval ratings during campaigns resort to more negativity. However, the actual impact of approval on the use of negativity during the electoral cycle has yet to be addressed. Furthermore, due to the short-lived nature of campaigns, current studies have been unable to establish a directional causal link between approval ratings and negativity. This paper addresses these gaps by: (i) building a theory for understanding the impact of public approval on the use of negativity throughout the electoral cycle; and (ii) methodologically testing this impact on a time series basis. Using data on negativity in parliaments, the results confirm that low approval ratings lead to more negativity closer to elections in Belgium (2014–2020) and Croatia (2010–2021). In the UK (2010–2020), however, approval does not appear to be a significant predictor of negativity use. These findings have important implications for our understanding of the use of negativity by political actors outside campaigns.

Reference:

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Introduction

Negativity in politics has been blamed for lower citizen turnout at elections (e.g. Lemert et al. 1999; Nai 2013), decreasing political trust (e.g. Thorson et al. 2000) and increasing polarisation (e.g. Iyengar et al. 2012). Despite knowing much about the impact that negativity has on citizens, not much is known about the impact of citizens' opinions on politicians deciding to go negative in the first place. This is surprising as there is plenty of literature on political behaviour that has confirmed the notion that politicians *do respond* to citizens' preferences (e.g. Wlezien and Soroka 2016). This begs the question: Could it be that citizens themselves (and their approval) are an important predictor of politicians deciding to use negativity in the first place?

To address this question, negativity needs to be treated as a dependent variable. Thus far, the only literature that has extensively tested negativity in such a way has focused on negative campaigning. These scholars studied negativity during election campaigns by collecting and analysing attacks by political actors on their opponents (Nai and Walter 2015). They have theorised that one of the explanations for going negative is the status these actors have in terms of public approval, operationalised through opinion polls and/or election results. More specifically, it has been hypothesised that the frontrunners, who score higher in opinion polls and are expected to gain a larger share of votes compared to a previous election, are less likely to use negative campaigning. In contrast, it is suggested that actors who are lagging behind in opinion polls are more likely to go negative (Skaperdas and Grofman 1995). These expectations have found support in several empirical studies (e.g. Damore 2002; Elmelund-Præstekær 2008, 2010; Haynes and Rhine 1998; Maier and Jansen 2017; Nai and Sciarini 2018; Walter and Van der Brug 2013) and confirm the expectation that public approval is an important element that politicians evaluate before deciding to utilise negativity.

While these findings are fundamental for our understanding of the use of negativity, two gaps in the research need to be addressed. First, the above-mentioned studies only explored the impact of public approval during election campaigns. Hence, the conclusions we currently have are only tied to a specific moment in time. However, citizens' opinions about political actors are not only formed during campaigns but also during regular day-to-day politics. As such, politicians are exposed to public approval signals during the entire electoral cycle, such as polls in the media (see Oleskog Tryggvason 2020). The impact of these daily approval signals on the use of negativity is yet to be investigated. Second, due to the limited time frame of campaigns, researchers have predominantly had to approach the operationalisation of public approval in a static and binary fashion, where some actors are classified as frontrunners and others

are considered stragglers throughout the entire campaign (e.g. Nai and Sciarini 2018; Elmelund-Præstekær 2010; Walter et al. 2014). Therefore, the causal link which is presumed (i.e. public approval impacting negativity) is based on the congruence between the two and not on directional causation.

Therefore, the intriguing results of these founding studies deserve some in-depth follow-up research. The aim of this paper is thus to: (i) build a theoretical framework (following prospect theory of risk-taking) about the causal relationship between public approval and negativity during the entire electoral cycle, while (ii) methodologically studying the interplay between the two in a time series fashion. The main argument of this study is that public approval has an impact on political actors going negative not only during campaigns but also throughout the electoral cycle. However, it is expected that this impact of public approval on negativity shifts and changes during the cycle. More precisely, this paper argues that as the time during the electoral cycle elapses, the impact of public approval on the use of negativity grows. Those actors who enjoy high approval ratings are encouraged to use less negativity because they fear the potential risks that negativity runs (i.e. fewer votes at the upcoming election). In contrast, actors who have low approval ratings become risk-takers later in the electoral cycle, using negativity in the hope of increasing their approval while damaging that of their competitors.

To test this hypothesis, the study made use of data on negativity employed by politicians in Belgium (2014–2020), Croatia (2010–2021) and the UK (2010–2020) during 'question time' sessions (QT) in their respective parliaments. The amount of negativity that politicians employed during QTs (*t*) was regressed on the most recent public approval ratings that preceded these QTs (*t-1*). The results showed that negativity used by politicians was, surprisingly, not always affected by approval polls. However, there was a significant effect of approval later in the electoral cycle and as the probability of an upcoming election increases. Furthermore, the notion that higher approval leads to less negativity and vice versa later in the cycle was identified in Belgium and Croatia but not in the UK, where the study found that as time elapsed during the cycle, both high and low approval actors were stimulated to use more negativity. These results have important implications for our understanding of the use of negativity by political actors, while also contributing to the broader literature that studies the linkage between politics and citizens.

Negativity and public approval

Election campaigns

Negativity is one of the key strategies used by political actors during election campaigns to gain election victory. It can be defined in a 'directional' way (Walter and Vliegenthart 2010) as any form of political attack in which one political actor criticises the competition during the campaign (Geer 2006). Citizens are exposed to these attacks through TV adverts, election posters, TV debates, etc., during campaign periods. Exposure to this negativity in politics can have harmful effects on the democratic process (e.g. adversely affecting political trust; Mutz and Reeves 2005) and also on society as a whole (e.g. increasing affective polarisation; Iyengar et al. 2012). There is extensive research on negativity during campaigning, in which scholars have attempted to establish what leads politicians to resort to such a campaign strategy. Given the impact that negativity has on citizens, these researchers have also looked at how citizens and their approval ratings have an impact on the use of negativity. Among the very first studies was one by Harrington and Hess (1996), who empirically showed for the US that candidates who were ranked low by citizens on the valence scale (i.e. competence) tended to be more negative. This prompted the hypothesis that high use of negativity and low public approval may be spuriously related, that is, they are both driven by candidates' inabilities (Harrington and Hess 1996: 221).

This hypothesis, however, was quickly abandoned, with scholars arguing that it is simply the low approval of the public that leads actors to employ negativity. Skaperdas and Grofman (1995), for example, had argued that in a two-candidate race, the candidate that lags in opinion polls is more likely to utilise negativity. The reason for this outcome is simple: if the runner-up wants to be the frontrunner, they need to discredit the current frontrunner in the perception of the electorate. As such, using negativity to attack the frontrunner is a rational strategy, as it may lower citizen approval of the frontrunner (Lefevere et al. 2020; Seeberg and Nai 2021). Another option for the runner-up would be to focus the campaign on positive messages instead (praising their own achievements/commitments), but this would hardly be an effective strategy if the public already has a more positive image of the frontrunner (Damore 2002). This argument was also tested beyond mere two-candidate races and found to be true for US primary races, where multiple candidates run to become their party's presidential candidate (Haynes and Rhine, 1998).

As the literature on negative campaigning started to move beyond the US, the impact of public approval on negativity was also tested in European states. These studies also identified a significant relationship between public approval and the use of negativity during campaigns in Europe. To be precise, parties and candidates across Europe use more negativity if they are expected to lose the election (Elmelund-Præstekær 2008, 2010; Maier and Jansen 2017; Nai and Sciarini 2018; Nai and Martinez i Coma

2019; Walter and Van der Brug 2013).[25] Most recently, Nai (2020) identified the same relationship, not only in Western (US and European) campaigns but also across the globe. Therefore, it is safe to conclude that the hypothesis about the relationship between negativity and public approval stands in the majority of cases: low public approval is associated with candidates going negative.

Despite these findings, it remains unclear what happens with negativity once campaigns are over. Negativity is employed not only during campaigns but also in regular day-to-day politics (Ketelaars 2019). Venues in which political actors are present between campaigns, such as the media or parliaments, present opportunities for politicians to utilise negativity during their parliamentary term. We know this from various other fields of political science that have shown how, for example, there is a heavy negativity bias in the news (Soroka and McAdams 2015), resulting in negative communication by politicians who aim to obtain media access (Haselmayer et al. 2019). At the same time, the literature on parliamentary behaviour has also established that parliaments, for example, are venues in which clashes and conflicts between actors take place (Otjes and Louwerse 2018; Vliegenthart and Walgrave 2011). Therefore, it is safe to say that there is negativity throughout the electoral cycle, leading us to wonder whether public approval also impacts this strategy.

In addition, public approval has been operationalised in a static way in the current research, which makes it difficult to establish the direction of causality, whereby approval impacts negativity (but see Nai and Martinez i Coma 2019; Maier and Jansen 2017). Scholars have tended to either classify actors as frontrunners or losers based on average public approval polls during elections (e.g. Nai and Sciarini 2018) or have calculated scores about their standing by, for example, comparing polls during elections to the vote share from the previous election to determine expected gains or losses (e.g. Elmelund-Præstekær 2010; Walter et al. 2014). While this approach allowed scholars to establish that there is a congruent relationship between low public approval and high use of negativity, recalling the initial point of Harrington and Hess (1996), it can be argued that this relationship may not be directionally causal from approval to negativity. It could be argued, for example, that during the actual campaign citizens approved of the actor who was less negative, making them the frontrunner and/or putting them in a gain position. Still, it should be noted, however, that the current approach to the operationalisation of public approval is understandable, as campaigns outside of the US tend to last for only a few weeks, which can make it

[25] For less significant findings, see Walter et al. 2014 and Hansen and Pedersen 2008.

difficult to study public approval dynamically (a similar problem was also encountered by public opinion scholars; see Wlezien and Soroka 2016).

Electoral cycle

To address the two gaps identified, this paper analyses the occurrence of negativity throughout the entire electoral cycle (1), while hypothesising about the directional causal relationship between public approval and negativity (2). As such, my definition of negativity follows campaigning studies, in which it is seen as occurrences of politicians publicly attacking each other. However, my definition does not specify the time period in which the attacks occur (i.e. it may be during a campaign or between campaigns) nor does it specify that criticism must be directed towards political competitors (i.e. criticism of partners and party colleagues are also included).

This broader definition is suitable for the purpose of this study as it allows us to study negativity in politics that takes place between actors in day-to-day politics (parliamentary debates, press releases, media interviews, cabinet meetings, etc.). Furthermore, this definition encompasses the strategic use of negativity, where actors direct negativity to internal party or coalition politics. For example, in systems where politicians are elected in single-member districts, parties may tolerate internal attacks, as this possibly allows a party to preserve its seat in the parliament (Proksch and Slapin 2012). In addition, coalition partners in government may go negative towards their partners to prevent drift from coalition agreements which may hurt their re-election chances (see e.g. Höhmann and Sieberer 2020).

To investigate this broader definition of negativity and its interplay with public approval, the study employs the prospect theory of decision-making, which argues that individuals who expect to gain are risk-averse, while individuals who expect to lose are willing to take risks (Kahneman and Tversky 1977). To determine if one is expected to gain or to lose, a *reference point* is chosen. Compared to that reference point, a decision-maker is either in a gain-situation or in a loss-situation, which determines whether they opt for a risk-taking or risk-averse decision strategy (Vieider and Vis 2019). For example, if the deviation from the reference point is beneficial for the decision-maker (*gain*), they become risk-averse in order not to damage the current favourable position. In turn, if the deviation from the reference point is not favourable (*loss*), they become a risk-taker.

Applying this general framework of prospect theory to negativity in politics, it can be argued that *the reference point is the approval rating* of political actors. An actor with a high approval rating would be

in a *gain* situation, while an actor with a low approval rating would be in a *loss* situation. Therefore, we can hypothesise that politicians will decide whether to risk using negativity or not based on their approval rating. The risk of using negativity is grounded in the backlash effect associated with negativity, as citizens may not approve of actors that go negative. For example, a meta-analysis of the literature on the effects of negativity by Lau et al. (2007: 1180–1183) found that those who attack others usually experience a decrease in citizen approval (out of 40 situations, 33 were characterised by decreasing approval for the attacker). This is in line with some contemporary studies that also looked at the backlash effect (see e.g. Nai and Maier 2021), which confirmed that some voters may choose to vote for a less negative candidate (Walter and Van der Eijk 2019). Therefore, given that going negative does not always lead to a desirable outcome, actors with high public approval are likely to be risk-averse and not willing to go negative. In contrast, actors with low public approval are willing to risk going negative in the hope of decreasing the approval of their competitors and/or increasing their own approval.

As mentioned above, this part of the theory is already addressed in the literature. However, this current framework is lacking some nuances, if we want to expand our understanding of the use of negativity during the entire election cycle. More specifically, there are reasons to argue that in addition to the *reference point* (which mainly concerns the approval rating), proximity to the next election also affects the use of negativity. We know from studies on campaigning that, as the election date approaches, more negativity will be employed (Damore 2002; Nai and Sciarini 2018). However, since campaigns are limited in time, scholars have been unable to provide a deeper theoretical explanation for the joint impact of approval and elections on negativity use (i.e. approval ratings and the election date were usually studied separately). Therefore, it is fundamental to evaluate such interplay given that there are reasons to expect shifts in political responsiveness to the public throughout the electoral cycle (Pardos-Prado and Sagarzazu 2019).

This is why this study extends the theoretical notion that approval impacts negativity during the electoral cycle by borrowing the prospect theory concept of *probability weighting* (see Vieider and Vis 2019). 'Probability weighting' means calculating whether the loss or gain outcome is going to occur and adapting risk behaviour accordingly (e.g. higher probability of gain leads to higher risk-aversion). It is argued that the probability weighting of the outcome is associated with the electoral cycle (i.e. proximity to the next election). As time elapses during the electoral cycle, there is an increasing probability that the election will be held, meaning that an actor with high approval has a higher chance of achieving electoral victory and suffering from the backlash effect if they go negative. This is unlike early in the cycle, when

such probability is low despite having gains (i.e. there are no elections to be won). In contrast, an actor with low approval knows that with a higher probability of losing the election as time elapses, the more risk they will have to take, but this is not necessary early in the cycle.

Hypotheses

This theoretical outline leads to two overarching suggestions. First, changes in public approval of actors at time *t-1* (*reference point*) have an impact, stimulating these actors to use more or less negativity at time *t* (*risk*), forming the first hypothesis:

> H1: *Low public approval leads political actors to use more negativity, compared to high approval, which leads political actors to use less negativity.*

Second, the decision to use negativity based on previous public approval depends on the electoral cycle (*probability weighting*). The risk of negativity is expected to be low at the start of the electoral cycle due to the low probability of a new election. Naturally, as time elapses during the cycle, the probability of winning or losing the upcoming election increases, leading actors with low approval to become risk-takers, while those with high approval become increasingly risk-averse. As such, this forms the second hypothesis:

> H2: *The effect of public approval on the use of negativity (see H1) becomes stronger as time elapses during the electoral cycle.*

Methodology

Cases

The hypotheses were tested in three different country case studies in Europe: Belgium, Croatia and the UK. One of the most profound differences across these three countries concerns the party systems in which politicians function and compete between themselves. Belgium is characterised by an extremely fragmented multi-party system that requires politicians to cooperate to gain office. The UK, in contrast, has a two-party system in which one of the two dominant parties assumes office on its own. Croatia,

somewhere between the two extremes, has a multi-party system (like Belgium), but most parties group into two blocks – each of which is led by a dominant party which cooperates with the other smaller partners (like the UK).

In each country, the focus is on politicians going negative in federal/national parliament during question time sessions (QTs) (Belgium: *Vragenuur*; Croatia: *Aktualno prijepodne*; UK: *Prime Minister's Questions*). QTs are useful to study the impact of approval ratings on politicians, since we know that QTs tend to be the parliamentary activity most exposed to the media. This allows politicians to communicate with voters (Salmond 2014). As such, it comes as no surprise that research has demonstrated that politicians use QTs in order to achieve their vote-seeking goals. For example, a survey of politicians revealed that they believe citizens do pay attention to their activities during QTs due to the media exposure and their own promotion of questions on social media (Soontjens 2021). Studies of parliamentary speeches have also shown that politicians use more emotional rhetoric during QTs compared to other debates, and they do this to appease voters (Osnabrügge et al. 2021). Studies have also shown that politicians from the opposition use QTs to discredit the government in the eyes of the electorate (Seeberg 2020b).

There are, however, substantive differences in how QTs are structured in each of these countries (see e.g. Serban 2020), which provides a diverse setting to test the theory and hypotheses. In Belgium, QTs take place every week and MPs ask questions in groups (based on a topic) to one or several members of the government. Once their questions are answered, MPs are granted a rebuttal. Each party group is permitted to ask questions, regardless of their size in the parliament. Although Croatia has a similar approach, QTs only take place once every two to three months and last for an entire day. The number of questions (out of a total of 40) allocated to each party is based on the share of seats in the parliament. As such, this approach does not allow small third parties a lot of room for manoeuvre during QTs. Similar to Belgium, MPs are allowed a rebuttal to cabinet members' answers. Finally, the Prime Minister's Questions (PMQs) in the UK take place every week, where opposition leaders and MPs from both the majority and the opposition ask questions to the PM. Only opposition leaders are permitted a rebuttal. Similar to Croatia, PMQs also tend to favour the two main parties, with smaller parties in the opposition often being neglected.

Data

To study the share of negativity employed by actors during QTs, a quantitative content analysis was performed on transcripts from these sessions in parliament. QTs were sampled by selecting one in each month from January 2010 to December 2020 (2021 for Croatia), which resulted in the following sample: 103 QTs in Belgium (30.5% of all Belgian QTs), 43 QTs in Croatia (100%) and 115 QTs in the UK (32.7%). Every speech contribution was scraped as an observation (N = 20,044) during these QTs from official parliamentary websites (for Belgium, dekamer.be; for Croatia, edoc.sabor.hr; for the UK, hansard.parliament.uk). This 'raw' data showed what each politician said during a particular QT (Belgium N = 6,634; Croatia N = 5,679; UK N = 7,731). Therefore, this data included every possible speech contribution, from *formal* speeches, such as questions and answers, to *informal* ones, such as interruptions and speakers' interventions (see Fernandes et al. 2021). Protocol speeches, such as speakers moderating the debate (only transcribed in Croatia), or PMs listing their engagements at the start of every QT (only in the UK) were not included in this data.

Coders familiar with these countries and languages (Croatian, Dutch, English and French) were trained and tested for six weeks in recognising negativity during QTs, that is, in each speech contribution (see *Appendix – Coder training* for a detailed description of the training and Krippendorff's alpha scores). Following the new definition of negativity (without the *campaigning* and the *competitor* dimensions), the main dependent variable was operationalised as an attack that contains a criticism of a political actor. As such, this definition encompasses: (i) attacks regardless of the moment in time at which they occur; and (ii) attacks in any type of direction (e.g. majority MP criticising the PM). This is important, as attacks also occur outside of campaigns, and parties or coalition governments may be incentivised to use internal criticism, as mentioned above (see Proksch and Slapin 2012; Höhmann and Sieberer 2020).

Once the coders reached satisfactory reliability in the final two weeks of training, they proceeded to code negativity in transcripts from QTs in all three countries. Each speech contribution was coded according to whether there was negativity in it or not. In other words, the data collected indicated whether a politician had attacked someone in a speech contribution. The final number of speech units with at least one attack was 6,643 and they accounted for 33.1% of all speech contributions (32.7% in Belgium, 36.8% in Croatia and 30.9% in the UK).[26] As such, on a descriptive level, we can see that QTs are

[26] While these descriptive findings are interesting and deserve attention, they are beyond the scope and goal of this paper.

not always about conflict, as approximately two thirds of the speech contributions were neutral. This indicates that negativity in parliaments is possibly employed strategically, with actors evaluating whether they should use it or not. See *Appendix - Examples of coding negativity* for examples of negativity and neutrality in data.

Next, to gather data on the public approval of actors at different times, the study relied on external polling data sources that preceded the QTs sampled in each country. When selecting this data, the most important criterion was that these polls were publicly available and had a media presence. This ensured that the actors were exposed to them and as such that they constituted a good proxy for public approval. In Croatia, the study used *CroDemoskop* polling data from polls conducted by PromocijaPlus for a major Croatian private television channel (RTL), while in the UK it relied on polling data from Ipsos MORI, which is featured in the *Evening Standard* newspaper. All polls were conducted regularly each month (with some gaps) on a representative sample of Croatian/British citizens, in which they are asked to indicate their preferences for parties and politicians. They were available for the majority of the time frame studied (2010–2020 for the UK and 2010–2021 for Croatia).

The situation in Belgium was less straightforward, not only because polls are not conducted regularly but also because of the country's split into Dutch-speaking (Flemish) and French-speaking (Walloon) regions, with different actors competing in each region. This is why several polling sources were used to generate approval ratings of actors on both sides and why they only cover the period between 2014 and 2020. Notably, the polls were conducted by several organisations (mostly Ipsos) for major public (VRT; RTBF) and commercial (VTM; RTL) media outlets in both regions, which asked Belgian citizens about their political preferences. To ensure that actors from all three countries were exposed to these polls, a brief investigation of their posts on Facebook revealed that the majority of them had acknowledged these polls in their social media posts at least once (see Appendix V).

Using the above-mentioned data, a new dataset was generated, where units of observation were parties nested in QTs per country. For example, the Flemish Christian-Democrats party at a QT from December 2020 in Belgium constitutes one observation. In Belgium, in total, twelve parties that regularly engaged in QTs were included (2 Christian-Democrats, 3 Liberals, 1 Radical Right, 1 Radical Left, 1 National, 2 Socialists, and 2 Greens), while in Croatia and the UK the focus was on the two dominant parties, one from the left (Social Democratic Party of Croatia; Labour Party, UK) and one from the right (Croatian

Democratic Union; Conservative Party, UK).[27] In the case of a party not speaking during a particular QT in Belgium, it was dropped for that particular observation, while the two dominant parties in Croatia and the UK were active in every QT.

Variables

Negativity. This is the main dependent variable, which indicates the share of negativity employed by a particular actor during a particular QT. Therefore, if the Flemish Greens in Belgium made 10 speech contributions during a QT in May 2020 and, out of these, 5 were negative, this variable has a value of 0.50, that is 50% of all speech contributions had negativity in them. For descriptive statistics see Table 1.

Public approval. This is the main independent variable, which represents the share of approval that actors had in polls at the time of the observation. Given that the study observed politicians on the party level, the value of this variable represents the share of citizens that indicated they would vote for this party if elections were to be held today or tomorrow.[28] If elections were held before a QT and no polling had yet been conducted, then the share of votes that the party received at the election was used here (only in the UK).

Electoral cycle. This variable indicates how many months have passed since the last parliamentary election. Therefore, for a QT that took place in July 2015 in the UK, the value of this variable would be 2, as the previous election was held in May 2015. Therefore, the bigger the value, the closer the next election would be, allowing us to deduce the possible *probability weighting* (see theory) of politicians about when to go negative during the cycle.[29]

[27] While a point can be made that third parties in Croatia should be included in this data due to the country's multi-party system, there was no reason to expect that public approval has an impact on these parties. Croatian third parties predominantly group around the two main ones for the election and post-election formation of a coalition. Therefore, it could be argued that these parties are more affected by the approval ratings of the two dominant parties. Furthermore, these parties have limited possibilities to calculate how to strategically approach QTs given that some of them will be granted a few or no questions during QTs.

[28] PVDA-PTB is the only party in Belgium that runs for office both in Flanders and Wallonia, so the share of citizens that intend to vote for this party is calculated by looking at the average of citizens that intend to vote for it in both regions.

[29] Different operationalisation of the electoral cycle (where months indicate time left until the regular end of the parliamentary term or the date of the actual elections) was used as a robustness check (Appendix G).

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for dependent and independent variables

		MEAN	SD	MIN	MAX
Belgium N = 353	**DV: Negativity**	**43.8%**	**35.4%**	**0**	**100%**
	IV: Public approval	15%	7%	1.7%	32.4%
	IV: Electoral cycle	25.1	16.4	4	57
Croatia N = 84	**DV: Negativity**	**49.9%**	**29.1%**	**3.1%**	**100%**
	IV: Public approval	24.9%	4.8%	16.1%	34.2%
	IV: Electoral cycle	21.6	13.5	1	46
UK N = 212	**DV: Negativity**	**38.4%**	**19.1%**	**0**	**80%**
	IV: Public approval	36.39%	4.8%	24%	52%
	IV: Electoral cycle	22	16.8	0	59

Method

The study used time series regressions to test the hypotheses presented in the theory section. Time series are the best method to predict causal inferences that are time dependent (influence of *t-1* on *t*) and are also frequently used in dynamic representation research to test how politicians respond to shifting public opinion (Beyer and Hänni 2018: 29). As such, the dependent variable (share of negativity by an actor during a specific QT) is placed at *t*, while the independent variable (on public approval) is placed at *t-1*. To test the expectations, party approval rating at *t-1* was evaluated in interaction with the electoral cycle looking at the impact this interaction had on the negativity share at *t* for each country. Given the frequency of polls in Croatia and the UK, public approval was simply lagged monthly (e.g. comparing Ipsos MORI ratings from September 2016 to a QT from October 2016), while in Belgium the nearest lag possible was used (e.g. Flemish public broadcast poll published in the first week of May 2018 was compared to the nearest QT in the third week of May 2018).[30] All regressions were run with fixed-effects on the party level (i.e. controlling for differences between parties), which is particularly important because it treats changes in approval for each party separately.

Several control variables were included in these models, namely whether the observed actor is in government or in opposition (not for the UK, as Conservatives were, for the most part, in office, which was controlled through fixed-effects). Furthermore, there was also a control for the main competitor's approval (not in Belgium, due to the fragmented nature of the party system). Therefore, when observing

[30] To ensure that lags in Belgium stayed within a reasonable time frame of influence, every approval poll that was included in Belgium dated back to maximum one month before a particular QT (as in Croatia and the UK).

the approval ratings of the Labour Party in the UK, the approval of the Conservative Party was also accounted for. For Belgium, there was also a control for regional differences, that is, whether a party was from Wallonia or Flanders. In all three countries, a lagged dependent variable on negativity use in a prior sampled QT was used to control for a potential temporal dependence, that is the autocorrelation of negativity (which accounts for the fact that some actors may be negative in general during QTs).

Results

The results of the time series regressions are shown in Table 2. From the base models (1, 3, 5), we can observe a negative influence on the use of negativity when approval increases in Belgium, Croatia and the UK. However, none of these relationships show statistical significance, leading to the rejection of H1. While there is strong confirmation in the literature that public approval is an important indicator of negativity during campaigns, it appears that we cannot apply this logic across the full electoral cycle.

However, once the interaction between public approval and the electoral cycle is added, we start observing different results. As we can see from these interaction models (2, 4), the public approval of actors depends significantly on the electoral cycle. As we move further away from the previous election and towards the next, politicians become responsive to public approval, exhibiting less or more negativity. Specifically, in Belgium and Croatia, an increase in public approval (*t-1*) later in the electoral cycle leads to less use of negativity by politicians in a subsequent QT (*t*). However, in the UK, an increase in the public approval (*t-1*) of parties in interaction with the electoral cycle (Model 6) remained an insignificant predictor of more or less negativity (*t*). In fact, there is a strong autocorrelation of negativity in the UK, with politicians employing similar shares of negativity during QTs, regardless of approval.

Table 2. Time series regressions testing the impact on the use of negativity (*t*) per country

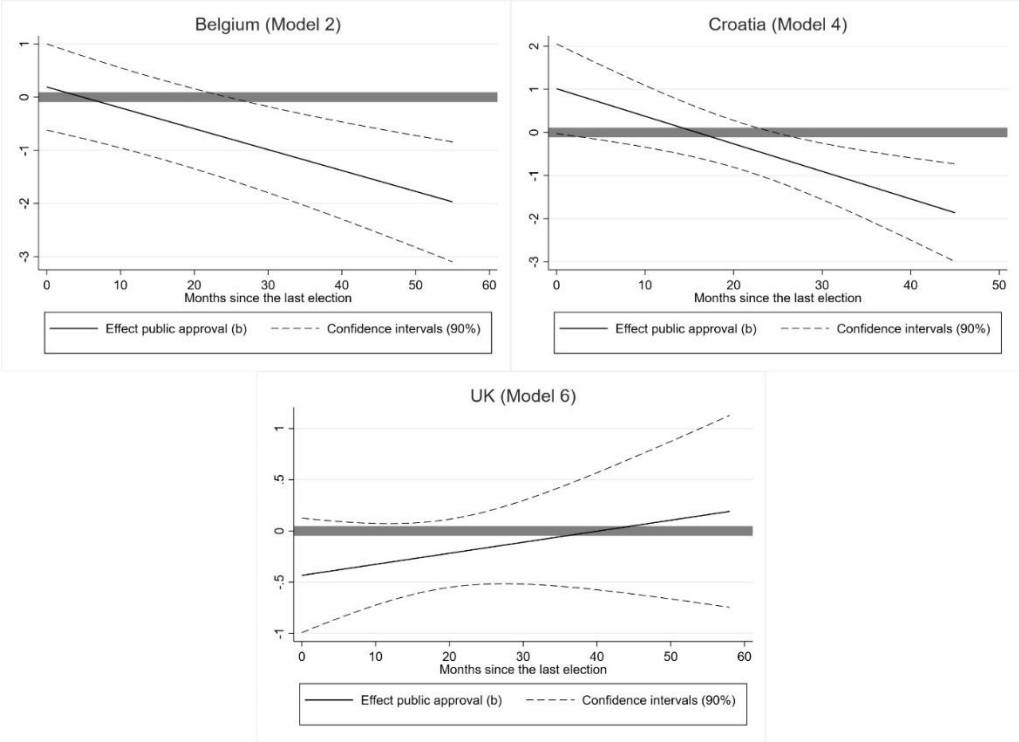
	Belgium		Croatia		UK	
	Model 1 Base	**Model 2 Interaction**	**Model 3 Base**	**Model 4 Interaction**	**Model 5 Base**	**Model 6 Interaction**
	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)
IVs						
Public approval (*t-1*)	-.40 (.46)	.19 (.49)	-.34 (.34)	1.01 (.63)	-.22 (.20)	-.43 (.34)
Public approval (*t-1*) X Electoral cycle	-	**-.04 (.01) ****	-	**-.06 (.03) ***		.01 (.01)
Controls						
Election (months since)	.00 (.00) **	.01 (.00) ***	.00 (.00) **	.02 (.01) **	.00 (.00) *	-.00 (.00)
Party status (ref. opposition)	-.34 (.08) ***	-.35 (.08) ***	-.44 (.05) ***	-.52 (.06) ***	-	-
Region (ref. Flanders)	.07 (.20)	.04 (.20)	-	-	-	-
Competitor's approval (*t-1*)	-	-	.64 (.34) †	.69 (.33) *	.13 (.20)	.14 (.20)
Negativity (*t-1*)	-.07 (.05)	-.09 (.05) †	.08 (.08)	.01 (.10)	.29 (.06) ***	.29 (.06) ***
Constant	.55 (.13) ***	.49 (.13) ***	.53 (.16) **	.24 (.19)	.27 (.13) *	.35 (.15) *
N (observations)	353		84		212	
N (QTs)	32		42		106	
N (actors)	12		2		2	
R^2 (adjusted)	.38	.41	.84	.85	.41	.42

Note: †p<0.1 *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.00

This means that there is support for H2 in Belgium and Croatia, but not in the UK. However, the strength of the effect of approval does not increase steadily as time elapses (see Figure 1). Rather, the public approval effect in interaction with the electoral cycle only becomes significant after a certain threshold. This means that while H2 holds, the effect of approval is only significant approximately 2.5 years after the previous election was held. In fact, approval in the first years after an election had no significant impact on politicians going negative during QTs in Belgium and Croatia. As reported in Table 2, during the whole electoral cycle, approval has no impact in the UK. The following presents detailed results for each country, inspecting exact negativity use based on the realistic low and high approval values in each case.[31]

[31] The realistic low and high approval values are based on standard deviation from the mean approval per country indicated in Table 1. For example, with the mean approval of 15% in Belgium, which has standard deviation of 7%, we can conclude that the realistic high approval in Belgium is around 22%, while the realistic low approval is around 8%.

Figure 1. Marginal effect (y-axis) of public approval in the interaction with the electoral cycle



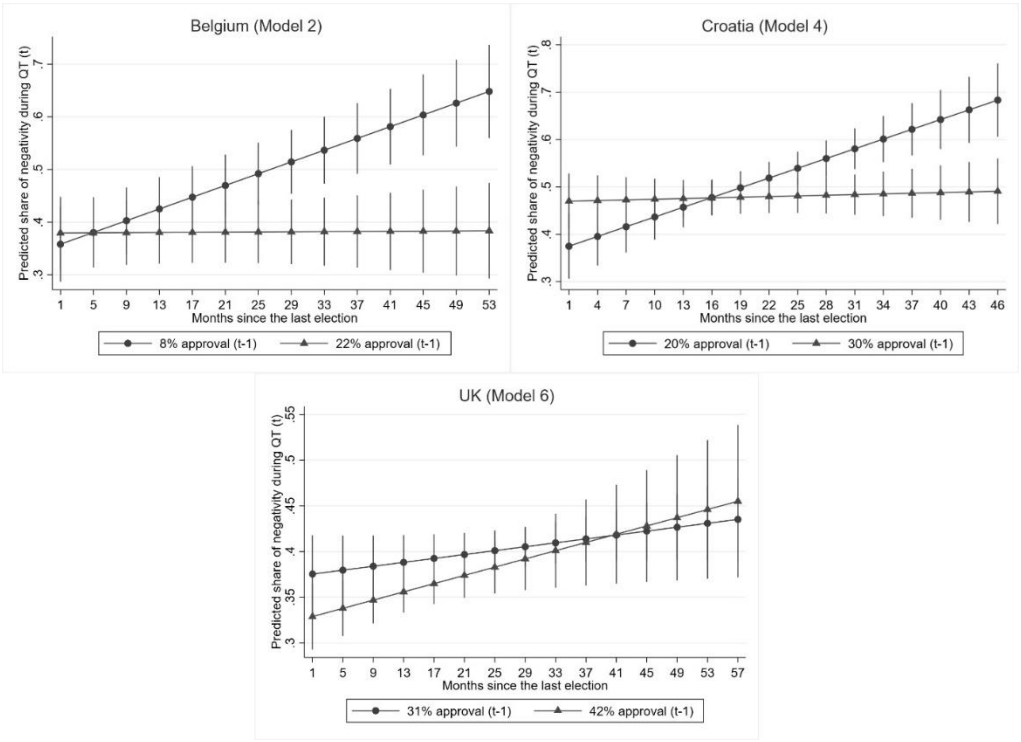
Note: Intervals below 0 indicate significance in the interaction (see Brambor et al. 2006). / The x-axis represents the electoral cycle (Belgium and the UK, 5 years; Croatia, 4 years).

In the interaction model (2), Belgian politicians behaved as expected in H2 (Figure 2; Appendix W.1). If a certain party in Belgium enjoys high public approval in the final months of the electoral cycle (22% at *t-1*), this results in 40% negative interactions by this party's members at the final QT (*t*) before the election. In contrast, if a party has low public approval at the end of the cycle (8% at *t-1*), it uses approximately 65% negativity (*t*). As such, politicians are 25 percentage points more negative if they have low approval. Thus, the higher the approval of politicians, the less likely they are to utilise negativity during QTs, but the difference between high and low approval only emerges later in the electoral cycle.

For Belgium, the difference only becomes visible at the start of the second part of the five-year electoral cycle (approximately 26–28 months since the last election) and further increases as we move towards the election. Note that for high approval, the approach of the elections does not change anything, and the share of negativity remains consistent (see the flat line in Figure 2). This allows us to conclude that, in Belgium, it is politicians whose parties have low approval that start to behave differently midway through the electoral cycle, using more negativity as elections get closer.

Croatian politicians behaved similarly to Belgian politicians and thus also confirm H2 (Figure 2; Appendix W.2). If a party enjoys high approval in Croatia in the final months of the electoral cycle (30% at *t-1*), politicians from this party will use approximately 50% negativity during the final QT (*t*). This is 20 percentage points less than a party with low approval (20% at *t-1*), which results in 70% negativity during the final QT (*t*). Like Belgium, this effect only occurs later in the cycle. In Croatia, this difference in the use of negativity becomes visible during the second half of the four-year electoral cycle (approximately 29–30 months after the last election). It should also be noted that, also in Croatia, high approval has little effect on the use of negativity as the elections near, rather it is low approval that leads to more negativity as elections approach.

Figure 2. Predicted negativity (share in all speech contributions by a party) during QTs (*t*) throughout the electoral cycle based on high or low approval (*t-1*)



Note: The x-axis represents the electoral cycle (Belgium and the UK, 5 years; Croatia, 4 years). / Vertical lines indicate the 90% confidence interval holding other variables at their mean.

The slightly delayed effect in Croatia (i.e. during the second half of the cycle) compared to Belgium (e.g. at the start of the second half) may be due to the stability of the majority in parliament. With the

two-block nature of the party system in Croatia, parties have greater certainty about when the next election will take place, so the impact of approval only becomes visible later in the electoral cycle. This is unlike Belgium, where a large number of parties in government produces uncertainty about cabinet stability and the duration of the electoral cycle. On average, cabinets in Belgium do not make it halfway through their maximum possible tenure (Bergmann et al. 2022). This is likely to lead to a stronger effect of approval earlier on, with politicians anticipating elections sooner, rather than later.

Finally, in the UK, we can observe that, regardless of approval, politicians go more negative as time elapses during the cycle (Figure 2; Appendix W.3). As such, politicians in both high and low approval scenarios at the end of the cycle (42% and 31% at *t-1* respectively) employ approximately 45% negativity at the final QT (*t*). The difference between high and low approval is not visible at all during the electoral cycle (see also Figure 1). There are several possible explanations for this observation. Above all, the UK has a two-party system in which conflict takes place primarily between the two main parties. Therefore, the risk associated with using negativity may be lower due to the lack of alternative parties to which voters could turn (see also Elmelund-Præstekær 2010). As such, it appears that this context does not allow public approval to be a fundamental predictor of the use of negativity (see the conclusion for more discussion on the UK exception).

Robustness checks

To check the robustness of these findings, several other tests were run. First, the potential differences between government and opposition were explored (Appendix X.1). Second, models were run using the categorical variable on years since the last election (Appendix X.2). Third, the impact of proximity to the end of the parliamentary term and actual elections was tested (Appendix X.3). Fourth, the dependent variable was transformed into a count variable (i.e. absolute number of negative speeches; Appendix X.4). Fifth, individual approval impact on PMs/opposition leaders in the UK was explored (Appendix X.5). Sixth, trends in public approval were tested (was the approval of an actor rising or falling; Appendix X.6). Seventh, the impact of different elections was explored (Appendix X.7). Finally, tests were run dropping certain controls (Appendix X.8), including the year 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Appendix X.9). In general, most of these tests provided further confirmation of the results and relationships that were presented above.

Reverse causality

Before discussing and summarising the conclusions, it is also worth exploring whether reverse causality occurs, that is, whether more or less negativity affects public approval. To do this, additional regressions were run that were identical to those reported above but they treated citizen approval as the dependent variable (*t*) and negativity as the independent variable (*t-1*). These regressions showed that there was no impact of politicians' use of negativity in parliaments on their approval ratings in all three countries (Appendix X.10). However, a strong autocorrelation in approval ratings was identified. This means that actors who do well will likely continue to do well in the following approval polls, regardless of the negativity used during QTs. As such, while it makes sense for politicians to respond to their approval rating during QTs, it cannot be expected that citizens' behaviour follows a similar pattern (i.e. citizens watching QTs and adapting their preferences). The implications of this are discussed in the closing section of this paper.

Discussion and conclusion

The main objective of this study was to explore how public approval impacts politicians' decisions to use negativity during the entire electoral cycle. Through an empirical analysis in three diverse European countries, the study confirmed its hypotheses in two countries. For Belgium and Croatia, the study found that, as time elapses during the cycle, actors become responsive to public approval through their use of negativity. They resort more to negativity later in the cycle if their approval rating is low, while actors with high approval use less negativity than others and keep their low negativity use constant. In other words, when parties in Belgium and Croatia have a low approval rating in the second part of the electoral cycle, their party members are more likely to use negativity during QTs in parliament. However, in the UK, this effect was insignificant.

The findings from the UK are interesting and deserve more attention, given that they contradict the current literature. As was proposed in the previous section, a potential cause for such different behaviour could be attributed to the two-party system (and the electoral system itself), which makes the backlash effect in the UK less prevalent compared to Belgium and Croatia. In other words, the potential gain of winning over volatile voters by going negative outweighs the potential loss of partisan voters. This is because partisan voters in two-party systems cannot abandon their party as easily as voters in a multi-party system, due to a lack of alternatives. Note that this is different in the US (also a two-party system),

where ‘candidate images and issue appeals have the potential to counteract partisan preferences’ (Dalton 2021), as opposed to the UK, where partisan voters remain loyal. This potentially explains why, in the US, unlike the UK, scholars find an effect of approval ratings on negativity use.

At the same time, UK politics has also experienced increasing voter volatility among the general public in the last decade due to ‘electoral shocks’ such as Brexit (Fieldhouse et al. 2020). Moreover, approval polls in the UK now have a long-standing history of making incorrect predictions about electoral outcomes (Mellon and Prosser 2017). This was especially problematic during the closer races that took place in the period studied (see Jennings and Wlezien 2018). All of these factors may have also contributed to the lesser effect of approval ratings in the UK, where both sides try to persuade increasingly volatile voters by using negativity. Finally, the divergent findings in the UK might simply be due to the nature of PMQs, where the two main rivals argue back and forth with each other, reinforcing negativity.

Despite the differences between the UK and the other countries, this study contributed to the current literature on several levels. First, the paper advanced the theoretical framework regarding politicians’ use of negativity. The well-established framework of prospect theory provided a foundation for understanding the relationship between approval and negativity from a longitudinal perspective during the electoral cycle. While previous studies offer a theoretical understanding of the impact of approval ratings on negativity during mostly short-lived campaigning periods, this study revealed that there is also an impact of approval between elections, but only later in the electoral cycle. In Belgium, which has a fragmented party system with high uncertainty regarding snap elections, politicians become more responsive to approval halfway through the term. In Croatia, where majorities in parliaments tend to be stable, politicians pay particular attention to approval during the second part of the cycle.

Second, this paper advanced the current literature by using a different methodological approach that explored the relationship between approval and negativity. Due to previous studies being oriented towards short-lived campaigns, they were unable to establish a directional causal link between approval and negativity. This paper approached this relationship from a longitudinal perspective which made it possible to lag public approval behind the use of negativity. This allowed the assessment of whether public approval impacted the decision to use more or less negativity during subsequent QTs.

Third, this paper also contributes to the public opinion literature. While previous studies showed that politicians respond to public opinion by shifting policy in a direction that the public wants (see e.g. Sevenans 2021), this study identified that politicians shift communication based on signals they receive from the public. This demonstrates that politicians do pay attention to citizen approval closer to elections

and that they are not only willing to change their policy based on what the public wants. Rather, in this particular case, they changed and adapted their communication strategy, probably trying to influence citizens' opinions about them. However, in line with previous studies that found weak citizen knowledge regarding politicians' engagements during QTs (Soontjens 2021), the study demonstrated that citizens' approval of politicians is not affected by negativity used during QTs.

On this final point, one may ask why politicians resort to more or less negativity based on approval if this does not significantly change the approval rating? One potential explanation could be grounded in the fact that politicians may think that more or less negativity works, despite approval not shifting significantly. In other words, low approval simply leads actors to employ more negativity in the hope that electoral gain will ultimately be achieved at the election (i.e. that it will pay off in the long run). For example, a low-approval actor who uses negativity may receive praise for this on social media, get more attention in the news (see Haselmayer et al. 2019), etc., leading them to believe that this is the way to go. In turn, high-approval actors may feel that their good standing is due to them being less negative, reinforcing risk-aversion: why change a winning strategy.

In this regard, it should be acknowledged that the main limitation of this study is that it does not explore this reverse causality puzzle in greater detail, as it was beyond the scope of this particular study. Other venues in which negativity is employed during the electoral cycle (e.g. on social media) may have a role to play, revealing different relationships and having a greater impact on citizens. Therefore, it is recommended that future research investigate other venues in which negativity is used (and during the entire electoral cycle), assessing how negativity in these venues is conditioned by approval but also whether negativity has an impact on citizens' approval.

CHAPTER 6

Give the media what they need: Negativity as a media access tool for politicians

Abstract

Recent studies indicate that politicians' negativity usage fails to enhance their approval ratings among the general public, yet politicians regularly use it. This begs the following question: why are politicians so negative if this strategy does not bolster their prospects for re-election? In this paper, I argue that the media, driven by audience engagement, plays a pivotal role in shaping politicians' propensity for negativity. Specifically, politicians resort to negativity because it aligns with the media's negativity bias, thereby increasing their chances of securing media access and public attention. I test this expectation on the less-likely case of Belgium, using data on politicians' negativity usage in parliament and their presence in prime-time TV news (2010-2020). The results show that using negativity significantly increases politicians' chances of gaining media access, particularly when using uncivil negativity. The more media access politicians start to attract due to negativity, the more they resort to negativity.

Reference:

Poljak, Ž. (2023). Give the media what they need: Negativity as a media access tool for politicians. *Currently under review.*

Introduction

Politicians employ different forms of negativity to enhance their chances of being re-elected. One such form is *negativity* in political communication, defined as "any criticism levelled by one candidate against another during a campaign" (Geer 2006: 23). Sometimes, this type of negativity may deviate from social norms (Mutz 2015) resulting in incivility with politicians mocking and name-call each other (Sobieraj and Berry 2011). Yet, while such rhetoric gets used to increase one's electoral attractiveness at the expense of political opponents, this does not always pay off. The so-called "boomerang effect" of negativity can lead to declining approval (Fridkin and Kenney 2004; Nai and Maier 2021) and may increase voters' preference for other candidates (Somer-Topcu and Weitzel 2022; Walter and Van der Eijk 2019). This makes the usage of negativity by politicians a risky strategy, the outcomes of which are often uncertain (Lau et al. 2007).

Despite these uncertainties about the effects of negativity, some politicians believe that discrediting and attacking opponents is their main job (Sevenans et al. 2015). Studies have shown that this is indeed the case: criticism among politicians is not something that only occurs during hostile campaigns, but in regular day-to-day politics as well (Ketelaars 2019). As such, based on these findings, one might get the impression that the rationale of politicians regarding negativity usage is that the benefits (i.e. more support among the voters) must outweigh the costs (i.e. less support). But this is far from true. A recent longitudinal and comparative study shows that politicians' usage of negativity in day-to-day politics does not lead to increasing public approval in public opinion polls, and more often than not results in decreasing approval (Chapter 5). But then why do politicians persistently rely on negativity by criticising each other if they see that this does not benefit their voter support? This question is particularly puzzling knowing that politicians admit that their approval among the public is an important indicator in their daily work (Oleskog Tryggvason 2020).

In this paper, I argue that the media's negativity bias, fuelled by the audience's engagement with negative news, may explain why politicians continue to use negativity despite its uncertain impact on public approval. While I am not the first to theorise about the relationship between political negativity and the media (see Ridout and Walter 2015), previous studies focused exclusively on short-term campaigning periods establishing that negativity usage leads to media coverage (Haselmayer et al. 2019). While these findings are fundamental, they do not explain the persistent usage of negativity by politicians beyond campaigns, nor do they tell us whether media coverage of negative politicians reinforces negativity usage.

Understanding the role of media and audience engagement as a catalyst for the negativity usage in day-to-day politics is crucial. While existing literature highlights the importance of negativity during campaign periods, it is necessary to recognise that the persistent signals received from day-to-day politics likely have a more profound impact on the public than several weeks of campaigning. Therefore, studying the factors behind negativity in political communication, spanning from one election to the next, can provide insights into the escalating and pervasive nature of negativity in political discourse (Frimer et al., 2023; Geer, 2012; Maisel, 2012). This negativity has been shown to positively affect the public by increasing their political attention (Mueller and Saeltzer, 2022; Mutz, 2015; Soroka, 2014) and satisfaction with democracy (Tuttnauer, 2022; Van Elsas and Fiselier, 2023). However, it can also have adverse effects on society (Thorson et al., 2000; Iyengar et al., 2012), especially when it takes the form of incivility (Druckman et al., 2019; Gervais, 2017; Goovaerts and Marien, 2020; Skytte, 2022).

To clarify the interaction between political negativity and media, I rely on the literature on the mediatization of politics (Strömbäck 2008). This theory argues that politicians adapt their behaviour to media logic as a means of achieving media access. Politicians need to do this as gaining continuous access to the media can significantly benefit their re-election goals (Van Erkel and Thijssen 2016; Van Remoortere et al. 2023). However, it remains unclear which media logic politicians should follow to reach the news and several studies offer different arguments (see review in Vos 2014). Nevertheless, we do know that media logic embodies techniques media use to capture citizens' interest (Strömbäck 2008). Given the public's tendency to react more strongly to negative information compared to positive ones, media outlets often operate under a negativity bias (Soroka, 2014). Consequently, I anticipate that politicians cater to the media's demand by providing them with what they need to engage their audience: negativity.

In this paper, I formulate three hypotheses: (i) negative politicians have a higher chance of appearing in the news, (ii) especially if they use uncivil negativity and, (iii) once politicians gain media access following negativity, they are incentivised to go negative again. These hypotheses are tested on the less-likely case of Belgium, using data on negativity usage by 367 politicians in the country's federal parliament during an 11-year period (January 2010 - December 2020). More specifically, I analyse whether a politician goes negative during question time sessions in the parliament at noon (t-1) and regress this decision on a possible news appearance later that day during prime-time TV news at 7 pm (t). In turn, I also test whether appearance in the news due to negativity (t), leads politicians to go negative again (t+1). The results significantly confirm the expectations. Negative politicians in parliament have a higher probability of getting into prime-time TV news, especially if they use negativity that is uncivil, and once

they gain media access following negativity, this experience increases the probability of going negative again. As such, the results confirm that politicians try to adapt to media logic, as they are likely aware that using negativity results in media access and public attention.

Negative politicians

The literature studying politicians' negativity usage has already explored the causal mechanisms behind the usage of negativity linking it to a *vote*-seeking political strategy (see review in Nai and Walter 2015). Negativity is used as a means to diminish the electoral attractiveness of opponents, and increase one's own chances of election victory (see also functional theory by Benoit 1999). While recent studies challenge this notion by showing that certain personality traits also contribute to higher negativity usage (Nai et al. 2022), the general principle of politicians' rational approach to using negativity holds: politicians who consider the use of negativity to be a beneficial rather than costly strategy, are more likely to go negative (Maier et al. 2022).

This principle can be observed by looking at how public approval impacts politicians' negativity usage. Politicians with low approval ratings are more likely to resort to negativity compared to politicians with high approval ratings. This goes back to the *vote*-seeking rationale: politicians that have low public approval are less likely to win the election. Therefore, they are more prone to use negativity to improve their approval ratings at the expense of the competition (Harrington and Hess 1996; Skaperdas and Grofman 1995). While they could turn to positive campaigning, by praising themselves (Geer 2006), this is less likely to pay off as frontrunners already have a positive public image (Damore 2002). At the same time, these frontrunners do not need to use negativity as they expect to win the election. This notion that lower approval leads to higher levels of negativity has been found across many empirical studies (e.g. Damore 2002; Elmelund-Præstekær 2008; 2010; Haynes and Rhine 1998; Maier and Jansen 2017; Nai and Sciarini 2018; Walter and Van der Brug 2013).

However, while negativity can potentially increase approval ratings, or at the very least diminish the approval rating of the competition, there is a boomerang effect associated with negativity usage. The usage of negativity can unintentionally backfire in a way that is unfavourable for the attacker, rather than the intended target (Roese and Sande 1993). This boomerang effect has been identified in several studies that analyse the effects of politicians' negativity usage. For instance, a meta-analysis by Lau et al. from

2007 demonstrated that more often than not, studies have shown that attackers who use negativity can expect a decrease in their public approval.

More contemporary campaigning studies reaffirmed this risky nature of going negative. Nai and Maier (2021), for instance, demonstrated that harsh negativity does not diminish the evaluation of the target but rather reflects negatively on the one employing negativity. Furthermore, a study by Walter and Van der Eijk (2019) points out that using negativity may lead to a second preference boost, whereby citizens may choose to vote for their second preferred candidate if their initial candidate goes negative. In addition to that, targets of attacks may receive higher voter support as opposed to attackers (Somer-Topcu and Weitzel 2022). Recently, a longitudinal and comparative study from Europe showed that politicians' negativity usage hardly impacts public approval in opinion polls, and when it does, it is most damaging for the attacker (Chapter 5).

Still, negativity remains widespread and present in a day-to-day context (Ketelaars 2019). This begs the question: if politicians see that their negativity usage does not impact or even hurt their approval, why do they continue using it? We could simply assume that politicians remain unbothered by, and do not care about public opinion polls. But this notion contradicts many studies on political representation, which have shown that politicians tend to follow public opinion daily (Wlezien 1995) and admit that their approval impacts their day-to-day work (Oleskog Tryggvason 2020). After all, public approval polls are the most accurate predictor of the election outcome, especially closer to elections (Jennings and Wlezien 2018). Therefore, politicians are affected by public approval, and it remains unclear why negativity remains continuously used even though it is hardly paying off (Chapter 5).

To disentangle this phenomenon, I argue that we need to place greater focus on the media, driven by audience engagement, as a predictor of negativity usage. As stated before, I am not the first to explore the relationship between political negativity and the media. Geer (2012), for instance, argued that negativity in politics is rising as a result of increased negativity in media. Following this premise, Ridout and Walter (2015) have theorised that politicians supply media with negativity as this strategy has more chances of getting picked up by journalists. Although their analysis of political advertisements in the news did not identify a strong bias towards negative political ads, Benoit et al. (2004) and Haselmayer et al. (2019), for example, did show this to be the case. Among campaign messages politicians supply to the public, negative messages are more likely to reach the news as opposed to non-negative ones. Furthermore, politicians who employ more negativity tend to receive greater media coverage (Maier and

Nai, 2020), and politicians in general are more likely to be featured in negative news stories (Niven 2001; Vliegenthart et al. 2011).

Despite these fundamental findings, the (short-term) campaign-centric perspective does not tell us anything about the media coverage of negativity in routine politics. It is crucial to move beyond campaigns because it is likely that the daily presence of negativity contributes to citizens' satisfaction with democracy (e.g., Tuttnauer, 2022), but also growing resentment towards politics. This resentment erodes political trust (e.g., Thorson et al., 2000), reduces voter turnout in elections (e.g., Nai, 2013), and exacerbates affective polarization (e.g., Iyengar et al., 2012). Moreover, previous studies investigating the relationship between politicians' use of negativity and news media primarily treated the media as a dependent variable, overlooking the exploration of whether media coverage reinforces negativity among politicians. To the best of my knowledge, it remains unknown whether media coverage of negative politicians amplifies the inclination for negativity within these same politicians (but do see Geer, 2012).

Mediatization of (negative) politicians

Attracting media access can be beneficial for politicians. More specifically, two broad goals can be on politicians' minds when they try to gain media access: personal-driven goals or policy-driven goals. Personal goals relate to politicians being occupied with their own image to attract votes at elections and advance their careers. For example, recent studies show that having more media access increases vote share at elections (Van Erkel and Thijssen 2016). Furthermore, being in the news allows politicians to climb the ladder in their careers by reaching positions of party leaders, ministers, or prime ministers (Van Remoortere et al. 2023). Politicians themselves admit that media can make or break them (Van Aelst et al. 2008). This is of particular importance with the increasing partisan dealignment where voters become volatile (Dassonneville 2023) and base their vote choice on individual politicians, rather than parties (Garzia et al. 2022).

While certain politicians may be primarily driven by their personal goals, politicians may also want to gain media access to advocate their policies. Instead of paying attention to their public image (see Louwerse and Otjes 2016), certain politicians see their main role as policy advocates that genuinely care about tackling issues and implementing their ideology and policy solutions (Egan 2013; Sevenans et al. 2015). Pushing for an issue through media coverage can be particularly useful due to the agenda-setting power that the media has over political agendas (Vliegenthart et al. 2016) and politicians are well aware

of this fact (Walgrave 2008). Therefore, if a politician is successful in gaining media attention, their issue and policy solutions receive a spotlight as well. Ultimately, regardless of when we observe politicians or what their underlying goal is, it is safe to expect that they crave media attention.

While politicians' dependence on the media cannot be understated, gaining media access is not an easy task. Journalists and media editors act as gatekeepers determining who gets into the news (Shoemaker et al. 2008). For example, a journalist is more likely to report on stories that are going to generate greater sales or increase viewership and visits to the media webpage. Journalism studies on metrics nicely depict this phenomenon. The more citizens click on the news and increase the metric of the news story, the more journalists tend to prioritise these stories (Lamot and Van Aelst 2019). Therefore, politicians that want to increase their chances of getting into the news need to adapt to media and journalists' preferences for what is relevant.

This phenomenon is the crux of the literature on the mediatization of politics which claims that politicians *adopt* the media logic (Strömbäck 2008). Media logic represents the abovementioned techniques the media uses to capture citizens' attention which is visible through news values that make certain stories newsworthy such as *conflict, entertainment, sensationalism,* or *drama* (Harcup and O'Neill 2017). Therefore, politicians need to use media logic by following these news values to attract journalists' interest, that is, they need to provide journalists with *conflict* or *sensationalism*. Indeed, empirical applications of the theory highlight that politicians do abide by the media logic trying to use it for their own advantage (Elmelund-Præstekær et al. 2011). Yet, studies offer different reasons about the exact *type* of media logic and news values that allow politicians to enter the media (see literature review in Vos 2014).

This is where the negativity bias comes in (Soroka 2012). This concept may help us to disentangle politicians' negativity usage as a media access tool. Negativity bias in the news is the result of human psychology: we attribute more importance and heavier weight to negative, rather than positive information (Knobloch-Westerwick et al. 2020; Soroka and McAdams 2015; Soroka et al. 2019). Therefore, as consumers of news, we are more prone to consume negative rather than positive news (Fournier et al., 2020; Robertson et al. 2023). This nudge from the public reinforces journalists' media logic to use their gatekeeping role by providing negativity as this generates more attention for the news outlet. As such, negativity bias in the news can be seen as a concept that reflects media logic relying on news values such as *conflict* driven by audience engagement with such news. Even in situations where the negative news

does not attract attention, journalists' gut feeling will lead them to rank negative news higher (Lamot and Van Aelst 2019).

Accordingly, if politicians want to gain media access, they need to provide the media with what the media needs: negativity. However, if the majority of politicians adopt such media logic by using negativity as a media access tool, there is a possibility that negativity gets too widespread. As a result, journalists need to draw a line about which type of negativity gains priority over which. This is where incivility comes in. Incivility is defined as the breakage of conventional social norms of communication (Mutz 2015; Walter 2021). While negativity usage represents criticisms among politicians on their policies and traits (Geer 2006), incivility goes beyond by including additional elements such as name-calling or mocking (Sobieraj and Berry 2011). Consequently, if negativity becomes uncivil, it does not only align with the news value of *conflict* but covers other values such as *sensationalism* or *entertainment*. This makes uncivil negativity extremely newsworthy (Muddiman 2018; Mutz, 2015; Skytte 2019) provoking stronger responses among the public in comparison to civil negative communication (e.g. Hopmann et al. 2018; Reiter and Matthes 2021; Walter and Ridout 2021).

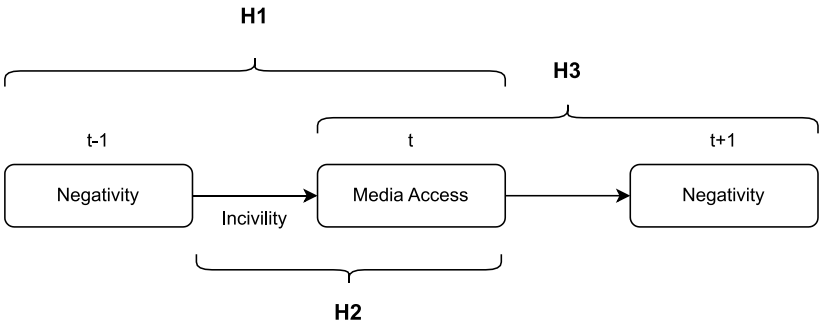
Following this theoretical outline, I propose three main hypotheses (see Figure 1). Firstly, I expect that negativity usage by politicians pays off in terms of gaining media access due to the negativity bias. In other words, negative politicians will have a higher probability of appearing in the news (H1). In addition, among negative politicians, I expect those that use incivility in the process to be particularly successful in gaining media access (H2). Lastly, I argue that this media logic has an impact on politicians through the mediatization of politics. Because politicians experience greater media coverage when they are negative, I expect them to rely upon negativity even more compared to politicians that never experience media access (H3). Therefore, I expect politicians to embrace media logic (Elmelund-Præstekær et al. 2011).

H1 - *Politicians using negativity (t-1) have a higher chance of gaining media access (t) compared to politicians that do not use negativity*

H2 – *Politicians using negativity that is uncivil (t-1) have a higher chance of gaining media access (t) compared to politicians that do not use uncivil negativity*

H3 – *Politicians gaining media access due to negativity (t) have a higher chance of using negativity again (t+1) compared to politicians that fail to attract media access*

Figure 1. Causal structures that lead to negativity usage by politicians



Methodology

I test my hypotheses using the case of Belgium, which is highly relevant due to the several characteristics that make the confirmation of hypotheses less likely. Firstly, the politics of Belgium can be described as a consensus democracy with a multi-party system where politicians need to cooperate to pass legislation or form a government (see Lijphart 2012). As a result, negativity usage in such countries tends to be low due to the importance of forming coalitions, unlike majoritarian two-party systems where there is minimal cross-party cooperation (Elmelund-Præstekær 2010). In addition, the boomerang effect of negativity is costlier in multi-party systems such as Belgium's. Voters in multi-party systems can easily change their vote choice for an ideological proximate party, something that is less likely in two-party systems (Walter 2014; Walter et al. 2014). Therefore, Belgian politicians may be more unlikely to use negativity as a media access tool as it may diminish party cooperation or make voters side with the competition.

Moreover, given that Belgium has a federal political system with decentralised power, politicians do not need to fight for media attention as much as politicians in other countries that are more centralised. As was shown by Vos and Van Aelst (2018), politicians in Belgium can expect to enjoy considerable media access regardless of whether they are prime ministers, ministers, party leaders, or ordinary members of parliament (MPs). This is different from news in centralised majoritarian systems such as the US or the UK, where the role of president or prime minister makes up for the majority of political media coverage. Therefore, due to the decentralised political system, individual politicians in

Belgium do not have as strong internal pressure to attract media attention through negativity as they already enjoy considerable media coverage. The absence of individual media-seeking behaviour is further reinforced by Belgium's partocratic system, where parties, rather than individual politicians, play a central role in the political landscape.

Lastly, regarding media, Belgium can be classified into the *Democratic Corporatist* media model which is characterised by strong journalism professionalisation with less commercial pressure (Hallin and Mancini 2004). This limits commercial media logic that contributes to more sensationalism in the news (Arbaoui et al. 2020). Furthermore, Belgium has strong state support for free media which correlates positively with journalist professionalisation and negatively with political parallelism (Humprecht et al. 2022). Therefore, this media context further provides us with a less-likely case to identify negativity biases in the news which would reinforce politicians' negativity usage.

While working with the Belgian case offers several advantages, there is one notable disadvantage to consider. Given that politicians' negative usage to seek media attention is uncommon, this rarity implies that when politicians do choose to go negativity, this action is more likely to attract significant media coverage. Consequently, Belgium becomes a more viable case for confirming H1 and H2. Nevertheless, recent studies (Chapter 1) reveal that the utilisation of negativity in Belgian politics remains consistently low through time. This implies that journalists in Belgium generally encounter consistent levels of negativity from politicians, eliminating concerns about a sudden surge in negativity that would increase the probability of identifying negativity bias in news.

Data

To test my hypotheses, I analyse individual politicians' negativity usage in Belgium's federal parliament (De Kamer) during question time[32] (QT) and compare it with politicians' media access in prime-time TV news in Flanders – one of the two major regions in the country. The choice of QT is driven by its consistent occurrence in day-to-day politics, attracting high media coverage and capturing citizens' attention on a

[32] Question time in Belgium takes place every week for approximately two hours during which minority and majority MPs pose questions to the prime minister, deputy prime ministers, ministers, and other cabinet members (i.e. secretaries). Questions are asked in thematic blocks (e.g. on green energy), and designated cabinet members provide answers to questions, after which all MPs that posed questions in this block may refute answers they received. The share of questions is distributed equally to all parties, regardless of their parliamentary size.

weekly basis (Osnabrügge et al., 2021). This makes it a suitable platform for testing politicians' use of negativity as a media-access tool on a day-to-day basis.

I initially use the *QuestionTimeSpeech* dataset (Poljak and Mertens 2022), where the units of observation represent each speech contribution during QT debates in Belgium. The strength of this dataset is that it goes beyond parliamentary questions which are predominantly studied in the literature (see Borghetto and Chaqués-Bonafont 2019), and also contains answers, interruptions, and points of order. As such, besides ordinary members of parliament (MPs), this allows us to study cabinet members as well (Prime Ministers and Ministers).

To code the usage of negativity, I randomly sampled QTs by taking one QT per month between January 2010 and December 2020. In total, I sampled 103 QTs (30.4% of all QTs between 2010 and 2020) during which 6.634 speeches were made. Four coders were trained for six weeks to be able to code negativity in speeches, operationalised as attacks in which (i) *criticism* is explicitly attributed to (ii) a *(formal) political actor* (following Geer, 2006). Among the speeches that contain negativity, coders were also tested for coding incivility, which was operationalised as the usage of name-calling, mocking, or sarcasm. Intercoder reliability using Krippendorff's alpha scores was sufficiently high in the last two weeks of training (reported in *Appendix – Coder training*). Coders coded negativity directed at any formal political actor such as individuals (e.g. PM), groups of individuals (e.g. ministers), individual parties (e.g. Greens), or a group of parties (e.g. coalition government). Negativity directed toward informal political actors such as interest groups, the army, or foreign political actors was not coded. Overall 2.168 speeches (32.7%) contain negativity and among these negative speeches, 559 (25.8%) contain incivility. Non-negative speeches contain an average of 212 words (SD = 180 words), while negative speeches average 246 words (SD = 123 words). Examples of negativity and incivility usage are available in Table 1.

Table 1. Examples of coding negativity and incivility in speeches

Neg.	Incivility	Politician	QT	Speech
No (0)	**No (0)**	Rachid Madrane (PS)	7.6.2012	*Mr. Prime Minister, we welcome the rapid and firm position of your government with regard to strengthening the fight against radicalism (…)*
		Sarah Smeyers (N-VA)	2.4.2010	*Madam Minister, I really hope from the bottom of my heart that there will be no relaxation in the area of the guidance of the unemployed by the RVA.*
Yes (1)	**No (0)**	Charles Michel (MR)	8.2.2018	*Madam MP the way in which your question is posed shows an imperfect or incomplete knowledge of the way the government deals with this issue.*
		Monica De Coninck (sp.a)	26.4.2018	*However, I do not accept that so many children disappear in this country. I think there should be a priority action plan, not just from you, but from the entire government.*
	Yes (1)	Marco Van Hees (PVDA)	2.7.2015	*Minister, I note that in addition to playing the role of the Smurf with glasses, you also play the role of the happy Smurf – "it will be better tomorrow".*
		Tanguy Veys (VB)	6.2.2014	*You wash your hands in innocence, then no longer like a Walloon Houdini, but like Pontius Pilate.*

Note: More examples are available in Appendix Y

The testing of the hypotheses was conducted by transforming the coded data so that each politician that spoke during a particular QT constitutes a unit of observation. In total, the final dataset contains 2.829 observations of politicians participating in QT with 367 individual politicians re-appearing across 103 QTs. Speakers that moderate QTs are omitted as they go negative to get politicians back in line when they break the rules of procedures. As such, negativity used by speakers is not suited for testing the theoretical framework of strategic political behaviour driven by the media. Furthermore, I omitted independent politicians without party affiliation as it is not possible to control their ideological positions, which may impact negativity usage (e.g. Maier and Nai 2021).[33]

Negativity is the first binary variable that indicates whether a particular politician during a particular QT engaged in negativity (0=No; 1=Yes). This is followed by a second binary variable *Incivility* that indicates whether incivility was used in the process (0=No; 1=Yes). For example, if a politician A on a specific QT (1 observation in data) attacked another political actor for a policy they advocated, a value in

[33] Despite omitting participation of speakers (N=103) and independent MPs (N = 65) in QTs, sensitivity analyses including these groups of politicians do not show different results from the ones reported in the main text.

the *negativity* variable is 1 indicating that politician A engaged in negativity. In addition, if politician A also mocked the other actor in the process, a value of 1 is attributed to the variable *incivility*. On average, 45.4% of politicians per QT engage in negativity and the average incivility usage per QT (among politicians that engage in negativity) is 31%. These numbers are consistent through time (see yearly trends in Appendix Y). As such, the dataset includes a variety of politicians that go negative but also many politicians that remain neutral in a debate by not criticising anyone explicitly. Given that politicians may attack more than one actor on a particular QT, I also generate additional count variables indicating the total amount of negativity and incivility used, which will be used in the sensitivity analyses (Appendix Z).

Media access is the third binary variable and shows whether a politician following a QT session (in which it participated) also got media access (0=No; 1=Yes). To generate this variable, I used the Electronic News Archive (ENA) dataset from Belgium, which collects appearances of politicians in prime-time 7 pm Flemish news on the main public (VRT) and private (VTM) broadcasts in Flanders[34] (nieuwsarchief.be). This variable is placed future in time, more specifically, +7 hours following a QT in the parliament. On average, 14.4% of politicians that participate in QT get a chance to appear in the prime-time news following QT. This shows that media access does not come hand in hand with simply participating in QT. Additional binary variables for only public or private media access are also generated, together with the overall count of media appearances following QT, all of which will be used in sensitivity analyses (Appendix Z).

Cumulative media access is the fourth variable. This variable is a cumulative variable and indicates for each observation the number of times the politician gained media access due to negativity in previous observations. If a politician was negative three times in the past (*Negativity = 1*), and two times this negativity resulted in media coverage (*Media Access = 1*), this politician receives a cumulative media access of 2 at that point in time. There are 748 observations of politicians that have non-zero cumulative media access.[35] Additionally, a binary variable is generated separating politicians into a control group (no

[34] The market is evenly split between the two while serving almost 80% of the 6 million Flemish audiences in Belgium (De Swert and Hooghe 2010). According to the *Reuters Institute Digital News Report* from 2022, over 70% of the Flemish audience trusts both prime-time TV news while 60% indicate TV as a source of news (Reuters Institute 2022). There is no national television in Belgium.

[35] 51.5% of these politicians have a cumulative media access of 1, 20% have a cumulative media access of 2, 8.6% have a cumulative media access of 3, 6.5% have a cumulative media access of 4, 5.8% have a cumulative media access of 5, and 4.7% have a cumulative media access of 6. All observations above 6 make up less than 1% of observations with a maximum value of 11.

media access following negativity ever) and a treatment group (did experience media access following negativity at least once). This variable will be used in the sensitivity analyses (Appendix Z).

Method

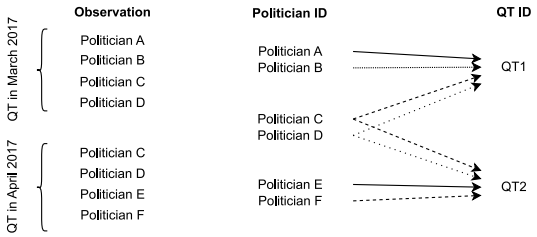
Due to the dichotomous nature of the dependent variables (*negativity* and *media access*), the testing of the hypotheses was conducted by running logistic regressions. Two main models were run. To test H1 (i.e., negative politicians receive more access to the media) and H2 (i.e., politicians that use incivility are more likely to gain media access), *media access* is the main dependent variable placed at time *t* (7 pm TV news), whereas *negativity* and *incivility* are the main independent variables and are lagged at time *t-1* (seven hours before TV news). To test H3 (i.e., politicians who get media access due to negativity are more likely to go negative again), *negativity* is the dependent variable at time *t* (QT), while *cumulative media access* at time *t-1* (previous QTs) is used as the independent variable. In this model, all politicians that never used negativity were omitted, as well as politicians that were negative only once[36] (N=2,537). This increases the validity of the model as it compares politicians that gain media access due to negativity to those that fail to attract media access despite using negativity.

Both of the models were run through a multi-level modelling structure in which individual politicians (N=367) and QTs (N=103) are inserted as a random intercept but are crossed with each other (see Figure 2). This modelling structure is important due to the panel nature of data in which politicians re-appear as observations (see more in Chung and Beretvas 2012). As such, the model safeguards that no individual is skewing the results (e.g. a specific politician who generally goes negative during QT and gets into the news often). In addition to the modelling structure, each regression includes several control variables that may impact *media access* of MPs and Cabinet Members (Yildirim et al., 2023) and *negativity/incivility* usage (e.g. Goovaerts and Turkenburg 2022). This includes the status of the politicians (Opposition MP; Majority MP; Minister; Deputy PM; PM), their gender (Man; Woman), and their parties' ideological extremity (distance from the ideological centre based on the Chapel Hill Expert Data; Jolly et al. 2022). Furthermore, due to the importance of the electoral cycle in parliamentary behaviour (e.g. Schwalbach 2022), I also control election proximity (how many months have passed since the last election) and also for regional differences in Belgium (Flanders; Wallonia). I also include public approval of

[36] Sensitivity analyses including these groups of politicians do not show different results from the ones reported in the main text.

politicians' parties in my models, but due to the data scarcity on approval in Belgium, which removes almost 40% of data observations, this variable is only included in the sensitivity analyses (Appendix Z).

Figure 2. Visual illustration of the multi-level model crossing politicians with QTs in which they participate



Results

The results of the multi-level logistic regressions are reported in Table 2. These results show a significant negativity (and to a lesser extent incivility) bias in the news when politicians are covered confirming H1 and H2. More specifically, Model 1 shows a positive and significant coefficient for the negativity variable: politicians that go negative in parliament at noon are more likely to appear in prime-time TV news later that day than politicians that do not engage in negativity. Furthermore, the model supports the hypothesis that the politicians using incivility are significantly more likely to appear in the news. Finally, the results also confirm the mediatization of (negative) politicians (H3). A positive and significant coefficient for the *cumulative media access* variable shows that the more media access politicians accumulate due to their negative behaviour, the more likely they become to use negativity again. In addition to the main predictors, the results also highlight that cabinet members enjoy significantly greater media access following QT (see also Yildirim et al., 2023) and men politicians participating in QT gain more access when compared to women politicians (Thesen and Yildirim, 2023).

Table 2. Multi-level logistic regressions testing the probability of gaining media access (Model 1) and using negativity (Model 2)

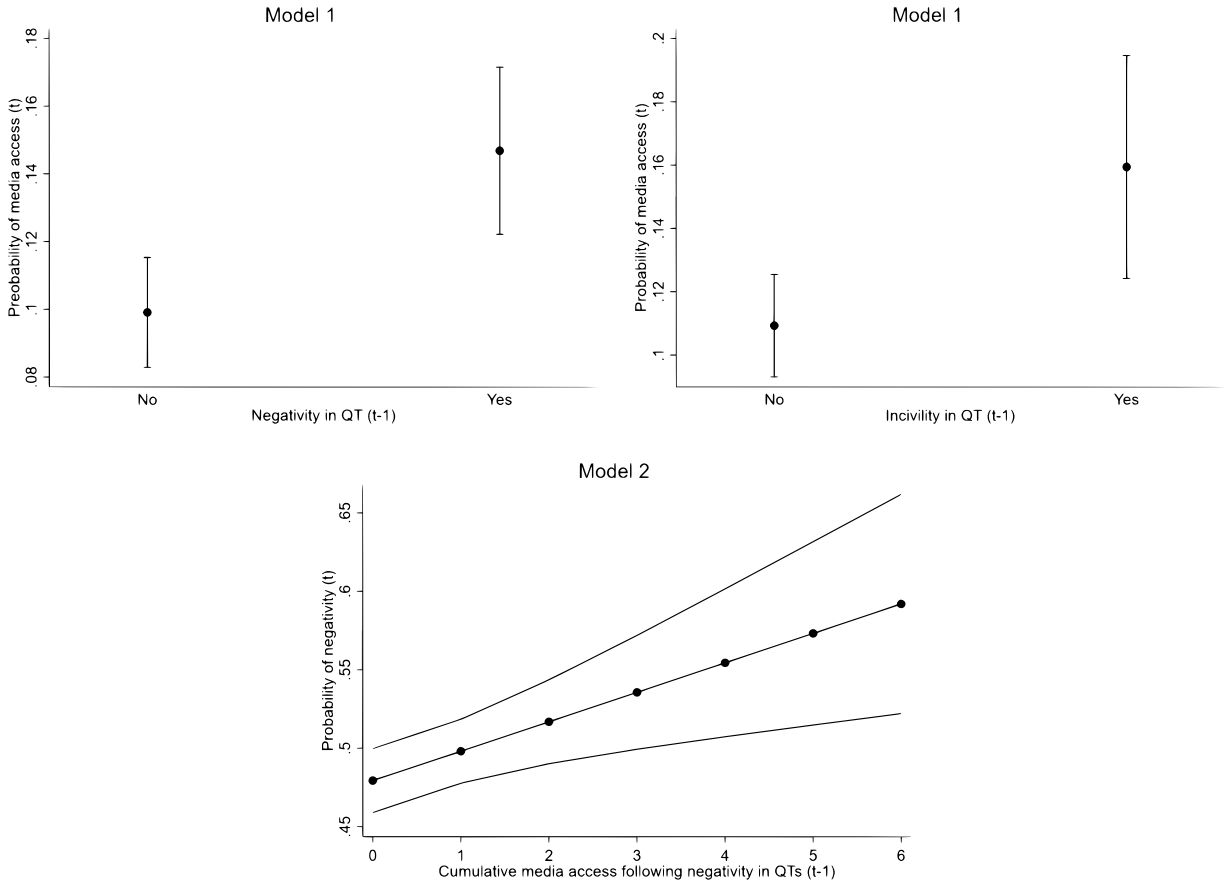
	Model 1	**Model 2**
	DV: Media access (1=Yes) (t)	**DV: Negativity (1=Yes) (t)**
	Coef. (SE)	**Coef. (SE)**
Independent variables		
Negativity (ref. no) (t-1)	**.645 (.184) *****	-
Incivility (ref. no) (t-1)	**.620 (.220) ****	**-**
Cumulative media access (t-1)		**.111 (.044) ***
Control variables		
Electoral cycle	.003 (.006)	.006 (.004)
Opposition MP (ref.)		
Majority MP	.155 (.253) ***	-2.005 (.134) ***
Minister	2.179 (.297) ***	-3.067 (.203) ***
Deputy PM	2.764 (.347) ***	-3.290 (.266) ***
PM	6.077 (.593) ***	-2.285 (.358) ***
Ideology	-1.023 (1.035)	1.737 (.578) **
Man (ref.)		
Woman	-.465 (.216) *	-.011 (.122)
Flanders (ref.)		
Wallonia	-1.894 (.240) ***	-.247 (.122) *
Constant	-2.854	.866 (.224) ***
Variance (QTs)	.572 (.194)	.176 (.063)
Variance (Politicians)	.331 (.117)	.119 (.064)
N (observations)	2.829	2.537
N (QTs)	103	103
N (individual politicians)	367	234
N (min. politicians per QT)	13	13
N (max. politicians QT)	37	35
AIC (empty model)	1.742 (0=1.930)	2.659 (0=3.031)

Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.00

To get a visualisation of these findings, post-estimated predicted probabilities of regression analyses are provided in Figure 3. Regarding negativity bias in the news, shown in the top-left side, the average probability of media access at 7 pm TV news is 48.2% higher for politicians that were negative during QT compared to those that were not (9.9 to 14.7). In addition, at the top-right side of Figure 3, the average probability for media access increases by 45.9% for politicians that decided to use incivility (10.9 to 15.9). Finally, at the bottom of Figure 3, we can also see that for each media access following negativity,

the average probability that a politician goes negative again increases. For example, politicians that were in the news twice after they were negative have a 3.6% higher probability of going negative again compared to those that were in the news following negativity only once (49.8 to 51.6)

Figure 3. Predicted probability of gaining media access following negativity in QT (top-left), using incivility in negativity (top-right), and going negative again following media access after negativity (bottom)



Note: Vertical lines indicate 90% confidence intervals holding other variables at their mean.

Further Tests of Causality

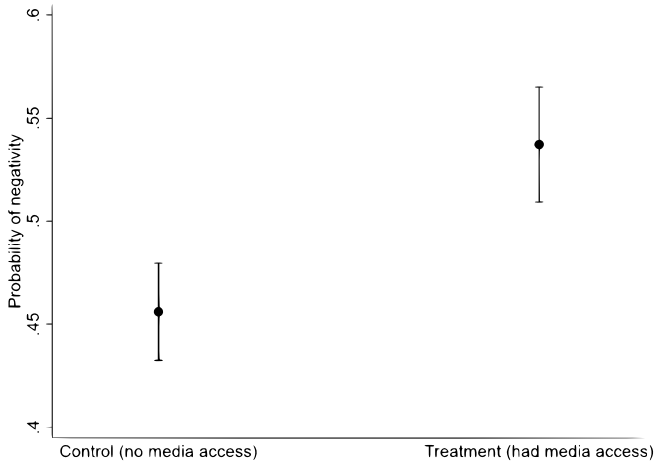
Before discussing and concluding the results, it is necessary to address two issues related to determining causality. First, it could be argued that the relationships between negativity and media (H1; H2) are spuriously related, as politicians tend to adopt negativity on attractive issues that the media aims to report on. Therefore, media coverage of politicians may be driven by issues they speak about, rather than

negativity. Second, it is possible that the observed negativity by politicians is not influenced by media coverage at all (H3). Instead, it could be the case that certain politicians are consistently negative and naturally attract media attention, meaning that reinforced negativity usage is not the result of media reporting on it. I will test both of these possibilities below.

The first issue of causality arises from politicians using negativity on issues that the media seeks to cover, indicating that it is issues, rather than negativity, that drive journalists' bias towards negative politicians. To explore this, speeches were automatically coded, categorising them as either speeches by politicians engaging in negativity or speeches by politicians who did not go negative. The key issues discussed in both types of speeches were identified using the Comparative Agendas Project dictionary, which maps references to 21 major issues such as the economy, immigration, social welfare, international relations, and defense (Albaugh et al., 2013). The resulting dataset consists of observations for each issue (N=21) within a given QT (N=103), indicating the share of attention devoted to each issue (N=2,163). By testing the relationship between issue attention in the two groups of speeches, a positive and significant correlation was found (Pearson's r = .5419; p = .000). Therefore, although not perfectly correlated, issues discussed by politicians engaging in negativity have a high likelihood of also appearing in speeches by politicians who remain neutral. This finding supports the notion of a negative bias among journalists, as they may cover politicians who are not negative in QT but address similar issues as those who adopt negativity.

The second issue with causality is the possibility that some politicians are consistently negative regardless of media coverage, leading to endogeneity in Model 2 (Table 2). In other words, media that reinforces negativity among politicians may not be driven by the media itself, but rather by politicians who are consistently inclined to adopt negative communication. To enhance the reliability of the main findings, I focused on politicians who exhibited negativity at least once within the dataset (N=234). These politicians were divided into two groups: a control group (no media access following negativity in QT) and a treatment group (experienced media access following negativity in QT). By employing the same model as in Table 2 (i.e., Model 2), significant differences between the two groups were observed (the full output in Appendix Z). The average probability of politicians adopting negativity increased by 17.8% (from .45 to .53; see Figure 4) when comparing the control group, which did not receive media coverage despite being negative, to the treatment group, which did receive media access following negativity. While the issue of endogeneity remains, this finding does provide additional evidence that the media may act as a reinforcing role for politicians' negativity usage.

Figure 4 Predicted probability of going negative if a politician has no experience with media access following negativity (control) vs. politicians that do have experience following negativity (treatment)



Note: Vertical lines indicate 90% confidence intervals holding other variables at their mean.

Robustness checks

Lastly, to further ensure the validity of the main findings (Appendix Z), several sensitivity analyses were conducted. These analyses examined differences between public and private TV broadcasts, tested the hypotheses using count dependent variables, and included public approval in the models. Additionally, given the round of the flag effect during the COVID pandemic (Louwerse et al., 2021), the effect size was explored when the year 2020 was omitted. In the majority of these models, consistent results aligned with the theory were obtained.

Discussion and Conclusion

When politicians decide to go negative, voters will not immediately be inclined to vote for them. However, politicians persistently rely on negativity. In this paper, I offered one possible explanation for this counterintuitive behaviour: politicians use negativity as a media access tool. Relying on the mediatization literature, I argue that politicians adopt media logic that is driven by a negativity bias. If politicians aim to be successful in obtaining news coverage (e.g., to advance their personal careers and their policy goals), they need to provide the media with negativity. Using longitudinal data on the negativity usage of Belgian

politicians in the country's federal parliament, and data on the media access in prime-time TV news, I show support for these hypotheses. The results indicate that the media reports more on negative politicians. The more the media prioritise the coverage of negative politicians, the more they stimulate further negative political behaviour.

While these findings may initially raise concerns, there are several encouraging aspects to consider in the results presented in this paper. Firstly, it is noteworthy that a significant number of politicians maintain a neutral stance and refrain from engaging in negativity during parliamentary debates in day-to-day politics (Appendix Y). Moreover, even among those who do employ negativity, the majority do so without resorting to incivility. This indicates that the negative communication utilised by politicians predominantly revolves around policy and trait criticisms that adhere to social norms. Therefore, it is important to recognise that while politicians adapt to media logic by supplying negativity, they do so in a manner that aligns with normative expectations and can actually benefit voters (Geer, 2006; Van Elsas and Fiselier, 2023). In addition, this study also indicates that negativity among politicians is not as widespread as we may assume and is not increasing (see also Goovaerts and Turkenburg 2022).

Furthermore, this study provides support for the existence of a negativity bias in political news coverage, which plays a crucial role in ensuring the quality of democracy (Soroka, 2014). Specifically, when the media delivers politicians' criticisms of each other's policies and traits, it empowers voters to make well-informed decisions during elections (Geer, 2006). By providing citizens with policy critiques, voters can better understand the positions of different parties and politicians on key issues, potentially increasing satisfaction with democracy (Ridge, 2022; Tuttnauer, 2022; Van Elsas and Fiselier, 2023). Moreover, scrutinising politicians' traits helps voters gain insight into their competencies and expertise. Consequently, the media and journalists prioritising politicians who engage in negativity, even if it doesn't always result in higher audience engagement (Lamot and Van Aelst, 2019), can be seen as a positive indication of effectively functioning democracy.

One issue, however, is that incivility also gathers attention, howbeit, to a lesser extent than general negativity usage. This may have a deteriorating effect on the quality of democracy. Namely, incivility can lead to increased citizens' interest in politics (Brooks and Geer 2007; Mutz 2015), yet on the other side, it has also been shown to lower the quality of the political debate (Marien et al. 2020), which in turn leads to lower levels of political trust (see meta-analysis in Van't Riet and Van Stekelenburg 2022). Therefore, when citizens get exposed to political incivility in the news, this may reinforce their resentment of politics (see e.g. Fridkin and Kenney 2011; Gervais 2017; Hopmann et al. 2018; Reiter and Matthes

2021; Walter and Ridout 2021). This may contribute to democratic backsliding (Marien and Hooghe 2011; Van Elsas and Fiselier 2023), the increase of affective polarisation in society (Druckman et al. 2019; Skytte 2022), and the success of ideologically extreme and populist parties (De Vries and Hobolt 2020).

Yet, one should be cautious in generalising these findings, as they only apply to the multi-party and non-liberal media model of Belgium. Still, there are reasons to expect that the results from this paper do apply to other systems, like the US. For instance, the two-party system tends to be more negative (e.g. Elmelund-Præstekær 2010), and the commercial media landscape enhances the negativity bias (e.g. Sacerdote et al. 2020). Therefore, this paper aims to stimulate a broader debate regarding the link between politicians' negativity usage and the influence of media, driven by audience engagement, in reinforcing such behaviour. Acquiring a deeper understanding of this subject is crucial as it enables us to gain insights into the quality of democracies, which necessitates the presence of negative political communication (Geer, 2006). Additionally, this knowledge helps us comprehend the challenges faced by contemporary democracies, such as declining political trust and escalating affective polarization. By delving into these aspects, we can foster greater awareness and facilitate potential solutions for these issues.

Conclusion

Politics is often perceived as a hostile arena where political actors engage in an endless conflict to secure positive public approval which is crucial for their success. Consequently, even outside of election campaigns, negative campaign rhetoric is expected to persist as politicians engage in permanent campaigning trying to discredit their competition in the mind of voters (Heclo, 2000). However, most of the existing research on negativity among political elites has primarily focused on official campaign periods (see overview in Nai and Walter, 2015). As such, despite the perception of a growing prevalence of negative politics (e.g. Geer, 2012), empirical evidence supporting this notion on the elite level and exploring the variation in the usage of negativity over time and across different electoral cycles is limited. As a result, little is known about who engages in negativity against whom, what the content of such negativity is, and what are the underlying motivations of politicians to employ such rhetoric when campaigns are not taking place. This dissertation sought to address these knowledge gaps by investigating three main research questions throughout this dissertation: (i) *who* employs negative communication against *whom*, (ii) *how* and *on what* is this negativity utilised, (iii) and *when* does this negativity occur?

To answer these questions, a novel theoretical framework was proposed to explain negativity usage in politics throughout the entire electoral cycle (goal 1). The core premise of this theory posits that parties and politicians employ negativity to gain policy advantages in the early stages of the electoral cycle, while proximity to elections prompts them to utilise negativity as a *vote*- and *office*-seeking tool. Drawing from various theoretical traditions, several conditions were identified that are expected to influence the usage of negativity, with their impact being contingent on the electoral cycle. In addition, it was hypothesised that the level of negativity would fluctuate over the electoral cycle, with its usage becoming more likely as elections draw near.

To test these expectations, novel data outside campaigns has been collected and analysed using methodological approaches, such as time-series analysis, that have rarely been applied in the field (goal 2). The data consisted of full transcripts of parliamentary debates during question time sessions in the national parliaments of Belgium, Croatia, and the United Kingdom from January 2010 to December 2020 (Poljak and Mertens, 2022). These debates were subjected to content analysis to identify instances of negative communication, defined as attacks from one political actor toward another. The analysis focused on the timing of negativity, the characteristics of attackers and targets, and the content of negativity

employed between them. Through the chapters of this dissertation, the data was analysed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the state of negativity and its usage in day-to-day politics (goal 3).

In the following section, I will present three main conclusions derived from my dissertation, along with the key contributions to the literature and recommendations for future research. I will conclude this section by discussing normative implications of my findings and summarising the central message of the dissertation.

Main conclusions

Negativity usage is not on the rise and is not as high as we may assume

The first main conclusion of this dissertation is that negativity remains consistently present in politics, without a significant longitudinal increase over time. As discussed in Chapter 1, the proportion of negativity in parliamentary speeches per year tends to remain stable. Across the analysed speeches in each country, only about one-third were negative, with a predominant focus on policy criticism. Additionally, only one-fourth of the negative speeches exhibited uncivil language. These proportions are relatively low considering the perception of parliaments as highly theatrical (see more in Te Velde, 2019) and conflict-driven, particularly during question times (Salmond, 2014). Surprisingly, these findings are fairly constant across countries, regardless of their institutional features that may influence the level of negativity (Maier and Nai, 2022). For instance, even in the UK's majoritarian system, which generally favours more negativity, the low usage of negativity during question time aligns with the lower usage observed in the less hostile proportional system of Belgium. Overall, it is evident that a significant portion of parliamentary debates remains neutral, with politicians refraining from attacking one another.

In addition, it is important to note that the speeches examined in this dissertation were from the most contentious and negative debates, i.e. question time, where parties and politicians engage in an intense party and issue competition (Russo and Wiberg, 2010). Therefore, it is plausible to expect even lower levels of negativity when exploring different parliamentary debates (e.g. Karlsson et al., 2022). Although negativity does not show an overall increase, it is essential to consider the electoral cycle. In the later stages of the cycle, as political actors become increasingly focused on seeking votes, we observe a higher prevalence of negativity (see more in the following two conclusions).

However, this finding does not address why is politics so often perceived as a hostile environment. Chapter 6 sheds light on this issue by revealing a negativity bias in the media when reporting on politicians

engaged in parliamentary debates. Journalists are more inclined to cover politicians who employ negativity and also those that use incivility in the process. As a result, our exposure to politics through traditional media tends to be skewed toward negative politics. This helps to explain, in part, why our perception of high negativity in politics does not meet the empirical reality. While this may sound alarming to some, it is actually beneficial that the media provides us, as citizens, with information regarding negativity among politicians (see later *Normative implications*).

Negativity usage is a vote- and office-seeking strategy that is contingent on the electoral cycle

The second main conclusion of this dissertation is that negativity is used as a *vote*- and *office*-seeking strategy, but its usage is contingent on the electoral cycle. Specifically, parties and politicians employ negativity to enhance their own electoral appeal at the expense of their competitors. However, the timing within the electoral cycle plays a crucial role. As demonstrated in Chapter 1, negativity between political parties becomes more pronounced when the electoral cycle is at its end, regardless if this ending is the result of a regular or snap election. This indicates that proximity to elections increases the pressure among political elites to differentiate themselves from others through the increased use of negative communication.

Furthermore, the content of this negativity becomes more personal and uncivil, as highlighted in Chapter 4. These types of negative messages are better at attracting media attention and will therefore spread to the general public more easily (Chapter 6). Consequently, there is a clear incentive to adopt uncivil negativity as election day approaches, aiming to secure media coverage and influence voters' choices. Chapter 3 also reveals that negativity closer to elections tends to focus on salient issues in society. This suggests that actors aim to appeal to the general public by targeting others on issues that are significant to the voters. By doing so, they demonstrate their ability to address urgent societal concerns, differentiating themselves from their competitors through criticism grounded on such issues.

Moreover, the usage of negativity is reinforced by poor approval ratings, especially when elections are approaching. Frontrunners anticipate significant electoral gains and potential seats in office making them risk-averse, while politicians expected to face losses at elections exhibit more risk-acceptance behaviour, i.e. they resort to heightened negativity. This does not only increase the probability of going negative (Chapter 4) but also causes a higher share of negativity to be employed by these actors (Chapter 5). However, this effect is also conditioned on the electoral cycle and is more prominent at the

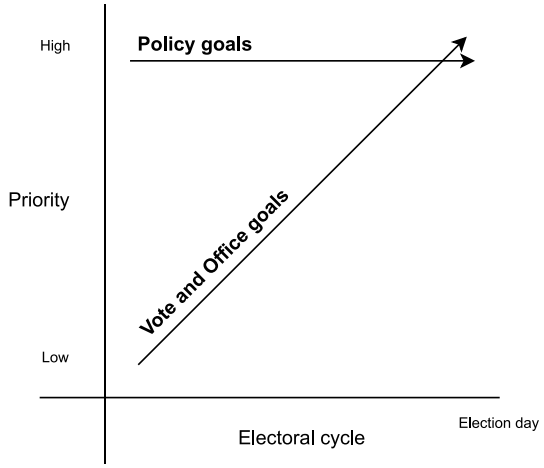
end, as opposed the beginning of the electoral cycle. This finding aligns with the expectation that low-approval actors in the post-election setting are more inclined to focus on internal issues and strategies lowering the priority of *vote*-seeking goals (see e.g. Seeberg, 2022; Somer-Topcu, 2009).

It is important to note that country differences also play a role. Specifically, the impact of public approval is more pronounced in multi-party systems like Croatia and Belgium, compared to the two-party system in the UK. This can be attributed to the idea that frontrunners in the UK can engage in risk-accepting negative behaviour with minor risks, as their voter base is less likely to abandon them (Walter et al., 2014b). Therefore, negativity usage is less problematic in such a system. Additionally, Belgium parties employ persistent use of uncivil rhetoric as a result of strong radical parties in parliament that face less repercussions for using incivility. In turn, the necessity for mainstream parties to form and maintain broad coalitions in Belgium contribute to their minimal use of incivility throughout the electoral cycle (Chapter 4).

Negativity usage is a policy-seeking strategy that is surprisingly not contingent on the electoral cycle

The third and last major finding of this dissertation is that negativity serves as a means to pursue *policy*-seeking goals regardless of the phase within the electoral cycle. Contrary to my initial expectation that *policy*-seeking goals would diminish in their priority as elections approach, the empirical evidence suggests otherwise. It appears that *policy*-seeking goals remain significant throughout the entire electoral cycle, resulting in consistent usage of negativity as a *policy*-seeking tool (Figure 1). Therefore, this finding demonstrates the importance of issue competition in politics (Schattschneider, 1960).

Figure 1. Theoretical conditions that have been identified to lead politicians to utilise negativity throughout the electoral cycle



Note: The figure is a merely heuristic outline of the main findings and should not be interpreted as deterministic

In Chapter 1, I presented findings that indicate parties' willingness to attack ideologically distant parties compared to those that are ideologically proximate. This supports the notion that negativity gets used strategically to pursue *policy*-related goals. When parties target ideologically distant counterparts, they are less oriented at gaining votes, as the likelihood of voters switching to an ideologically distant competitor is low (Walter, 2014a). Consequently, it can be expected that parties engage in attacks against ideologically distant opponents due to different policy priorities or ways in which policy should be formulated or implemented. Surprisingly, this pattern of attacking ideologically distant parties persists throughout the electoral cycle without significant fluctuations, defying the expectation that it would diminish closer to elections when *vote*-seeking becomes more prominent.

This is furthermore supported in Chapter 4, where the analysis of the content of negative communication revealed that policy criticism is the dominant theme of attacks throughout the entire electoral cycle. It was expected that the importance of policy criticism would decrease as elections approach, but findings did not consistently confirm this hypothesis. Even if the overall emphasis on policy in negativity does decreases, it remains the most prevalent content of negative communication. Thus, irrespective of proximity to elections, politicians and parties continue to criticise each other on past policy positions, policy implementation, and attention given to various issues. Additionally, Chapter 3 demonstrates that parties primarily focus their attacks on policy areas they have ownership of,

irrespective of the moment within the electoral cycle. This focus on owned issues reflects genuine concern for these policy areas and underscores the persistent use of negativity as a tool to seek policy outcomes.

Lastly, Chapter 1 demonstrated how coalition members engage in intra-government criticism. As theorised and supported by existing literature, parties within a coalition government criticise each other to prevent policy drift from coalition agreements (Höhmann and Sieberer, 2020). Similarly, in majoritarian systems with single-party governments and single-member districts, internal criticism emerges when the government's policies fail to align with the interests of the constituency a majority MP represents (Kam, 2009). However, as the electoral cycle progresses and policy implementation becomes less feasible, concerns about policy drift should diminish. Nonetheless, intra-government criticism persists throughout the entire electoral cycle, indicating a consistent use of negativity in the pursuit of *policy* goals. However, despite these findings, the persistent use of intra-party and intra-coalition criticism throughout the electoral cycle may also be driven by *vote*-seeking goals, as coalition parties (Fortunato, 2021) or individual politicians (Bøggild and Pedersen, 2020; 2023) aim to differentiate themselves in the minds of voters.

Croatian parties differ from their counterparts in Belgium and the UK in this regard, as governing parties in Croatia engage in fewer intra-party or intra-coalition attacks. This distinction can be attributed to the lack of institutionalisation of coalition agreements in Croatian politics (Nikić Čakar, 2020). Consequently, the policy arrangement among coalition partners becomes unclear, leading to a diminished *policy*-seeking nature of negativity within Croatian governing coalition parties and also internally within governing parties. However, this absence could also be influenced by the *vote*-seeking ambitions of majority MPs that rely on their party leadership in the cabinet for re-election (see Stefan et al., 2012) thereby avoiding criticising their own party or government (see Appendix D.2 for further details).

Contributions to the literature on negativity in politics

This dissertation makes four contributions to the literature on negativity in politics. Firstly, it stands out as one of the first studies that delve deeper into the usage of negativity by political elites in their day-to-day activities. Unlike previous literature that primarily focused on negative campaigning by elites during official election campaigns or general negativity bias in the media or among the electorate, this dissertation goes beyond that scope. Consequently, it presents an expanded theoretical framework by integrating various theories such as the prospect theory of decision-making (Kahneman and Tversky, 1979), role congruency theory (Eagly and Karau, 2002), and mediatization of politics (Strömbäck, 2008).

This framework offers a fresh perspective through which we can better understand the utilisation of negativity by political parties and individual politicians. The empirical data strongly supports this framework, providing a solid foundation for future research on negativity and political communication beyond the confines of this dissertation (see the next section for potential areas of future research).

Secondly, this dissertation contributes to the literature by collecting empirical data on negative campaigning in the intervals between consecutive election campaigns. By doing so, it enables us to examine the trends of negativity and its different forms, including incivility, over time. Through the collection and coding of parliamentary communication between 2010 and 2020, it becomes apparent that neither negativity nor incivility is on the rise. Instead, the usage of negativity is dependent on the electoral cycle. This finding aligns with recent literature, which also highlights the context-dependent nature of uncivil communication (Goovaerts and Turkenburg, 2022). Despite the belief that politics has become more hostile due to the rise of social media and the emergence of certain populist leaders, the parliamentary speech data does not demonstrate a substantial increase in the usage of negativity. Moreover, it reveals that the round-the-flag effect, wherein negativity is less prevalent in times of crisis (Louwerse et al., 2021), did occur during the COVID pandemic.

Thirdly, this dissertation contributes to reaffirming the findings from the negative campaigning literature in a distinct setting and using novel methodological approaches in the literature. Namely, the focus on a short period of official campaigns limited previous negative campaigning studies from employing certain modelling strategies, such as time-series analysis, to establish directional causality in negativity usage. However, by examining negativity on a day-to-day basis, this thesis overcomes that limitation and allows for the lagging of certain variables to a period before the occurrence of negativity. For instance, in Chapter 3, I confirm that an increase in the salience of an issue leads to a corresponding rise in negativity surrounding that issue. This finding expands upon previous research, which had only shown the congruent relationship between issue salience and negativity on an issue (Damore, 2002). Furthermore, in Chapter 5, I provide evidence that a decrease in approval ratings is associated with an increased usage of negativity, particularly in close proximity to election campaigns. This adds to the existing body of knowledge, which had previously focused solely on the congruence between these two variables (Nai, 2020; Walter et al., 2014).

Lastly, this dissertation not only reaffirms the findings from negative campaigning literature in a non-campaign setting using different methodologies but also uncovers new causal dynamics that contribute to the usage of negativity. In Chapter 1, I illustrate that governing parties, especially in a system

with two strong parties (Croatia, the UK), are equally prone to engaging in negativity compared to the opposition. This is distinct from campaigns, where the opposition typically attacks the government, even in two-party systems (Benoit, 1999). Government parties not only target opposing parties but also engage in internal criticism within coalition partners (Belgium) and intra-party criticism (UK). Furthermore, while previous campaigning studies presented mixed or null impacts of ideology on negativity usage, Chapter 1 provides support for the role of ideology outside of campaigns. It indicates that the greater the ideological distance between parties, the more likely attacks will occur. Additionally, in Chapter 2, I establish the role of gender, revealing that women use and receive less criticism compared to men—a phenomenon that has not been identified (women attacking less) or debated extensively (women receiving less criticism) in the literature regarding campaigns. Lastly, in Chapter 6, I demonstrate that the media can stimulate negativity among elites. Previous studies on campaigning have consistently revealed a strong congruence between negativity and media exposure (Maier and Nai, 2020), as well as a media bias in reporting negative advertisements (Benoit et al., 2004; Haselmayer et al., 2019). However, the impact of this interaction on politicians has been overlooked. My research demonstrates that politicians who receive media coverage after employing negativity are more inclined to continue using negativity, in contrast to those who employ negativity but do not garner media attention.

Limitations and avenues for future research of negativity in politics

While this dissertation contributes to the current literature on negativity in politics, there are several avenues for further exploration. Firstly, this dissertation focuses exclusively on question time debates within parliamentary venues. Future research could expand beyond these debates to examine different mechanisms that likely shape negativity in less media-exposed and prominent settings such as plenary speeches or committee sittings. It is plausible to expect that the level of hostility in these debates is lower, as they face less media coverage and are not as easily exposed to citizens. However, considering that *policy*-driven negativity has shown a strong presence in this research, it is possible that negativity also exists in these debates. Particularly in committees, where actual policy is debated and party positions may be at odds with each other (Loxbo & Sjölin, 2017). Additionally, with the rise of social media and direct connections between politicians and citizens, committees or plenary sessions can easily serve as platforms for *vote*-seeking. Politicians may employ negativity in committee sittings to discredit their competitors, taking advantage of the ease of sharing such interactions on social media platforms thereby bypassing traditional media in the process (Kalsnes et al., 2017).

Furthermore, the field could benefit from exploring negativity throughout the electoral cycle in venues beyond parliaments, such as press releases, traditional media (TV, newspapers), and social media. While this dissertation provides support for the expectation that negative politicians attract media access, it is likely that the type and tone of negativity vary significantly across different venues (Walter and Vliegenthart, 2010). Studies have shown the toxic nature of social media and the prevalence of incivility in online political interactions (Frimer et al., 2023). This characteristic of social media may contribute to the increased usage of offensive language in politicians' social media posts. Additionally, negative posts tend to generate more attention and engagement (Mueller and Saeltzer, 2022; Peeters et al., 2022), which may lead politicians to reinforce negativity among themselves on social media to a greater extent than in parliamentary settings. However, it is also known that direct in-person debates generate more negativity (Walter and Vliegenthart, 2010), suggesting that parliaments may have the highest levels of negativity compared to other venues. Future research should investigate the precise differences in negativity across these different platforms in day-to-day politics.

Beyond debates and venues, there is also a need to study negativity in comparatively different contexts beyond the cases that were examined in this dissertation. While Belgium, Croatia, and the UK have their unique characteristics allowing some results in this dissertation to be generalised, these countries still do not cover features of some other European countries and beyond. Consequently, generalising the findings of this dissertation to other countries within and outside Europe poses a challenge. For instance, the countries analysed in this dissertation do not include those with minority governments. The instability of such governments can affect the duration of the electoral cycle (e.g. Thürk, 2022), potentially leading to variations in the levels and types of negativity used from one election to another. For example, we might anticipate higher usage of negativity from the opposition in minority systems, considering the absence of clear majority support for the government. However, negativity usage by opposing actors in such systems may be more driven by policy concerns, as they possess greater power to influence legislation. Therefore, it is crucial to investigate the usage of negativity in diverse political systems with different forms of government and varying degrees of electoral cycle stability beyond the cases that were studied in this dissertation. This will provide a more comprehensive picture of negativity in politics throughout the electoral cycle.

Moreover, recent studies have begun exploring negativity beyond a purely rational approach and have introduced personality traits as an explanation for individual politicians' negativity usage (see Maier et al., 2022; Nai et al., 2022). While the rational approach is undoubtedly a contributing factor, as

demonstrated throughout this dissertation, it is essential to acknowledge that certain politicians may have certain personality predispositions that make them more prone to negativity compared to others. Therefore, studying negativity from an individual-dominated perspective in the day-to-day context throughout the electoral cycle offers new possibilities. For instance, when elections draw closer, priorities shift towards re-election, which may stimulate greater usage of negativity based on personal attacks and incivility. It is important to investigate how politicians with a predisposition for negativity based on their personality traits respond to an increasingly hostile electoral environment and whether it reinforces their inherent disposition for negativity.

Lastly, this dissertation primarily focused on exploring negativity as criticism among political actors from a quantitative perspective. Future studies should delve deeper into the various forms of negativity exhibited by political elites, including instances of manipulation and deception (Jamieson et al., 2000; Mark, 2009). These alternative forms of negativity can be examined through qualitative methods, allowing for a more detailed analysis of how politicians attempt to manipulate public opinion and engage in negative behaviour. Additionally, the study of incivility can encompass a range of behaviours that extend beyond the scope of this dissertation. For instance, politicians may employ intolerant discourse to silence certain groups and individuals (Rossini, 2022), an aspect not covered in this dissertation.

Normative implications

When it comes to the normative implications of this dissertation, the analysis demonstrates that political elites engage in their day-to-day activities in a desirable manner. Namely, a significant number of politicians refrain from negativity during parliamentary debates, likely engaging in deliberation focused on policies and issues without explicit attacks or hostility (Chapter 1). This illustrates that much of the work carried out by MPs in parliament is primarily oriented towards policy matters, such as addressing constituency or electorate-related issues, rather than engaging in a mere competition to secure votes in an upcoming election (see also Louwerse and Otjes, 2016). Consequently, instead of fostering harmful forms of political deliberation, a substantial portion of political debates in parliaments likely exhibit deliberative qualities such as policy justification and civility (e.g. Marien et al., 2019), consistent with similar findings from campaigns (Turkenburg and Goovaerts, 2022).

Yet, as emphasised in the introduction, conflict is a fundamental principle of politics. Therefore, the use of negativity by politicians is not inherently negative but rather necessary for the democratic

functioning of political institutions, enabling the challenging of ideas and engagement in critical debates. As demonstrated, negativity usage is consistently present, typically appearing in approximately one-third of parliamentary speeches, and when it does get used, it is predominantly used on issues and policy (Chapter 3; 4). This suggests that politicians engage in an appropriate level of policy conflict alongside civil and policy discussions (point above). By employing negativity, defined in this dissertation as a criticism of political actors, parties and politicians allow voters to differentiate between the positions they represent and those they oppose (Geer, 2006). Even if attacks are directed at personal traits, they can serve as indicators to voters of the competencies and skills possessed by certain politicians or parties.

In relation to this, it is advantageous that the media exhibits a negativity bias (Soroka, 2014) and is inclined to provide extensive coverage to politicians who engage in negativity (Chapter 6). Namely, negative communication among political elites will garner greater attention from citizens leading journalists to prioritise political conflict in parliamentary speeches. Consequently, presenting citizens with conflict has the potential to enhance their satisfaction with democracy (Tuttnauer, 2022) as it signals how actors differ between themselves (Ridge, 2022; Van Elsas and Fiselier, 2023). Therefore, the prioritisation of politicians who employ negativity by journalists, even in cases where it may not generate higher audience engagement (Lamot and Van Aelst, 2019), is a positive indication of a functioning democracy.

However, there is one important caveat regarding these positive findings. Incivility can also be observed in political speeches (Chapter 2; 4) and attract media attention (Chapter 6). This can harm the quality of democracy, undermining the deliberative process and diminishing the otherwise beneficial aspects of negativity (see the meta-analysis by Van't Riet and Van Stekelenburg, 2022). Nevertheless, the presence of incivility and media coverage of such incidents is less prevalent compared to general negativity. Moreover, there is a case to be made for incivility, particularly when used exclusively among political elites, as it may generate increased citizens' interest in politics (Brooks and Geer, 2007; Mutz, 2015) and potentially contribute to strengthening democracy (Rossini, 2022).

Concluding remarks

The theory of negativity in politics presented in this dissertation finds a strong presence in the real world. As elections draw near, politicians and parties become increasingly focused on securing votes, leading to greater usage of negativity and more personal and uncivil forms of negativity. This negativity tends to centre around issues that are salient among voters. Moreover, negative approval ratings when elections

are approaching reinforce the usage of negativity. Yet, policy-driven goals consistently underlie politicians' employment of negativity. Parties frequently attack ideologically distant opponents, coalition members use negativity within their ranks to prevent policy drift, and policy criticism is the primary content of attacks throughout the entire electoral cycle, with a focus on issues that politicians genuinely care about and take ownership of.

Furthermore, this dissertation demonstrates that negativity is not as pervasive as it is commonly assumed. Only about one-third of politicians' discourse in hostile parliamentary debates such as question time can be categorised as negative. In fact, the usage of negativity remains consistent across the three countries studied in this dissertation and does not show a longitudinal increase over time. Special forms of negativity, such as incivility, are also not on the rise. Instead, the increase in negativity is observed in relation to the electoral cycle: the closer the elections, the more negativity is utilised.

This dissertation also challenges the notion that politicians are consistently hostile and increasingly uncivil toward each other in day-to-day politics. On the contrary, regardless of when they are observed, negativity is predominantly directed toward others on policies and is generally expressed in a civil manner. Politicians are not perpetually engaged in campaigning; they are primarily focused on policy debates, attacking each other's proposals throughout most of the electoral cycle between elections. It is only in the proximity of election campaigns, whether they are regular or snap, that negativity becomes more personal and uncivil. Hence, our general perception of high negativity usage among politicians, which is often assumed to be primarily focused on personal attacks and incivility, may be influenced by other factors. As was highlighted in Chapter 6, journalists are inclined to report on specific instances of negative rhetoric by elites, such as incivility. Furthermore, the perception of hostile elites may also be linked to the growing influence of social media, which facilitates toxic interactions between politicians and may limit the exposure to beneficial speech rhetoric by elites online.

Nevertheless, from a normative perspective, it is reassuring that politicians primarily use negativity to criticise each other on policy matters, even as elections approach and negativity usage intensifies. Additionally, it is encouraging that journalists prioritise politicians who engage in negative rhetoric by attacking their counterparts. Media coverage oriented at politicians attacking each other provides valuable signals to voters about where politicians and parties stand on specific policy issues and how they differ. Ultimately, this helps voters make more informed choices regarding their support during elections. Moreover, such criticism can contribute to increased satisfaction with democracy. Therefore, policy-based criticism can be seen as both necessary and beneficial for upholding the quality of

democracy, suggesting that, for the most part, politicians engage in a normatively desirable form of political communication.

In conclusion, the key takeaway from this dissertation is that the utilisation of negativity by political actors reflects their ambitions and is, more often than not, employed in a normatively desirable manner. Politicians are more inclined to engage in negative debates centred around policy. However, as elections draw near, they become prone to utilising personal criticism and uncivil rhetoric but not at a high cost of policy attacks. This dissertation, therefore, provides limited support for the notion of permanently campaigning politicians solely focused on their public image, as well as the idea that political elites bear sole responsibility for concerning contemporary phenomena such as the rise of affective polarization or the decline of political trust. Instead, this dissertation shows signs that politicians do their job in a way that is beneficial for us as citizens. Politicians engaging in civil criticisms of each other's ideas and qualities, with greater media access given to such actors, enables us to increase our political knowledge and allows us to make more informed choices during elections. Ultimately, it can be concluded that negativity in politics from election to election does uphold the core principles of democracy.

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Author contributions

CHAPTER	CONTRIBUTIONS OF AUTHORS
Chapter 1: Parties' attack behaviour in parliaments: who attacks whom and when	**Single-authored**
Chapter 2: The role of gender in parliamentary attacks and incivility	**Single-authored**
Chapter 3: Attacks and issue competition: Do parties attack based on issue salience or issue ownership?	**Željko Poljak:** theory development, data analyses, interpretation of results (75%) **Henrik Bech Seeberg:** theory development, interpretation of results (25%)
Chapter 4: Parties' Parliamentary Attack Behaviour throughout the Electoral Cycle	**Željko Poljak:** theory development, data analyses, interpretation of results (75%) **Annemarie Walter:** theory development**,** interpretation of results (25%)
Chapter 5: The impact of public approval on the use of negativity throughout the electoral cycle	**Single-authored**
Chapter 6: Give the media what they need: Negativity as a media access tool for politicians	**Single-authored**

English Summary

This dissertation investigates the prevalence and nature of negativity in politics throughout the electoral cycle. The research addresses three main questions: (i) *who* uses negative communication against *whom*, (ii) *how* and based *on what* is negativity used, and (iii) *when* does negativity occur? To answer these questions, a theoretical framework is proposed, suggesting that politicians strategically employ negativity to gain policy advantages early in the electoral cycle, and as a vote-seeking strategy later in the electoral cycle. This framework is tested using novel data on attacks in parliamentary speeches during question time sessions in Belgium, Croatia, and the United Kingdom, from January 2010 to December 2020. The dissertation yields three overarching findings. First, contrary to the common assumption, negativity is not as prevalent in day-to-day politics as one might expect. Only one-third of the discourse in parliamentary debates can be categorised as negative, and the data does not show an increasing trend in the use of negativity over the past decade. As such, the general perception that negativity among politicians has recently become more prevalent is likely caused by other factors. For instance, this dissertation illustrates that the media's preference for featuring negative politicians might explain this perception. Second, negativity usage follows a cyclical pattern from election to election. The level of negativity decreases after elections, but increases as the next election approaches. This is because political actors start prioritising winning votes. As such, in the later stages of the electoral cycle, negativity becomes more personal and uncivil, and is mostly used by political actors with low approval ratings. Third, contrary to expectations, it appears that achieving policy goals is a constant driver of negativity. Negativity is most prevalent in the form of policy criticism, regardless of the proximity to the next election. Politicians primarily target opponents with different ideological beliefs, as well as coalition partners and party colleagues who deviate from agreed-upon policies. As such, this dissertation challenges the idea of continuous hostility between politicians and provides little evidence for the notion that politicians are constantly campaigning and are only concerned with their public image.

Dutch Summary

Dit proefschrift onderzoekt de prevalentie en de aard van negativiteit in de politiek gedurende de verkiezingscyclus. Het onderzoek richt zich op drie onderzoeksvragen: (i) *wie* gebruikt negatieve communicatie tegen *wie*, (ii) *hoe* en *op basis waarvan* wordt negativiteit gebruikt, en (iii) *wanneer* komt negativiteit voor? Om deze vragen te beantwoorden wordt een theoretisch kader voorgesteld waarin gesuggereerd wordt dat negativiteit vroeg in de verkiezingscyclus strategisch wordt ingezet om beleidsdoelen te halen, terwijl later in de verkiezingscyclus negativiteit eerder gebruikt wordt om stemmen te winnen. Dit kader wordt getest aan de hand van nieuwe data over negativiteit in parlementaire toespraken tijdens vragenuursessies in België, Kroatië en het Verenigd Koninkrijk, van januari 2010 tot december 2020. Het proefschrift levert drie overkoepelende bevindingen op. Ten eerste is negativiteit, in tegenstelling tot de gangbare veronderstelling, niet zo veel voorkomend in de dagelijkse politiek als men zou verwachten. Slechts een derde van het discours in parlementaire debatten kan worden gecategoriseerd als negatief, en de data toont ook geen stijgende trend in het gebruik van negativiteit in de afgelopen tien jaar. De algemene perceptie dat negativiteit onder politici recent is toegenomen, wordt daarom waarschijnlijk veroorzaakt door andere factoren. Dit proefschrift illustreert bijvoorbeeld dat deze perceptie veroorzaakt zou kunnen worden door de neiging van de media om negatieve politici in de schijnwerpers te zetten. Ten tweede volgt het gebruik van negativiteit een cyclisch patroon van verkiezing tot verkiezing. In het begin van de verkiezingscyclus, wanneer de verkiezingen net voorbij zijn, is er minder negativiteit in de politiek. Maar naarmate de verkiezingen dichterbij komen, en politici en partijen de prioriteit geven aan het winnen van stemmen, neemt het gebruik van negativiteit toe. Daarom wordt negativiteit in de latere fasen van de verkiezingscyclus vaak gebruikt door politieke actoren die slecht scoren in opiniepeilingen. Bovendien neemt de persoonlijke en onbeschaafde negativiteit toe als het gaat over thema's die populair zijn bij kiezers. Ten derde blijkt, in tegenstelling tot de verwachtingen, dat het bereiken van beleidsdoelen een constante drijfveer is om negativiteit te gebruiken. Negativiteit komt namelijk het meeste voor in de vorm van beleidskritiek, ongeacht de nabijheid van verkiezingen. Politici richten zich voornamelijk op tegenstanders met een andere ideologische overtuiging, maar ook op coalitiepartners en partijgenoten die afwijken van het afgesproken beleid. Dit proefschrift betwist dan ook het idee van voortdurende vijandigheid tussen politici en biedt weinig bewijs voor het idee dat politici permanent campagne voeren en alleen maar bezig zijn met hun publieke imago.

Appendices

Coder training

The content analysis was conducted by four MA political science students who successfully completed a six-week training program with one of the authors. During the first five weeks of the training, the coders coded approximately 15% of the UK data (150-200 speech acts per week) as they were all fluent in English. Krippendorff's alpha was used to measure inter-coder reliability, and noticeable improvements were observed every week (see tables below). In addition to coding, the coders attended joint meetings with the author during the training to discuss coding issues. Each coder received individual written feedback on their coding, highlighting any mistakes made during the previous week. The codebook was updated every week during the training. In the final week, after high-reliability scores were achieved for the UK data, the coders were also tested for coding Belgian and Croatian data. The average Krippendorff's alpha score for coding attacks was .97 (Table 1), for the content of these attacks was .74 (Table 2), and for the (in)civility of these attacks was .82 (Table 3). The Krippendorff's alpha score for coding all variables reached a value of .82 in the final week (Table 4).

Table 1 Krippendorff's alpha scores per coder for identifying attacks in speech acts

	Coder A	**Coder B**	**Coder C**	**Coder D**	**Average**
Week 1	0,956759	0,985354	0,8924272	0,9855864	**0,9550318**
Week 2	0,946835	0,960117	0,9867105	0,9468444	**0,9601268**
Week 3	0,959027	0,979513	0,9795263	0,9692968	**0,9718408**
Week 4	0,986921	0,986921	0,9869206	0,9607619	**0,9803809**
Week 5	1	1	0,9861051	0,9721845	**0,9895724**
Week 6	0,916365	1	1	1	**0,9790912**
Average	**0,960984**	**0,985318**	**0,9719483**	**0,9724457**	**0,972674**

Table 2 Krippendorff's alpha scores per coder for identifying trait and issue attacks

	Coder A	Coder B	Coder C	Coder D	Average
Week 1	0.5964859	0.62116	0.435146	0.596364	**0.562289**
Week 2	0.4508566	0.459559	0.452599	0.546455	**0.477367**
Week 3	0.4220226	0.745086	0.771564	0.718106	**0.664195**
Week 4	0.6160338	0.578392	0.484491	0.60233	**0.570312**
Week 5	0.797964	0.774903	0.828961	0.72031	**0.780534**
Week 6	0.7676552	0.645321	0.777612	0.807207	**0.749449**
Average	**0.608503**	**0.637403**	**0.625062**	**0.665129**	**0.634024**

Table 3 Krippendorff's alpha scores per coder for identifying uncivil attacks

	Coder A	Coder B	Coder C	Coder D	Average
Week 1	0,188718	0,261438	0,388937	0,639362	**0,369614**
Week 2	0,443441	0,783232	0,678759	0,809672	**0,678776**
Week 3	0,485256	0,700893	0,55497	0,604348	**0,586367**
Week 4	0,630542	0,60771	0,674899	0,793348	**0,676625**
Week 5	0,626781	0,490421	0,745211	0,744639	**0,651763**
Week 6	0,929263	0,800964	0,779221	0,790607	**0,825013**
Average	**0,550667**	**0,607443**	**0,636999**	**0,730329**	**0,631359**

Table 4 Krippendorff's alpha scores per coder for all variables

	Coder A	Coder B	Coder C	Coder D	Average
Week 1	0,65007332	0,643619	0,646304	0,56962	**0,627404**
Week 2	0,597234094	0,68818	0,685905	0,692417	**0,665934**
Week 3	0,594976804	0,684221	0,672337	0,752718	**0,676063**
Week 4	0,663424565	0,669457	0,701644	0,724657	**0,689796**
Week 5	0,746810338	0,765724	0,836624	0,803619	**0,788194**
Week 6	0,80209381	0,808271	0,848942	0,843965	**0,825818**
Average	**0,675768822**	**0,709912**	**0,731959**	**0,731166**	**0,712202**

Examples of coding negativity

Table 1 Examples of negativity in speech

	Info	Speech unit
Belgium	Stefaan Van Hecke Groen 30.3.2017	I can only conclude that there was no such coolness in Antwerp. For his moment of glory, the mayor has jeopardized the investigation and safety of the Antwerp residents, that much is clear. (Protest)
	Annemie Turtelboom Open-Vld. 10.11.2011	I would like to emphasize to you that for me transparency means that everything is said at all times. For you, transparency is only communicating what is convenient for you at a particular time. You use twitter for that purpose. For the rest you use the carrier pigeon.
	Raoul Hedebouw PVDA-PTB 19.11.2020.	Mr. Prime Minister, you have not responded to my anger, or that of hundreds of thousands of people, whether they are small independents, young people or workers. You tell me that you are already making a lot of effort, but your answer is insufficient. Take, for example, the gateway right, about which I made a concrete proposal! For some sectors, the gateway right should be an automatic right! We have to act proactively, get in touch with citizens.
	Hervé Rigot PS 24.10.2019	Minister, make no mistake about it; I hear you pointing the finger at everyone's responsibilities, unions, employers. But let's be serious! What I am pointing to is your responsibility, Madam Minister. Indeed, by structurally underfunding health care institutions, you are depriving them of the means to implement this social agreement that has existed for two years.
	Bruno Tobback sp.a 7.4.2011	For example, two weeks ago I heard you say that unannounced inspections at nuclear power plants are not possible. That is something that raises questions for me. (…) Tear down the facades of security instead of leaving them untouched, as in past years. Make a public assessment of all safety issues for all nuclear installations in this country. Make the entire nuclear industrial process transparent.
	Wim Van der Donckt N-VA 12.7.2028	So I am left with the question of why you stubbornly refuse to have the system extinguished more quickly. I said here two weeks ago that we live in a two-tiered Community country. In Belgium everything is community. The different advice in Flanders, on the one hand, and Brussels and Wallonia, on the other, proves this once again.
	Kristof Calvo Groen 14.12.2017	Mr Van Quickenborne, I think it's a shame that Open Vld [Flemish liberal party] and the CD&V [Flemish Chris. Dem. party] are allowing the debate in the hemisphere to be monopolized today by the N-VA [Flemish nationalist party], the Nuclear Flemish Alliance. They are the best ambassadors for those other monopolists, ENGIE and Electrabel.
Croatia	Stjepan Milinković HDZ 13.11.2013.	Mr. Minister, your term so far has been marked by a number of negative phenomena, I will mention only some that I witness every day, and that is the decline of family farms, the decline in milk and meat production (…) With that, damage was done to the Croatian countryside, of course, and to the Croatian state, and in that sense I ask you, will you resign because of all that has been said, Mr. Minister?
	Damir Tomić SDP 16.9.2015	My question is the following, what can we expect from this project, what are the next steps and do you see the need to explain to other citizens, especially those who live in the past, and here I mean primarily the HDZ who is still apparently living in 2009, who cannot recognize positive indicators because while they ruled there were no such indicators and they could not see them (…)
	Mirando Mrsić SDP 17.1.2017	To put it bluntly, you, Minister Ćorić and Minister Dalić, who, in her interview alone boasted that she would like to be Croatian Margaret Thatcher, obviously do not care about workers' health.
	Ivan Šuker HDZ 27.1.2010	Mr. MP, it is not good to say what you said in your last sentence. You are accusing something with nothing. You should have had, before you asked this question, it might have been far better and of better quality if you had read the General Tax Act and seen who and under what conditions can get an installment payment.
	Gordan Maras SDP 17.3.2010	Unfortunately, where we left off, you did not continue. The same number of unemployed in 2004 and today. The economy stalled in 2006. Domestic debt is like in '99. You have additionally indebted 50,000 HRK to each Croatian citizen, and the results are not visible. Not a single job is open. Where did that money go, Ms. Kosor? The results are catastrophic. You can fight, I appreciate it, but you have no results.
	Frano Matušić HDZ	However, obviously HNS is not ready to apply European standards, it is not ready to apply the standards that we apply in the Croatian Democration Union, their coalition partners are also

	28.9.2011	not ready to apply them, they behave so, not to offend, I will express myself pictorially, like those three monkeys from Chinese relief , one closes his eyes, the other closes his ears, and the other closes his mouth.
	Željko Jovanović SDP 15.1.2020	You don't have to advise me what the National Council should do, we do it intensively, we try to change as much as we can the perception of citizens about the loss of trust in all institutions, but unfortunately, we fail because of the behaviour of your government, your key allies in this parliament.
United Kingdom	Lisa Nandy Labour 16.11.2016	The Prime Minister does not seem to have very much control over world events, but she should at least be able to get a grip on the child abuse inquiry that she set up. In two years, it has lost not only three chairs, but now eight senior lawyers, the latest citing further concerns about competency and leadership.
	Peter Tapsell Conservative 30.4.2014.	(…) may I tell the Prime Minister that the Opposition's questions about, and their criticisms of, the way in which the Royal Mail launch was handled show their total ignorance of City markets?
	Charlie Elphicke Conservative 16.1.2019	Does the Prime Minister agree that, since 2010, Conservative Governments have delivered time and again for the British people and that the biggest threat to that is sitting on the Opposition Front Bench, with a leader whose policies would mean fewer jobs, higher taxes, a weaker economy and less investment in our public services?
	David Lammy Labour 16.1.2013	In 2010 the Prime Minister and his party said it was lying and scaremongering to suggest they would reduce family tax credits for families earning less than £31,000, but we found out last week that the threshold will, in fact, be £26,000.
	Angela Rayner Labour 16.9.2020	The Government have had six months to get this right and yet the Prime Minister still cannot deliver on his promises. The Health Secretary said yesterday that it would take weeks to sort the situation out. Well, we do not have weeks. The Government's latest figures show that there was an average of 62,000 people tested per day, not 500,000.
	Harriet Harman Labour 14.7.2010	Thank you, Mr Speaker, and the Prime Minister has still not answered. He is obviously ditching the guarantee for cancer patients, but he has not the guts to admit it to the House. Perhaps he can be more straightforward with this question. The White Paper says that his reorganisation of the NHS will mean extra up-front administration costs, but it does not give the figure. Surely he must know the figure. How much extra will it cost next year?
	Wendy Morton Conservative 11.10.2017	I was shocked the other week to hear the shadow Chancellor predicting a run on the pound if Labour took office. For my constituents that would mean an increase in their household bills and in the cost of their weekly shopping. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the biggest risk to this country would be letting the shadow Chancellor into No. 11 Downing Street?

Table 2 Examples of no negativity in speech

	Info	**Speech unit**
Belgium	Sarah Smeyers N-VA 2.4.2010	Madam Minister, I really hope from the bottom of my heart that there will be no relaxation in the area of the guidance of the unemployed by the RVA. You are talking about adjustments, I really hope there are no relaxations in that area. Especially now, in times of crisis, people need guidance in their search for a suitable new job.
	Karin Temmerman sp.a 7.2.2013	Mr President, Vice-Prime Minister, ladies and gentlemen, we must all agree and deeply regret that the social dialogue has been suspended. In times of crisis there are no easy decisions, in times of crisis there are no easy messages. It is therefore very important to have as broad support as possible for difficult decisions.
	Kathleen Verhelst Open-Vld 19.11.2020	Madam Chairwoman, Minister, on Women's Entrepreneur's Day, I enjoy being here as an entrepreneur, but also as a politician. I like to express my concern, because tomorrow is the day for all entrepreneurs.
	Rachid Madrane PS 7.6.2012	Mr. Prime Minister, we welcome the rapid and firm position of your government with regard to strengthening the fight against radicalism, in particular the banning of these extremist and radical groups, whatever they may be.
	Joy Donné N-VA 18.6.2020	We therefore want a very clear signal from the government, and in the first place from you as Minister of the Interior, that the government stands behind its police and its police officers. The police expect that and deserve it. Hence a very simple question, sir. What will you do about this in the coming days and weeks?

	Barbara Pas VB 19.11.2015	Until five minutes before the meeting, the cabinet could not tell me who would answer. I assumed that the answer would be passed on to a fellow minister. His presence came as a very big surprise to me. I am very grateful that he came here himself. Sir, that is to your credit.
	Myriam Vanlerberghe sp.a 10.11.2011	Madam Minister, I think we both share the same concern, which is that a patient should never become a victim of such conditions.It is indeed a complicated matter. What is not urgent or urgent sometimes has to be decided in a few seconds. However, you have provided clarity on liability here.I hope that in the future there will be even more discussion of avoiding confusion and the possible dangers associated with it.
	Caroline Cassart-Mailleux MR 3.3.2016	Madam Minister, thank you for this comprehensive response. You had a consultation with the sector. This is obviously essential. I would like to draw your attention to the "Colla law" of April 29, 1999 on unconventional practices, which you have already assessed. In its article 9, it already provides that any practitioner must ask his patient to produce a medical report before any intervention.
Croatia	Zoran Milanović SDP 18.4.2012	Dear colleague, I cannot comment on what you said because I do not know it. Of course, you have the right to replace the county assembly rostrum with this rostrum as a member of parliament and to score politically on something you interpret in your own way. I can't get into the merits of the thing you were talking about.
	Damir Krstičević HDZ 15.9.2017	Honorable Speaker of Parliament, ladies and gentlemen, so I would like to thank all of you, this Parliament, after 15 years, all of you together, we have adopted the National Security Strategy of the Republic of Croatia and this National Security Strategy recognizes new threats, new risks and, most importantly, recognizes the need to link all components of the system and the army and police and security intelligence system and the Mountain Rescue Service (…).
	Romana Nikolić SDP 19.1.2021	But most importantly, to establish the responsibility of those who led to this situation and left many families homeless. My question is, do you support our proposal that the state audit thoroughly explores the inventory and perform control there. Thank you.
	Peđa Grbin SDP 16.9.2020	Unfortunately, all we can see in the last few months shows that overcoming the economic crisis caused by the Covid pandemic will not be in the shape of the letter V as we hoped, as we had hoped, but overcoming the economic crisis will be a little longer and harder. It will be harder for the state, it will be harder for the Croatian economy, it will ultimately be harder for Croatian citizens.
	Tomislav Lipošćak HDZ 15.9.2017	Thank you for the answer, I am satisfied with the answer and especially the information means about simplified procedures, fairer conditions for tenders and of course the increase in the number of young farmers who use these funds. Thank you.
	Martina Dalić HDZ 22.1.2014	Namely, the proposals of the Commission, which usually and always become the conclusions of the Council, have been known for at least this part of the decision-making process for more than a month. However, the Croatian public does not know and has not yet had the opportunity to find out how, in what way and with what dynamics the Croatian Government will approach this overriding problem (…)
	Slavko Linić SDP 10.4.2013	I thank the Member of Parliament for his question. The answer is short, in May the preparation of work on the amendments to this rulebook will begin. Considering the activity of the MP as the chairman of the committee, more or less everything has been agreed, the rulebook has been prepared in the proposal and it will be in force from May 1 this year.
United Kingdom	Jack Dromey Labour 24.6.2015	Three times, she was refused a referral; she was told that she was too young. Now, she is battling cervical cancer and will never have another child. Will the Prime Minister ask the Secretary of State for Health to investigate what happened and to meet me? Will he act to ensure that in future we have early referral so that never again are people denied treatment that could be the difference between life and death?
	Greg Hans Conservative 7.4.2010	What did the Chancellor mean when he said that the job losses resulting from the national insurance hike would be manageable? How many is manageable?
	Tulip Siddiq Labour 5.9.2018	I find it deeply troubling that a British citizen was threatened against contacting her own embassy. Does the Prime Minister share my concern, and will she raise this specific issue with President Rouhani when she next speaks to him, perhaps in New York later this month?
	Dan Jarvis Labour 19.12.2018	It is a shameful indictment of our ability as a country to protect our most elderly and vulnerable residents, so may I ask the Prime Minister to say specifically what she will do this winter to prevent thousands of people from dying needlessly?

	Mark Fletcher Conservative 9.12.2020	Conservative colleagues across Derbyshire have been working very hard on our bid for community testing to help us tackle covid. Will my right hon. Friend ensure that the bid from Derbyshire County Council receives the resources and attention we need to help us in our fight to get out of tier 3?
	Julian Brazier Conservative 19.12.2012	May I reassure my right hon. Friend that those of my constituents who are most strongly in favour of reforming benefits—focusing them more on those who need them and taking them away from those who do not—are people who live on council estates and are fed up with working long hours to subsidise the lifestyles of those who do not want to work?
	Matt Western Labour 9.12.2020	Looking at a simple analysis of car sales as an indicator of economic performance, relative to Germany, we have lost 184,000 car sales in the UK, or versus France, 100,000. Behind those numbers, which are a big hit to UK plc, are jobs and businesses. How does the Prime Minister explain this relative economic performance?

Chapter 1

Appendix A Attack data

Table A.1 Example of data on attacks that was generated from the content analysis of raw data (N = 9.099)

N	Country	Attack	Attacker Name	Attacker Party	Target name	Target Party
(…)	(…)	(…)	(…)	(…)	(…)	(…)
121	Belgium	We are now 228 days without government. I think it is high time that the winners of the elections, namely the N-VA and the PS, take responsibility, abandon their own great right and come to an agreement to solve important social problems such as pensions, among other things. Because pensions are a big problem	Wouter De Vriendt	Groen	N-VA	N-VA
122	Belgium	We are now 228 days without government. I think it is high time that the winners of the elections, namely the N-VA and the PS, take responsibility, abandon their own great right and come to an agreement to solve important social problems such as pensions, among other things. Because pensions are a big problem	Wouter De Vriendt	Groen	PS	PS
123	Belgium	I thought we heard from you in the summer of 2009 that you would be building a lot, but that you would also be doing the usual business, including making sure that the helicopters can no longer land in the courtyard of the prison. (…) Hence my question what happened. Why has your decision not yet been implemented?	Renaat Landuyt	sp.a	Stefaan De Clerck	CD&V
(…)	(…)	(…)	(…)	(…)	(…)	(…)
3.214	Croatia	And on the other hand, your program boils down to what we've already heard. So, long live the soup [hrv. Živjela juha] from which we can read just to increase the production of noodles and snacks in Croatia and that's all we ladies and gentlemen can read from this program.	Jadranka Kosor	HDZ	SDP	SDP
3.215	Croatia	Dear Mr. Speaker, Article 210 has been violated, which is that the speaker should stick to the topic, and that means answering the question. Therefore, Mr. Speaker, I would also like to point out the violation of the Rules of Procedure, which is that you, as President, are obliged to maintain order here in this House and not allow any speaker to be disturbed. That's your job.	Ranko Ostojić	SDP	Luka Bebić	HDZ
3.216	Croatia	All in all, you did not give me an answer, so I will tell you that since the last "question hour" 80,000 workers have lost their jobs, which means that we are talking about the total number of 317,600 unemployed. (…) So, since you became prime minister, almost 80,000 workers have been left without bread	Romana Jerković	SDP	Jadranka Kosor	HDZ
(…)	(…)	(…)	(…)	(…)	(…)	(…)
8.628	UK	The Prime Minister's deal lies in tatters (…) When will she develop a backbone and stand up to those who would take this nation to disaster? As one of her Ministers said this morning, referencing another feeble Prime Minister: "Weak, weak, weak."	Pete Wishart	SNP	Theresa May	Con

8.629	UK	Will the Prime Minister welcome Oil & Gas UK's report today predicting £200 billion of new investment in the sector, supported by this Government's fiscal policy in direct contrast to the SNP's failure to stimulate the Scottish economy?	Colin Clark	Con	SNP	SNP
8.630	UK	I say to my hon. Friend that the Chancellor's spring statement last week showed that this is indeed a Government who are delivering for Scotland. (…) While the SNP is obsessed with independence, it is this Conservative Government who are focused on growing Scotland's economy.	Theresa May	Con	SNP	SNP
(…)	(…)	(…)	(…)	(…)	(…)	(…)

Table A.2 Attacks generated through the content analysis of raw (transcripts) data

Speech contributions with at least one attack		
Belgium	2.168	32.7% out of all speech contributions
Croatia	1.875	36.9% out of all speech contributions
UK	2.384	30.8% out of all speech contributions
TOTAL	**6.427**	33.0% out of all speech contributions

Total attacks identified	
Belgium	3.117
Croatia	2.953
UK	3.029
TOTAL	**9.099**

Table A.3 Content of attacks generated through the content analysis of raw (transcripts) data

	Attacks	**Policy**	**Trait**
Belgium	2.168	1,810 (83.49%)	934 (43.08%)
Croatia	1.875	1,345 (71.73%)	1,159 (61,81%)
UK	2.384	1,715 (71.94%)	1,154 (48.41%)
TOTAL	**6.427**	**4,870 (75.77 %)**	**3,247 (50.52%)**

Note: Attacks can be coded as having both policy and tra

Appendix B Dyadic data

Table B.1 Descriptive statistics for dyads per country

	N	Min	Max	Mean
Belgium	14.293	100	169	138.8
Croatia	4.603	49	196	118
UK	2.358	9	49	20.5
TOTAL	21.254	9	196	82.7

Note: Min/max indicates minimum/maximum number of dyads per QTs

Table B.2 Descriptive statistics for dyads per country (only CHES parties)

	N	Min	Max	Mean
Belgium	14.078	100	169	136.7
Croatia	2.982	49	144	76.4
UK	1.684	9	25	14.6
TOTAL	18.743	9	169	72.9

Note: Min/max indicates minimum/maximum number of dyads per QTs

Table B.3 Parties that appear in dyadic data

Belgium	**CD&V**	**cdH**	**DéFI (FDF)**	**Ecolo**	**Groen**	**LDD**	**MLD**	**MR**
	N-VA	Open Vld	PP	PS	PVDA/PTB	VB	Vooruit (sp.a)	
Croatia	BDSH	BM 365	Blok za Hrvatsku	DC	DP	Fokus	GLAS	HDS
	HDSSB	HDZ	HGS	HNS	HRAST	HRID	HSD	HSLS
	HSP	HSP AS	HSS	HSU	Hr. laburisti	Hr. suverenisti	ID	IDS
	MOST	Možemo!	NHR	NLM	NLSP	Novi val	ORaH	Pametno
	Promijenimo Hrv.	RF	Reformisti	SDAH	SDP	SDSS	SIP	SMSH
	SNAGA	Živi zid						
UK	Alliance	Change UK	Conservative	DUP	Green	LD	Labour	PC
	Respect	SDLP	SNP	UKIP	UUP			

Note: While the list of parties in Croatia could give the impression that the country has an extremely fragmented party system, this is far from true as the majority of these parties were short-lived in the Croatian parliament and/or they tended to group around the two main ones (HDZ and SDP).

Table B.4 Example of dyadic data on attacks between parties during each QT (N = 21.254) that was generated from attack data from appendix A

Country	Date	Election Date	Dyad Id	Subject	Object	Attack (All)	Attack (MPs)	Status	Ideology
(…)	(…)	(…)	(…)	(…)	(…)	(…)	(…)	(…)	(...)
UK	13.2.2013	33	1	Conservative	Labour	1	1	G→O	.313333
			2	Conservative	LD	1	0	G→G	.213333
			3	Conservative	Conservative	1	1	G→G	.0
			4	Labour	Conservative	1	1	O→G	.313333
			5	Labour	Labour	0	0	O→O	.0
			6	Labour	LD	0	0	O→G	.1
			7	LD	Labour	1	1	G→O	.1
			8	LD	LD	0	0	G→G	.0
			9	LD	Conservative	1	1	G→G	.213333
UK	6.3.2013	34	1	Conservative	Labour	1	1	G→O	.313333
			2	Conservative	LD	0	0	G→G	.213333
			…	…	…	…	…	…	…
(…)	(…)	(…)	(…)	(…)	(…)	(…)	(…)	(…)	(...)

Note: This is a hypothetical scenario where only three parties spoke during QT in the UK

Table B.5 Descriptive statistics for the binary DV (attack)

	Attack presence in a dyad	N	%
Belgium (N = 14.293)	Yes	1.496	10.47
	No	12.797	89.53
Croatia (N = 4.603)	Yes	400	8.69
	No	4.203	91.31
UK (N = 2.358)	Yes	452	19.17
	No	1.906	80.83
Total (N = 21.254)	Yes	2.348	11.05
	No	18.906	88.95

Table B.6 Descriptive statistics for the status

	Possible attack direction based on status	N	%
Belgium (N = 14.293)	O→G	3.243	22.69
	G→O	3.243	22.69
	G→G	2.625	18.37
	O→O	5.182	36.26
Croatia (N = 4.603)	O→G	1.077	23.40
	G→O	1.077	23.40
	G→G	901	19.57
	O→O	1.548	33.63
UK (N = 2.358)	O→G	489	20.74
	G→O	489	20.74
	G→G	301	12.77
	O→O	1.079	45.76
Total (N = 21.254)	O→G	4.809	22.63
	G→O	4.809	22.63
	G→G	3.827	18.01
	O→O	7.809	36.74

Table B.7 Descriptive statistics for variables ideology and election date

	Min	Max	Mean	SD
IDEOLOGY				
Belgium (N = 14.078)	0	.925	.29	.22
Croatia (N = 2.981)	0	.7	.21	.18
UK (N = 1.684)	0	.63	.17	.15
Total (N = 18.743)	0	.925	.27	.21
ELECTION DATE				
Belgium (N = 14.293)	4	58	26.6	14.9
Croatia (N = 4.603)	1	46	22.7	13.8
UK (N = 2.358)	0	59	22.3	17.2
Total (N = 21.254)	0	59	25.3	15.0

Note: N is smaller for ideology as not all parties are included in CHES data

Appendix C Attacks by party ideology

Table C.1 Distribution of attacks by party family (attacker) towards other party families (victim) per each country (%)

		ATTACKER														
		Radical right			Conservative			Liberal			Chris. -Dem.		Social. -Dem.			
		Belgium	Croatia	UK	Belgium	Croatia	UK	Belgium	Croatia	UK	Belgium	Croatia	Belgium	Croatia	UK	
VICTIM	Radical right	0	0	0	3,41	0	1,49	3,36	2,56	0	3,59	8,82	1,68	18,67		
	Conservative	17,07	0	100	1,14	0	9,90	13,09	0	47,22	23,08	10,78	20,54	4	83,90	
	Liberal	31,71	7,14	0	30,11	13,64	6,93	19,13	5,13	0	41,03	35,29	46,80	4	10,24	
	Chris. -Dem.	26,83	52,38	-	22,16	68,18	-	24,16	76,92	-	14,36	5,88	24,58	53,33	-	
	Social-Dem.	20,73	40,48	0	31,25	18,18	78,71	27,85	15,38	52,78	8,21	38,24	4,38	6,67	5,85	
	Green	3,66	0	0	7,39	0	2,48	7,05	0	0	8,21	0,98	2,02	2,67		
	Radical left	0	0	0	4,55	0	0,50	5,37	0	0	1,54	0	0	10,67		
	Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	

		Green			Radical left	
		Belgium	Croatia	UK	Belgium	Croatia
VICTIM	Radical right	1,19	0	0	0,99	0
	Conservative	20,95	0	100	22,77	0
	Liberal	42,29	16,67	0	55,45	15,79
	Chris. -Dem.	21,74	33,33	-	14,85	15,79
	Social-Dem.	13,83	50,00	0	5,94	68,42
	Green	0	0	0	0	0
	Radical left	0	0	0	0	0
	Total	100	100	100	100	100

Note: No observations for Christian-Democrats in the UK. Radical Left (Respect) party in the UK made no attacks in the sample.

Appendix D Robustness checks

Appendix D.1 G→G as a ref. point

Table D.1 Multilevel regressions from Table 2 using G→G as a ref. point

	Model 1 (full)	**Model 2 (Belgium)**	**Model 3 (Croatia)**	**Model 4 (UK)**
	Coef. (SE)	**Coef. (SE)**	**Coef. (SE)**	**Coef. (SE)**
Gov. →Gov. (ref.)				
O→G	1.484 (.113) ***	1.484 (.120) ***	2.475 (.392) ***	.750 (.485)
G→O	.187 (.124)	-.120 (.138)	1.487 (.375) ***	-.064 (.494)
O→O	-1.521 (.163) ***	-1.607 (.182) ***	-2.449 (.523) ***	-2.363 (.579) ***
Intercept	-4.116 (.292) ***	-3.637 (.300) ***	-9.552 (1.134) ***	-2.434 (.770) **
N (QTs)	257	103	39	115
N (min. dyads)	9	100	49	9
N (max. dyads)	169	169	144	25
AIC	9.540 (0 model = 10.272)	7.319 (0 = 7.899)	1.164 (0 = 1.328)	944 (0 = 1.034)

†p<0.1; *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001 / Control for years included in every model / Election and ideology variable included in every model, but not reported as the output remains the same as in Table 2

Appendix D.2 MPs' attacks

Table D.2 summarises the results of the first robustness test in which regressions were run using only attacks made by MPs as a DV, hereby excluding attacks made by the PM or Ministers (for the UK this means MPs who do not have a seat in the cabinet). These results confirm all hypotheses with one notable exception for H1 in the UK. We can see that by excluding the cabinet (or the PMs[37]) the effect that more parties will attack as the next election approaches, is not present. Therefore, it is the cabinet that initiates more attacks in multiple directions closer to elections in the UK, while regular MPs attack more consistently regardless of when the next elections occur.

Another aspect that is worth mentioning is that these results show a higher probability of majority MPs attacking the government rather than attacking the opposition. This finding is not surprising considering our confirmation of H3, and existing literature that has established that MPs do control their coalition partners and governments through parliamentary instruments (e.g. Höhmann and Sieberer, 2020). As such, it can be expected that majority MPs are more likely to attack their partners (and themselves) in parliaments, rather than they would attack opposing parties.

[37] Out of 115 PMQ in my sample, on 11 of these the PM was absent and instead other cabinet members stepped in to answer questions (notably deputy-PM Nick Clegg during Cameron's first cabinet).

This effect, however, does not appear in the results for Croatia. In Croatia, the majority of MPs are focused on attacking the opposition rather than their governments. One potential explanation for this could be grounded in the fact that Croatian parties dominantly place their party leadership in the cabinet. This party leadership also decides who gets which position on an upcoming election ballot and has the power to promote regular politicians to higher ranks (see also Kam, 2009 for a more detailed elaboration on how politicians who aspire higher office do not go against party lines). As such, this prevents majority MPs in Croatia from attacking the cabinet (and by extension, their party leadership) as they would damage their chances of getting a favourable position on a ballot, getting re-elected, and being granted higher office. Another explanation could be the frequency of QTs in Croatia. The fact that QTs only take place a few times a year limits the possibility for majority MPs to go after the cabinet as the pressure to discredit rivalling opposition may be too high.

Table D.2 Multilevel regressions testing probabilities of attacks occurring during QTs using DV that only includes MPs' attacks (i.e. excluding attacks that come from PMs and Ministers).

	Model 1 (full)	**Model 2 (Belgium)**	**Model 3 (Croatia)**	**Model 4 (UK)**
	Coef. (SE)	**Coef. (SE)**	**Coef. (SE)**	**Coef. (SE)**
Election date (months since)	.009 (.003) **	.015 (.004) **	.065 (.019) ***	.010 (.007)
Opp. →Gov. (ref.)				
G→O	-1.983 (.126) ***	-2.109 (.140) ***	-2.423 (.333) ***	-2.766 (.534) ***
G→G	-1.660 (.118) ***	-1.548 (.124) ***	-3.061 (.426) ***	-1.936 (.532) ***
O→O	-2.991 (.140) ***	-3.068 (.156) ***	-4.994 (.556) ***	-3.240 (.490) ***
Ideological distance	2.104 (.466) ***	1.882 (.372) ***	1.228 (1.670)	1.438 (1.916)
Country (ref. Belgium)				
Croatia	-.423 (.230) †	-	-	-
United Kingdom	.680 (.348) †	-	-	-
Intercept	-2.479 (.283)	-2.244 (.296) ***	-6.287 (1.032) ***	-.959 (.752)
Variance (QTs)	.300 (.045)	.267 (.047)	.222 (.232)	.000 (.621)
Variance (dyads)	1.547 (.110)	.823 (.085)	3.567 (.590)	1.936 (.419)
N (QTs)	257	103	39	115
N (min. dyads)	9	100	49	9
N (max. dyads)	169	169	144	25
AIC	8.741 (0 model = 9.515)	6.781 (0 = 7.369)	999 (0 =1.173)	875 (0 =958)

†p<0.1; *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001 / Control for years included in every mode

Appendix D.3 Interactions between IVs

The following tables show the results of the second robustness test in which the regressions investigate the interaction between the independent variables. These results indicate that the election date does not impact the probability of status-based attacks (see Table D.3.1) nor ideology-based attacks (see Table D.3.2). This means that parties attack their opponents with the same probability regardless of the election date (opposition attacking government, attacking ideologically different parties, etc.). The exception to this is the UK where we observe an increase in attacks between opposing parties as the election date approaches (LD attacking Conservatives leading up to 2010 elections; Labour attacking SNP leading up to 2015 elections; SNP attacking Labour leading up to 2019 elections). Interactions between ideology and status show no significance (Table D.3.3).

Table D.3.1 Multilevel regressions testing probabilities of attacks occurring during QTs based on time and status interaction

	Model 1 (full)	**Model 2 (Belgium)**	**Model 3 (Croatia)**	**Model 4 (UK)**
	Coef. (SE)	**Coef. (SE)**	**Coef. (SE)**	**Coef. (SE)**
Election date (months since)	.006 (.004) †	.013 (.005) **	.061 (.021) **	-.006 (.011)
Opp. →Gov. (ref.)				
G→O	-1.377 (.167) ***	-1.703 (.194) ***	-1.496 (.464) **	-1.314 (.601) *
G→G	-1.484 (.182) ***	-1.350 (.205) ***	-3.028 (.626) ***	-.983 (.663)
O→O	-3.351 (.245) ***	-3.129 (.264) ***	-5.356 (1.080) ***	-5.186 (.842) ***
Ideological distance	2.525 (.483) ***	1.906 (.357) ***	1.789 (1.713)	3.531 (2.027) †
Election X Opp. →Gov. (ref.)				
G→O	.003 (.005)	.001 (.005)	.022 (.016)	.017 (.014)
G→G	.000 (.006)	-.005 (.006)	.024 (.020)	.021 (.016)
O→O	.012 (.007) †	.001 (.007)	.018 (.033)	.067 (.020) **
Country (ref. Belgium)				
Croatia	-.333 (.238)	-	-	-
United Kingdom	1.141 (.357) **	-	-	-
Intercept	-2.594 (.294) ***	-2.157 (.298) ***	-6.808 (1.124) ***	-1.342 (.825)
Variance (QTs)	.318 (.043)	.285 (.044)	.327 (.149)	.159 (.392)
Variance (dyads)	1.672 .115	.797 (.080)	3.989 (.702)	2.044 (.396)
N (QTs)	257	103	39	115
N (min. dyads)	9	100	49	9
N (max. dyads)	169	169	144	25
AIC	9.543 (0 model = 10.272)	7.324 (0 = 7.899)	1.168 (0 = 1.328)	939 (0 = 1.016)

†p<0.1; *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001 / Control for years included in every model

Table D.3.2 Multilevel regressions testing probabilities of attacks occurring during QTs based on time and ideology interaction

	Model 1 (full)	Model 2 (Belgium)	Model 3 (Croatia)	Model 4 (UK)
	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)
Election date (months since)	.005 (.004)	.007 (.006)	.069 (.022) **	.016 (.010)
Opp. →Gov. (ref.)				
G→O	-1.298 (.113) ***	-1.684 (.125) ***	-.990 (.269) ***	-.814 (.450) †
G→G	-1.485 (.113) ***	-1.485 (.120) ***	-2.491 (.395) ***	-.750 (.485)
O→O	-3.010 (.140) ***	-3.094 (.154) ***	-4.939 (.554) ***	-3.116 (.469) ***
Ideological distance	2.258 (.551) ***	1.447 (.463) **	1.349 (2.127)	3.656 (2.171) †
Ideology X Election	.010 (.010)	.017 (.011)	.015 (.044)	.001 (.039)
Country (ref. Belgium)				
Croatia	-.335 (.238)	-	-	-
United Kingdom	1.120 (.356) **	-	-	-
Intercept	-2.552 (.301)	-1.996 (.311) ***	-6.963 (1.152) ***	-1.679 (.776)
Variance (QTs)	.320 (.043)	.285 (.044)	.322 (.149)	.148 (.411)
Variance (dyads)	1.671 (.114)	.796 (.080)	3.980 (.694)	1.999 (.391)
N (QTs)	257	103	39	115
N (min. dyads)	9	100	49	9
N (max. dyads)	169	169	144	25
AIC	9.541 (0 model = 10.272)	7.319 (0 = 7.899)	1.280 (0 = 1.328)	946 (0 = 1.016)

†p<0.1; *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001 / Control for years included in every model

Table D.3.3 Multilevel regressions testing probabilities of attacks occurring during QTs based on status and ideology interaction

	Model 1 (full)	Model 2 (Belgium)	Model 3 (Croatia)	Model 4 (UK)
	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)
Election date (months since)	.008 (.003) **	.013 (.004) **	.074 (.019) ***	.020 (.008) *
Opp. →Gov. (ref.)				
G→O	-1.259 (.265) ***	-1.789 (.288) ***	-2.133 (.853) *	-.559 (.838)
G→G	-1.356 (.223) ***	-1.407 (.233) ***	-3.109 (.836) ***	.157 (1.384)
O→O	-3.314 (.257) ***	-3.469 (.294) ***	-4.967 (.938) ***	-1.859 (.923) *
Ideological distance	2.378 (.579) ***	1.645 (.471) ***	.429 (2.330)	7.410 (3.464) *
Ideology X Opp. →Gov. (ref.)				
G→O	-127 (.684)	.293 (.700)	3.434 (2.388)	-1.404 (3.913)
G→G	-.653 (.785)	-.484 (.813)	2.551 (3.192)	-4.483 (6.973)
O→O	.958 (.604)	1.021 (.628)	-1.568 (3.358)	-7.110 (4.560)
Country (ref. Belgium)				
Croatia	-.342 (.239)	-	-	-
United Kingdom	1.161 (.359) **	-	-	-
Intercept	-2.617 (.311)	-2.099 (.315) ***	-6.714 (1.203) ***	-2.530 (1.006) *
Variance (QTs)	.319 (.043)	.284 (.044)	.356 (.148)	.161 (.381)
Variance (dyads)	1.680 (.115)	.811 (.082)	4.115 (.728)	2.001 (.396)
N (QTs)	257	103	39	115
N (min. dyads)	9	100	49	9
N (max. dyads)	169	169	144	25
AIC	9.541 (0 model = 10.272)	7.321 (0 = 7.899)	1.166 (0 = 1.328)	947 (0 = 1.016)

†p<0.1; *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001 / Control for years included in every model

Appendix D.4 Election closeness vs. election expectation

The third robustness check investigates a different operationalisation of the election date variable. While in the main text this variable is operationalised as election closeness (i.e., how many months have passed since the last elections) in these regressions I defined the election date variable as an electoral expectation (i.e. how many months are left until the actual elections). For example, if a QT took place in January 2014, while elections are going to take place in May 2014, then the value of this variable is 4. This variable only considers the months until the next real election (accounting for both snap and regular elections). However, for the final years in the sample (for which we do not know when exactly the next election will be held), I assigned the number of months until the expected end of the parliamentary term. Due to this operationalisation, all negative coefficients indicate a positive relationship because the bigger the value the further away the elections are. Even with this different operationalisation, I can confirm all findings from the main text (Table D.4.1). Hence, these tests indicate that parties attack more even when snap elections are near, confirming H1.

Table D.4.1 Multilevel regressions testing probabilities of attacks occurring during QTs using electoral expectation

	Model 1 (full)	**Model 2 (Belgium)**	**Model 3 (Croatia)**	**Model 4 (UK)**
	Coef. (SE)	**Coef. (SE)**	**Coef. (SE)**	**Coef. (SE)**
Election date (months until)	-.008 (.003) **	-.011 (.004) **	-.038 (.015) *	-.022 (.009) *
Opp. →Gov. (ref.)				
G→O	-1.298 (.114) ***	-1.683 (.125) ***	-.983 (.268) ***	-.821 (.452) †
G→G	-1.484 (.113) ***	-1.485 (.119) ***	-2.477 (.391) ***	-.662 (.487)
O→O	-3.013 (.140) ***	3.091 (.154) ***	-4.935 (.544) ***	-3.167 (.464) ***
Ideological distance	2.515 (.482) ***	1.903 (.357) ***	1.761 (1.714)	3.782 (1.945) †
Country (ref. Belgium)				
Croatia	-.408 (.238) †	-	-	-
United Kingdom	1.067 (.356) **	-	-	-
Intercept	-2.246 (.276) ***	-1.720 (.258) ***	-4.340 (.983) ***	-.509 (.760)
Variance (QTs)	.323 (.043)	.288 (.044)	.442 (.133)	.117 (.509)
Variance (dyads)	1.667 (.114)	.797 (.080)	4.032 (.716)	1.977 (.387)
N (QTs)	257	103	39	115
N (min. dyads)	9	100	49	9
N (max. dyads)	169	169	144	25
AIC	9.540 (0 model = 10.272)	7.319 (0 = 7.899)	1.172 (0 = 1.328)	943 (0 = 1.016)

†p<0.1; *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001 / Control for years included in every model

To further inspect the confirmation of H1, I have added a quadratic term for the electoral cycle variable to all models from the main text to inspect if the relationship is linear. The quadratic term variable was generated by taking the square of the election closeness variable (see above) which is centred around the mean (to avoid correlation between the two). The results (Table D.4.2) show an insignificant effect of the quadratic term in Croatia and the UK. In other words, there is no indication that any type of curve relationship exists between attacks and elections in these two countries. This leads us to conclude that the positive linear findings from the main texts are robust (the election closeness variable remains positive and significant when the quadratic term variable is included). In Belgium, we identify a curved relationship from the significant quadratic term. Nevertheless, with both coefficients for the linear and the quadratic term remaining positive, we can confirm that the relationship between attacks and elections is indicating a curved upward rise in the number of attacks as we get closer to the next election.

Table D.4.2 Multilevel regressions testing for curved relationships between attacks and elections

	Model 1 (full)	**Model 2 (Belgium)**	**Model 3 (Croatia)**	**Model 4 (UK)**
	Coef. (SE)	**Coef. (SE)**	**Coef. (SE)**	**Coef. (SE)**
Election date (centred)	.008 (.003) *	.007 (.004)	.074 (.019) ***	.029 (.012) *
Election date (centred) ²	.000 (.000)	.001 (.004) ***	.000 (.001)	-.001 (.001)
Opp. →Gov. (ref.)				
G→O	-1.297 (.114) ***	-1.685 (.125) ***	-.987 (.269) ***	-.810 (.449) †
G→G	-1.482 (.112) ***	-1.467 (.119) ***	-2.475 (.391) ***	-.754 (.486)
O→O	-3.006 (.140) ***	-3.110 (.154) ***	-4.919 (.543) ***	-3.110 (.463) ***
Ideological distance	2.515 (.482) ***	1.901 (.355) ***	1.774 (1.710)	3.609 (1.946) †
Country (ref. Belgium)				
Croatia	-.331 (.238)	-	-	-
United Kingdom	1.109 (.357) **	-	-	-
Intercept	-2.436 (.275) ***	-.997 (.427) *	-6.864 (1.228) ***	-1.783 (.753) *
Variance (QTs)	.317 (.043)	.250 (.045)	.323 (.149)	.086 (.686)
Variance (dyads)	1.670 (.114)	.789 (.079)	3.989 (.698)	1.990 (.390)
N (QTs)	257	103	39	115
N (min. dyads)	9	100	49	9
N (max. dyads)	169	169	144	25
AIC	9.542 (0 model = 10.272)	7.309 (0 = 7.899)	1.166 (0 = 1.328)	944 (0 = 1.016)

†p<0.1; *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001 / Control for years included in every model

Appendix D.5 Second-order elections

The fourth robustness check explores whether second-order elections have an impact on attack strategies. For this, I ran the models from the main text while omitting the parliamentary election date variable and including variables on the election dates of local elections, EU elections (not in Belgium because these elections both in 2014 and 2019 were held on the same date as parliamentary elections), and presidential elections (only in Croatia). All these elections are operationalised as election expectation (see Appendix D.4) because these elections are fixed in every country[38] (unlike parliamentary elections that can happen unexpectedly). We can see that coefficients are insignificant for the second-order elections (Table D.5) which is not the case for parliamentary elections (Table 2 in the main text). Even when controlling for all elections, we can identify the significant effect of parliamentary elections in Belgium (Model 2) and Croatia (Model 6). In the UK, as was the case in other robustness checks (Appendix D.2), there is no indication that elections impact attack behaviour.

[38] Note that in the UK, I do not observe an impact of EU elections in the period after the 2019 EU elections because of Brexit. Furthermore, local elections in the UK, which take place every year in May, are omitted from March 2020 onwards because they had to be postponed due to the COVID pandemic. Also, Croatia had a (special) EU election in 2013 prior to entry to the EU, but I do not account for this election as it was not clear whether this election would actually be held. So, from January 2010 onwards, I observe attacks in Croatia based on the 2014 EU elections, rather than the special one.

Table D.5 Multilevel regressions testing probabilities of attacks occurring during QTs based on second-order elections

	Model 1 Belgium Local	Model 2 Belgium Full	Model 3 Croatia Local	Model 4 Croatia EU	Model 5 Croatia Presidential	Model 6 Croatia Full	Model 7 UK Local	Model 8 UK EU	Model 9 UK Full
	Coef. (SE)	**Coef. (SE)**	**Coef. (SE)**	**Coef. (SE)**	**Coef. (SE)**	**Coef. (SE)**	**Coef. (SE)**	**Coef. (SE)**	**Coef. (SE)**
ELECTIONS:									
Parliamentary	-	.012 (.005) *	-	-	-	.080 (.020) ***	-	-	.012 (.008)
Local	.005 (.003)	.003 (.003)	.008 (.013)	-	-	-.005 (.011)	-.040 (.028)	-	-.009 (.011)
EU	-	-	-	-.002 (.009)	-	-.012 (.008)	-	-.008 (.011)	-.034 (.031)
Presidential	-	-	-	-	-.033 (.031)	-.008 (.028)	-	-	-
Opp. →Gov. (ref.)									
G→O	-1.685 (.125) ***	-1.683 (.125) ***	-.981 (.268) ***	-.980 (.268) ***	-.982 (.268) ***	-.987 (.268) ***	-.656 (.449)	-.524 (.455)	-.526 (.459)
G→G	-1.472 (.120) ***	-1.483 (.120) ***	-2.455 (.391) ***	-2.459 (.390) ***	-2.455 (.391) ***	-2.476 (.391) ***	-.632 (.504)	-.682 (.522)	-.641 (.516)
O→O	-3.101 (.154) ***	-3.093 (.154) ***	-4.919 (.543) ***	-4.909 (.542) ***	-4.920 (.543) ***	-4.921 (.543) ***	-2.881 (.468) ***	-2.705 (.481) ***	-2.725 (.474) ***
Ideology distance	1.905 (.355) ***	1.903 (.357) ***	1.864 (1.711)	1.849 (1.718)	1.873 (1.713)	1.817 (1.711)	4.270 (2.009) *	4.436 (2.005)*	4.872 (2.048) *
Intercept	-1.907 (.282) ***	-2.234 (.303) ***	-5.325 (1.069) ***	-4.933 (1.057) ***	-3.245 (1.958) †	-6.099 (2.166) **	-1.306 (.742) †	-1.184 (.906)	-1.354 (.939)
Variance (QTs)	.303 (.044)	.282 (.044)	.506 (.132)	.512 (.131)	.496 (.132)	.288 (.157)	.177 (.348)	.183 (.343)	000 (.434)
Variance (dyads)	.791 (.080)	.796 (.080)	3.992 (.707)	3.993 (.708)	3.993 (.707)	3.979 (.694)	1.971 (.384)	1.914 (.376)	1.943 (.382)
N (QTs)	103	103	39	39	39	39	106	100	100
N (min. dyads)	100	100	49	49	49	49	9	9	9
N (max. dyads)	169	169	144	144	144	144	25	25	25
AIC	7.324 (0 = 7.899)	7.320 (0 = 7.899)	1.178 (0 = 1.328)	1.178 (0 = 1.328)	1.177 (0 = 1.328)	1.168 (0 = 1.328)	891 (0 = 1.016)	848 (0 = 1.016)	846 (0 = 1.016)

†p<0.1; *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001 / Control for years included in every model / Number of QTs and dyads differs in the UK due to the Brexit (no observations post 2019 elections) and Corona pandemic (local elections scheduled for May 2020 were postponed indefinitely in March 2020)

Appendix D.6 Niche vs. Mainstream/Main vs. Third

The last robustness check dives deeper into differences between parties who engage in attack. To this end, I drop the status variable (government and opposition) and include a variable that indicates the ideological profile of the party (in Belgium) based on mainstream parties vs. niche parties (radical right, radical left, and green). In Croatia and the UK, I include a variable that indicates the two main mainstream parties (in Croatia: HDZ and SDP; in the UK: the Conservative party and the Labour party) or third parties.[39] Next, dyads are coded following the four possible attack outcomes based on these variables (Niche → Mainstream, Mainstream → Niche; Niche → Niche, etc.).

Results from these models are shown in Table D.6. In Belgium, where there are equal opportunities to attack, the probability that niche parties attack mainstream parties and mainstream parties attacking themselves is the same (insignificant coefficient for M→M when ref. category is N→M). However, niche or mainstream parties attacking niche parties are significantly less likely to occur when compared to the ref. category of N→M.

In Croatia and the UK, we observe that the likeliest attacks to occur during QTs is between the two major parties. I would argue that this outcome is due to the nature of QTs that favours the two main parties. This is why ideology has an insignificant impact on attack behaviour during QTs, unlike Belgium where ideology is always a significant predictor. As such, there is a strong indication that attack strategies in Croatia and the UK would likely resemble the ones in Belgium if QTs would grant more opportunities to third parties (this is also supported by an insignificant probability difference of two main parties attacking third parties when compared to third parties attacking them). Therefore, in the parliamentary arena, mainstream parties are equally (Belgium) or even more likely (Croatia/ the UK) to exhibit attack behaviour when compared to more extreme ideological parties, who tend to be more negative during campaigns.

[39] Due to niche parties often being exlucded from QTs in Croatia and the UK, which dominantly favours two major parties, it is more valid to group all minor parties together and compare them to the two major ones.

Table D.6 Multilevel regressions testing probabilities of attacks occurring during QTs observing attacks based on niche vs. mainstream and main vs. third parties operationalisation

	Model 1 (Belgium)	Model 2 (Croatia)	Model 3 (UK)
	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)
Election date (months since)	-.010 (.004) **	-.028 (.012) *	-.011 (.008)
Niche → Mainstream (ref.)			
Mainstream → Niche	-1.653 (.340) ***	-	-
Mainstream → Mainstream	.405 (.290)	-	-
Niche → Niche	-4.208 (.635) ***	-	-
Third parties → HDZ/SDP (ref.)			
HDZ/SDP → Third parties	-	-.735 (.576)	-
HDZ/SDP → HDZ/SDP	-	3.321 (1.184) **	-
Third parties → Third parties	-	-4.566 (.575) ***	-
Third parties → Con/Lab (ref.)			
Con/Lab → Third parties	-	-	-.183 (.844)
Con/Lab → Con/Lab	-	-	2.364 (1.093) *
Third parties → Third parties	-	-	-3.909 (1.036) ***
Ideological distance	4.215 (.575) ***	4.912 (1.132) ***	4.971 (1.878) **
Intercept	-3.759 (.370) ***	-2.591 (.633) ***	-1.719 (.794) *
Variance (QTs)	.241 (.043)	.250 (.148)	.070 (.757)
Variance (dyads)	1.305 (.111)	1.901 (.261)	1.693 (.353)
N (QTs)	103	39	115
N (min. dyads)	100	49	9
N (max. dyads)	169	144	25
AIC	7.793 (0 = 7.899)	1.232 (10 = 1.328)	979 (0 = 1.016)

†p<0.1; *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001 / Control for years included in every model

Chapter 2

Appendix E Examples of speeches

Table E.1 Examples of attack speeches (with no incivility)

Belgium	Dries Van Langenhove 23.1.2020	You and your predecessor failed to give the Immigration Department the necessary clout. Even worse, you and your predecessor have failed to take the necessary steps to limit the influx of foreigners.
	Gwenaëlle Grovonius 18.1.2018	You talk about efficiency, about results. The least you could do is apply this concept to yourself and respect your own commitments,
	Monica De Coninck 26.4.2018	I'm glad you discovered that reality is sometimes very complex. However, I do not accept that so many children disappear in this country. I think there should be a priority action plan, not just from you, but from the entire government.
	Denis Ducarme 26.9.2018	This is an important subject! Mr. President, you will take responsibility for not seeing answers given to all of the nine questions that were put to me and which normally give me the opportunity to answer with an extended speaking time!
	Peter Luykx 11.3.2010	You cite a number of reasons to justify the King's visit, including the historical links, for what they are still worth today. But, Prime Minister, there are not one, not a thousand, but hundreds of thousands of reasons not to go to Congo.
Croatia	Biljana Borzan 19.5.2010	The fact is that what was hidden and what you personally signed came to light. I would just like to tell you that in normal countries, for far less damage, resignations are given for moral reasons.
	Tulio Demetlika 16.1.2019	As you said, I am not at all happy with your answer because I asked very clear questions so I expected clear answers accordingly and you have entered a certain history.
	Darko Milinović 27.1.2010	Of course, I have another 15 minutes to speak, but I have a chance to once again refute the misinformation from the ranks of the SDP.
	Marta Luc-Polanc 14.11.2018	(…) you have stated that you are increasing timber quotas. You are completely in contradiction with your statement that more is planted and less is cut, if you have foreseen 20 years in advance on forest management grounds.
	Đuro Popijač 21.1.2015	So you didn’t do what you were supposed to do. You are the designated minister. Of course, with other colleagues primarily the Minister of Labor, Foreign Affairs, to protect and prevent this discriminatory law.
UK	Feryal Clark 19.12.2020	Is the Prime Minister aware that his Government risk failing a generation of children in my constituency of Enfield North and across the country (…)
	Nadine Dorries 14.7.2010	Thanks to the massive deficit left by Labour, all but two departmental budgets are to be cut by between 25% and 40%.
	Michael Connarty 20.10.2010	(...) it is clear that this Government intend to breach the spirit and the letter of the Good Friday and the St Andrews agreements by refusing to bring in a Human Rights Act
	Andy Slaughter 7.5.2014	Will the Prime Minister stop his Health Secretary putting my constituents’ lives at risk?
	Leo Docherty 28.6.2017	I was deeply alarmed to hear of the Leader of the Opposition’s reported announcement at the Glastonbury festival that, if in power, he would abandon Trident and utterly undermine the security and safety of our country.

Table E.2 Examples of attack speeches (with incivility)

Belgium	Marco Van Hees 2.7.2015	Minister, I note that in addition to playing the role of the Smurf with glasses, you also play the role of the happy Smurf – "it will be better tomorrow".
	Véronique Caprasse 1.6.2017	You are in a real quagmire, Madam Minister. (…) This situation is very disturbing, you are playing a dangerous game, both for public health in the south of the country and for democracy.
	Jan Jambon 8.11.2012.	Mr Di Rupo, I must confess that I have a certain admiration for you. After a pleiade of MPs here ask you questions, you manage to say nothing (…) You proclaim blah blah blah and don't answer any specific question except the one about 0.7%.
	Karin Temmerman 26.9.2018	Minister, did you also fall out of the sky, like your colleague Marghem? Was it a bolt from the blue for you too?
	Tanguy Veys 6.2.2014	You wash your hands in innocence, then no longer like a Walloon Houdini, but like Pontius Pilate.
Croatia	Gordan Jandroković 14.11.2012	Mr. Prime Minister does not know that. He is the Goliath of words and the Lilliputian of deeds.
	Nenad Stazić 17.1.2017	(…) by resigning from the position of former Minister of Culture, Mr. Zlatko Hasanbegović, all the people in the media, especially the non-profit ones, but also all the other people who truly love democracy, breathed a sigh of relief as if from a nightmare.
	Tatjana Šimac Bonačić 22.9.2010	It is very interesting to hear, Mr. Minister, what a magician you are that you managed to save 50% of your income (…) people in the current helplessness and anger they feel, because of your court, gave you a nickname " Dr. House. "
	Andrej Plenković 24.11.2021	Mrs. Peović, keep it to yourself, you are disgusting. And not just you but everyone along with it.
	Goran Marić 14.5.2014	But you are offering a prophecy instead of resigning. Every day you explain to the public and the Croatian people why what you announced the day before yesterday did not happen yesterday, you are actually a prophet who prophesies backwards.
UK	Boris Johnson 22.7.2020	The Leader of the Opposition has more flip-flops than Bournemouth beach.
	Harriet Harman 14.3.2012	That is absolute rubbish. (…) What has happened to that fine Liberal tradition? They must be turning in their graves: the party of William Gladstone; the party of David Lloyd George: now the party of Nick Clegg.
	David Cameron 18.12.2013	I would have thought that after today's briefing in the papers the hand gesture for the shadow Chancellor should be bye-bye. You don't need it to be Christmas to know when you are sitting next to a turkey.
	Theresa May 28.11.2018	What does Labour have to offer? Six bullet points. My weekend shopping list is longer than that.
	Jeremy Corbyn 19.12.2018	She is holding Parliament and the country to ransom. (…) Is this not just a deeply cynical manoeuvre from a failing and utterly reckless Prime Minister?

Table E.3 Examples of neutral speeches

Belgium	David Clarinval 25.6.2016	Minister, thank you for your response. 98% coverage is great, but let's aim for indoors. For the rest, I share your opinion. It is important that the Walloon Region understands that if it wants to develop rural areas, it must stop taxing pylons at all costs!
	Georges Gilkinet 24.5.2012	Mr. Chairman, I understand that various groups have tabled proposals on this very important subject. That said, I agree with the comments made by Mr. Moriau. As Chairman of the Finance Committee, I can propose, possibly with the External Relations Committee, to organize hearings before the holidays in order to make concrete progress in this matter.
	Annemie Turtelboom 7.1.2010	Dear colleague, at the moment the black boxes are already being used by certain units of the federal police for certain interventions; you yourself referred to the Intervention Corps. They are also already being used in certain local police zones, for example Schaerbeek.
	Sophie Rohonyi 12.12.2019	Madam Minister, do you consider that the law against sexism, which is the basis of this legal action, must be adapted to make it possible to sanction remarks made not against a particular person but against a group of people, in this case all women?
	Sammy Mahdi 9.4.2020	Minister, how will you deal with the warnings of many Flemish scientists? When can we expect the app? Time is running out on that front. Do you have any idea of the cost of developing and maintaining such an application?
Croatia	Branka Juričev-Martinčev 10.4.2013	Therefore, all of them are fearfully wondering what will happen and whether this new real estate tax will be introduced. Your question, given that you have now passed and presented a new bill in part of our country, do you still insist on the introduction of a real estate tax, yes or no?
	Domagoj Hajduković 15.9.2017	My question and I would ask you for a direct answer, will the Government of the Republic of Croatia buy INA from MOL and if we are going to buy INA from MOL does that mean that we are going to privatize 25% of HEP shares, ie 25% of HEP and of these 25% of HEP included 7 veterans percent? Thank you.
	Milanka Opačić 15.4.2015	Mr. MP, so yes, we initially divided the debt write-off into two categories. In the first category were the beneficiaries of social benefits, in the second category are our citizens who meet a certain income threshold. So 2.5 thousand per single person or 1250 kuna per household member in the last 3 months.
	Karmela Caparin 17.3.2011	I am satisfied with the answer and I am pleased with the positive business of the Croatian Health Insurance Institute and I believe that you will continue the health care reform and insurance reform, because really this money we provide is needed by our citizens and patients for whom we are here.
	Zvonko Milas 23.1.2013	Mr. President, yesterday, if I remember correctly at Maslenica, you said that freedom had no alternative. I totally agree with you. Some decisions and some values simply do not have, but I think that this decision could have an alternative and so I ask you if the Government of Croatia and you personally consider postponing this law (…)
UK	Boris Johnson 25.11.2020	Yes, indeed; I can make that guarantee. Our position on fish has not changed. We will only be able to make progress if the EU accepts the reality that we must be able to control access to our waters. It is very important at this stage to emphasise that.
	Jo Stevens 2.5.2018	The Prime Minister's new Home Secretary says that her "hostile environment""does not represent our values as a country".—[Official Report, 30 April 2018; Vol. 640, c. 41.]Does she agree with him?
	David Linden 9.12.2020	Why does the Prime Minister think we have now seen 15 consecutive polls showing majority support for Scottish independence?
	Annette Brooke 10.2.2010	Recent research has shown that more than 70 per cent. of blind and partially sighted people are unable to access vital personal health information. Will the Prime Minister agree to meet me and a delegation from the Royal National Institute of Blind People, so that we can discuss provisions that could address that shameful inadequacy?
	Jeremy Corbyn 15.6.2016	Last week, the Prime Minister gave a welcome commitment to the closing of the loophole in the posting of workers directive. We will hold him to that, but we are concerned about the exploitation of migrant workers and the undercutting of wages in this country as a result. On that issue, will he today commit to outlawing the practice of agencies that only advertise abroad for jobs that are, in reality, jobs in this country?

Appendix F Descriptive statistics for female (descriptive) representation and variables

Table F.1 Descriptive representation of female politicians during QTs

Country	Term	N (sampled QTs)	Average	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Belgium	2007-2010	4	37.2	7.5	27.6	45.2
	2010-2014	34	30.4	9.3	14.8	50
	2014-2018	50	30.5	10.0	13.3	57.7
	2018-2023	15	41.4	8.3	27.6	53.9
Croatia	2007-2011	7	29.5	2.0	26.9	32
	2011-2015	15	23.4	6.1	9.7	31.7
	2015-2016	1	16.7	-	-	-
	2016-2020	14	20.4	4.3	13.6	29.1
	2020-2024	6	30.4	3.2	25.5	34.5
UK	2005–2010	4	18.1	13.1	9.5	37.5
	2010–2015	53	23.3	6.7	7.7	43.3
	2015–2017	21	28.9	8.2	13.3	41.7
	2017–2019	26	34.8	8.1	19.4	50
	2019-2024	11	28.5	7.4	16	38.1

Table F.2 Descriptive statistics for dependent variables

Variable		N
DV1: Employing attack (N=7,724)	No	4,584 (59.3%)
	Yes	3,140 (40.7%)
DV2: Getting targeted (N=7,724)	No	6,129 (79.3%)
	Yes	1,595 (20.7%)
DV3: Attacking with incivility (N=3,140)	No	2,228 (71%)
	Yes	912 (29%)
DV4: Getting targeted with incivility (N=1,595)	No	1,076 (67.5%)
	Yes	519 (32.5%)

Note: Speakers and independent politicians/politicians from parties not in the CHES excluded

Table F.3 Descriptive statistics for independent variables

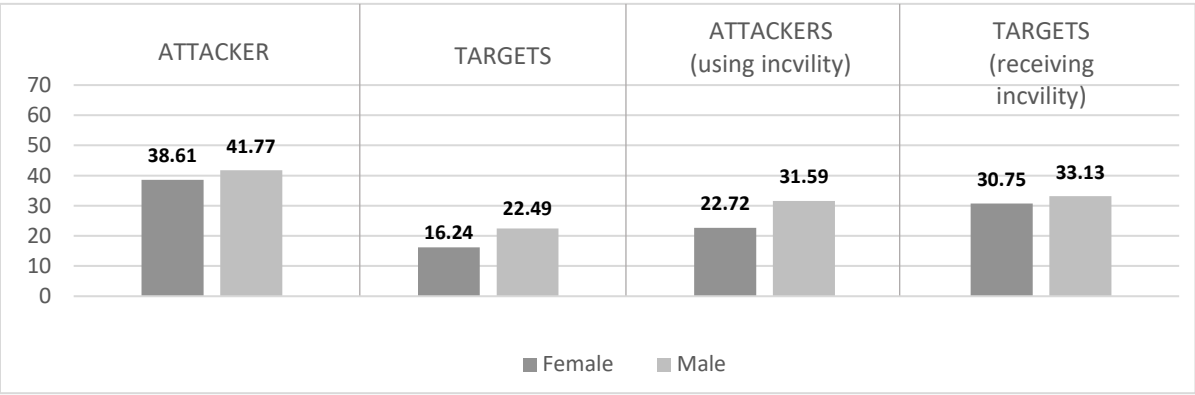
Variable		N	Average	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Gender	Male	5,452 (70.6%)	-	-	-	-
	Female	2,272 (29.4%)	-	-	-	-
Proximity to elections		7,724	23.4	15.1	0	59
Ideology		7,724	.18	.08	.00	.47
Position	Opposition	3,163 (41%)	-	-	-	-
	Majority	3,183 (41.2%)	-	-	-	-
	Cabinet	1,378 (17.8%)	-	-	-	-

Note: Speakers and independent politicians/politicians from parties not in the CHES excluded

Appendix G Descriptive analysis

In this appendix, I will briefly explore whether hypotheses hold on a descriptive level. As such, on the far-left side of Figure G.1, I show the share of politicians that employed attacks and got targeted in attacks during QTs based on gender. As can be seen, men attacked more compared to women. Out of all men who spoke during all QTs, almost 41.8% of them attacked someone during QTs, compared to women where 38.6% of them engaged in attacks. The difference between men and women is wider if we look at targets. We can see that 22.5% of men got attacked which is 6 percentage points less compared to women who accumulated 16.2% of attacks in their direction. As such, we can conclude that there is some merit in H1a and H2a. Moving to the right side of Figure G.1, we focus on instances where politicians attacked or got targeted, looking at the share of used or received incivility in these attacks. There is a strong indication that corroborates H3a with 22.7% of women relying on incivility in attacks compared to 31.6% of men. H4a, that is, that women are less attacked compared to men with incivility, also shows support as there is 2 percentage points difference in incivility usage with men receiving more uncivil attacks in their direction.

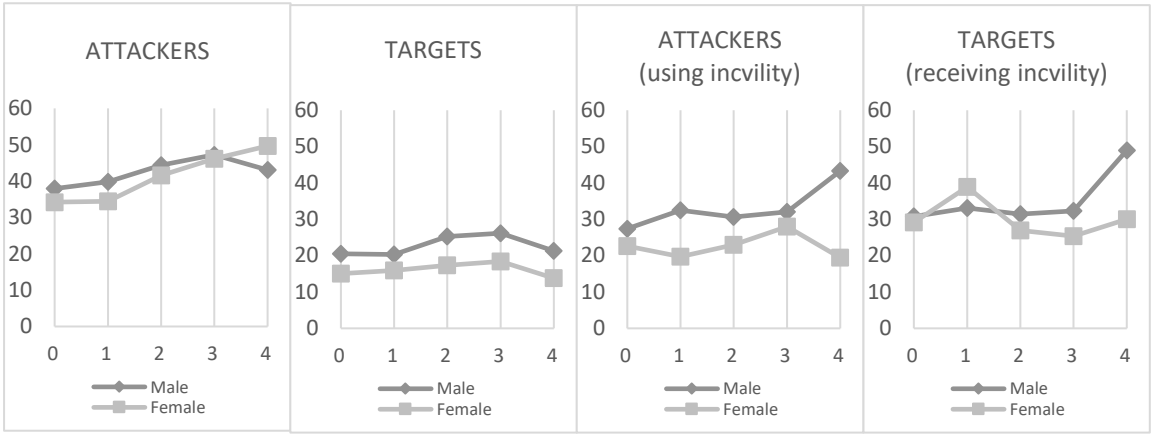
Figure G.1 Share of female and male politicians that attacked/got targeted/attacked with incivility/got targeted with incivility (y-axis) in the pool of all politicians nested in QTs



To explore sub-hypotheses regarding the impact of proximity to parliamentary elections, I plot shares from Figure G.1 per year since the last election (Figure G.2). We can observe that there is some merit for H1b, H3b, and H4b. On the far-left side of Figure G.2, we see that women employ slightly fewer attacks compared to men early in the electoral cycles but these shares become equal the closer we get to elections and even surpass men in the election year thereby confirming H1b. Regarding targets, female politicians tend to be less attacked compared to men throughout the term which is not in line with H2b.

Looking at the incivility usage on the right side of Figure G.2, we can observe that men increase their usage of incivility and receive more uncivil attacks closer to elections, unlike women who experience a decrease. This is in line with H3b and H4b.

Figure G.2 Share of female and male politicians that attacked/got targeted/attacked with incivility/got targeted with incivility (y-axis) in the pool of all politicians nested in QTs plotted by proximity to the next election

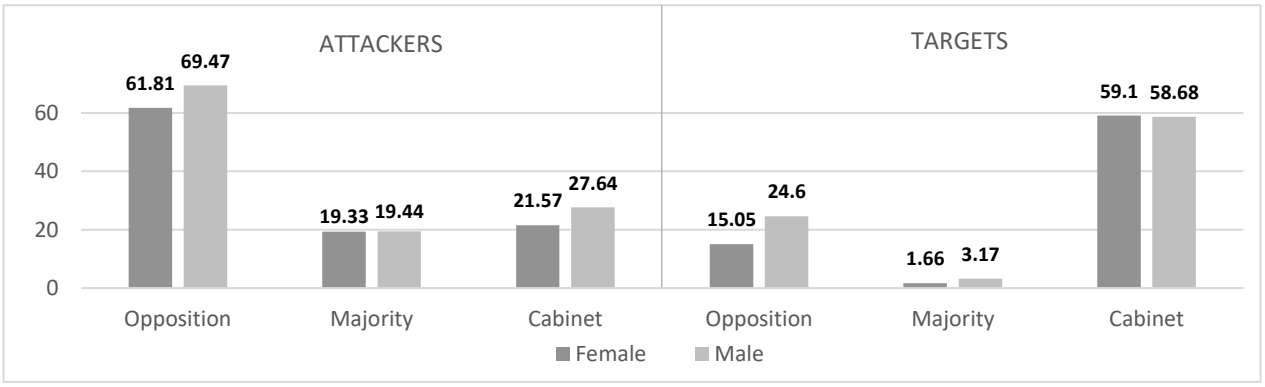


Note: x-axis represents years since the last parliamentary elections

Furthermore, to get a deeper take on the results, on the left side of Figure G.3, I show the share of politicians that engaged in attack behaviour during QTs based on gender and their status. As can be seen, whether we observe opposing or cabinet politicians, in both groups, men attacked more compared to women. Out of all men in the opposition who spoke during all QTs, almost 69.5% of them attacked someone during QTs, compared to women where 62% of them engaged in attacks. In the cabinet, almost 28% of men attacked, compared to 21.5% of women. The difference between men and women in the majority is non-existent. Overall there is an indication that H1a holds both for the opposition and the cabinet.

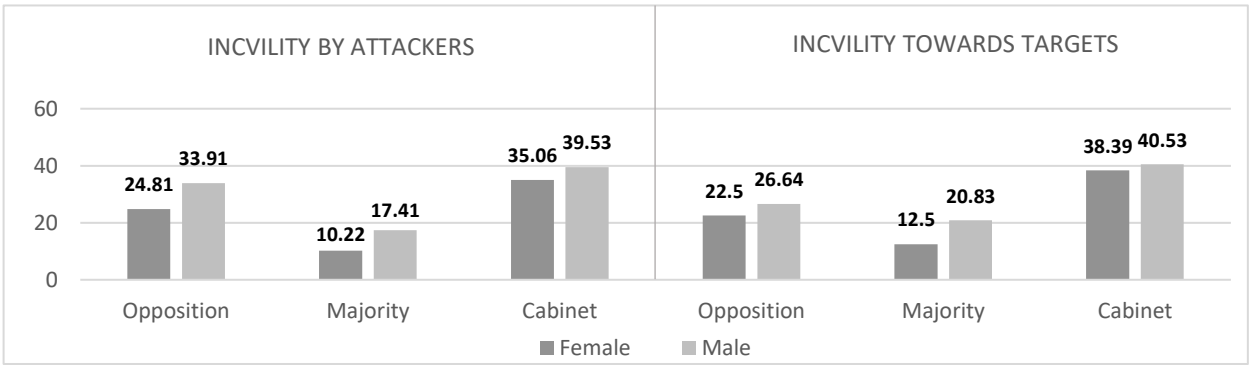
On the right side of Figure G.3, I show the share of politicians that got targeted in attacks during all QTs based on gender. We can see that in the opposition, 24.5% of men got attacked which is 9 percentage points less compared to women who accumulated 15% of attacks in their direction. There is only a small gender difference between attacks on male and female majority politicians who rarely got targeted. However, with regards to the cabinet, we can see that women receive an equal share of attacks as men. It does appear that having women in the cabinet increases the likelihood that they will be attacked similar to men when compared to women and men in the opposition. This is in line with the theory that there is pressure to attack women if they are in the cabinet.

Figure G.3 Share of female and male politicians that attacked/targeted (y-axis) in the pool of all politicians nested in QTs



Moving to incivility in attacks, on the right side of Figure G.4, I present the share of politicians that used incivility in their attacks during QTs. There is a strong indication that corroborates H3a, as across all three groups (opposition, majority, and cabinet) men used more incivility in attacks compared to women. Changes range from 4.5 percentage points difference in the cabinet to 9 percentage points difference in the opposition in favour of men using incivility. In turn, there is also support on a descriptive level for H4a. Considering all attacks directed towards opposition, majority, and cabinet members, there is less incivility in attacks that are targeting women. There is 4 and 8 percentage points difference between male and female politicians receiving uncivil attacks in the opposition and majority respectively. In turn, for the cabinet, this difference is only slightly above 2 percentage points. As such, the difference is visibly greater for opposition and majority politicians when compared to cabinet politicians.

Figure G.4 Share of female and male politicians that attacked/targeted with incivility (y-axis) in the pool of all politicians nested in QTs that were engaged in attacks



Appendix H Odds ratios from the main models

	DV1: Employing attack (1=Yes)	DV2: Getting targeted (1=Yes)	DV3: Attacking with incivility (1=Yes)	DV4: Getting targeted with incivility (1=Yes)
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
	O.R. (S.E.)	O.R. (S.E.)	O.R. (S.E.)	O.R. (S.E.)
Male politicians (ref.)				
Female politicians	**.810 (.051) ****	**.666 (.053) *****	**.623 (.062) *****	**.731 (.105) ***
Proximity to Elections	1.013 (.002) ***	1.007 (.002) **	1.008 (.003) **	1.008 (.005) †
Ideology	4.452 (3.808) †	1.431 (1.535)	21.593 (19.172) **	1.057 (1.134)
Opposition MPs (ref.)				
Majority MPs	.056 (.005) ***	.045 (.007) ***	.323 (.050) ***	.657 (.214)
Cabinet politicians	.082 (.008) ***	3.041 (.313) ***	1.150 (.170)	2.495 (.389) ***
Belgium (ref.)				
Croatia	1.466 (.325) †	1.765 (.493) *	.478 (.124) **	.717 (.177)
UK	.357 (.090) ***	1.225 (.415)	1.134 (.314)	1.441 (.403)
Constant	2.480 (.721) **	.215 (.074) ***	.249 (.081) ***	.224 (.090) ***
Variance (QT)	.364 (.041)	.083 (.146)	.222 (.093)	.260 (.136)
Variance (Parties)	.429 (.096)	.617 (.106)	.430 (.097)	.307 (.129)
N (total)	7,724	7,724	3.140	1.595
N (QTs)	261	261	261	261
N (min. politicians per QT)	13	13	3	1
N (max. politicians per QT)	56	56	37	23
AIC (empty model)	8.140 (0=9.509)	5.785 (0=7.707)	3.584 (0=3.810)	1.938 (0=1.984)

Note: †p<0.1;*p<0.05;**p<0.01;***p<0.001 / Control for yearly differences included / Due to the large O.R. and S.E. for the ideology variable in certain models, tests were re-run omitting this variable, but the effect of the gender variable remained consistent.

Appendix I Country differences

Table I.1. Multi-level regressions testing probabilities of engaging in attacks during QTs by interacting gender and country

	DV1: Employing attack (1=Yes)	DV2: Getting targeted (1=Yes)	DV3: Attacking with incivility (1=Yes)	DV4: Getting targeted with incivility
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
	Coef. (S.E.)	Coef. (S.E.)	Coef. (S.E.)	Coef. (S.E.)
Male politicians (ref.)				
Female politicians	.008 (.104)	-.193 (.125)	-.189 (.143)	-.158 (.210)
Male (ref.) X Belgium (ref.)				
Croatia	-.216 (.165)	-.220 (.194)	-.114 (.249)	-.237 (.351)
UK	**-.423 (.144) ****	**-.480 (.193) ***	**-.975 (.255) *****	-.347 (.359)
Proximity to Elections	.013 (.002) ***	.007 (.002) **	.008 (.003) *	.008 (.004) †
Ideology	1.556 (.852) †	.436 (1.071)	3.207 (.881) ***	.143 (1.085)
Opposition MPs (ref.)				
Majority MPs	-2.874 (.102) ***	-3.088 (.158) ***	-1.152 (.157) ***	-.417 (.326)
Cabinet politicians	-2.492 (.106) ***	1.117 (.103) ***	.167 (.148)	.913 (.156) ***
Belgium (ref.)				
Croatia	.455 (.224) *	.630 (.282) *	-.671 (.261) *	-.281 (.257)
UK	-.898 (.256) ***	.333 (.342)	.342 (.280)	.446 (.293)
Constant	.814 (.292) **	-1.621 (.348) ***	-1.507 (.328) ***	-1.557 (.408) ***
Variance (QT)	.368 (.041)	.101 (.123)	.229 (.091)	.259 (.137)
Variance (Parties)	.426 (.096)	.615 (.106)	.424 (.097)	.314 (.129)
N (total)	7,724	7,724	3.140	1.595
N (QTs)	261	261	261	261
N (min. politicians per QT)	13	13	3	1
N (max. politicians per QT)	56	56	37	23
AIC (empty model)	8.135 (0=9.509)	5.783 (0=7.707)	3.572 (0=3.810)	1.941 (0=1.984)

Note: †p<0.1; *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001 / Control for yearly differences included

Table I.2 Multi-level regressions testing probabilities of engaging in attacks during QTs per each country

	BELGIUM				CROATIA				UK			
	DV1:	DV2:	DV3:	DV4:	DV1:	DV2:	DV3:	DV4:	DV1:	DV2:	DV3:	DV4:
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
	Coef. (S.E.)	Coef. (S.E.)	Coef. (S.E.)	Coef. (S.E.)	Coef. (S.E.)	Coef. (S.E.)	Coef. (S.E.)	Coef. (S.E.)	Coef. (S.E.)	Coef. (S.E.)	Coef. (S.E.)	Coef. (S.E.)
Male (ref.)	-.060 (.100)	-.139 (.126)	-.193 (.144)	-.228 (.203)	-.212 (.147)	-.440 (.146) **	-.376 (.208) †	-.448 (.282)	-.454 (.104) ***	-.870 (.169) ***	-1.381 (.233) ***	-.667 (.330) *
Female												
Proximity to Elections	.012 (.006) †	.007 (.006)	.015 (.007) *	.003 (.009)	.047 (.014) **	.027 (.009) **	.030 (.014) *	.017 (.015)	.004 (.004)	.005 (.006)	.008 (.007)	.027 (.012) *
Ideology	2.305 (.748) **	1.716 (.722) *	3.023 (.685) ***	1.769 (1.173)	-2.466 (2.475)	1.146 (1.602)	2.448 (2.385)	-.191 (2.871)	.800 (1.235)	2.765 (1.783)	-.023 (2.341)	-7.994 (7.989)
Opposition (ref.)												
Majority	-2.089 (.140) ***	-.950 (.216) ***	-1.034 (.212) ***	.525 (.438)	-4.264 (.217) ***	-3.497 (.249) ***	-1.108 (.272) ***	-1.119 (.791)	-2.104 (.145) ***	-3.410 (.315) ***	-.480 (.304)	.567 (1.180)
Cabinet	-2.854 (.163) ***	2.606 (.178) ***	-.846 (.295) **	1.685 (.308) ***	-3.813 (.215) ***	.127 (.130)	-.250 (.215)	.234 (.203)	3.715 (.598) ***	5.417 (.735) ***	2.351 (.319) ***	3.061 (.894) **
Constant	.174 (.421)	-3.041 (.458) ***	-1.868 (.483) ***	-2.158 (.676) **	1.940 (.718) **	-1.216 (.494) *	-2.765 (.774) ***	-1.569 (1.071)	.025 (.239)	-1.626 (.361) ***	-.947 (.424) *	-1.418 (1.330)
Variance (QT)	.386 (.071)	.351 (.086)	.301 (.117)	.198 (.328)	.366 (.087)	.000 (.086)	.000 (.167)	.000 (.438)	.000 (.051)	.000 (.086)	.000 (.228)	.000 (.326)
Variance (Parties)	.233 (.103)	.195 (.107)	.182 (.138)	.000 (.587)	.855 (.216)	.435 (.173)	.707 (.275)	.164 (.415)	.000 (.051)	.000 (.118)	.000 (.084)	.799 (.497)
N (total)	2.833	2.833	1.284	635	2.059	2.059	954	595	2.832	2.832	902	365
N (QTs)	103	103	103	103	43	43	43	43	115	115	115	115
N (min. politicians)	13	13	5	2	28	28	10	9	14	14	3	1
N (max. politicians)	37	37	22	13	56	56	37	23	37	37	17	6
AIC (empty model)	2.947 (0=3.295)	2.217 (0=2.949)	1.513 (0=1.539)	795 (0=818)	1.811 (0=2.663)	1.897 (0=2.448)	1.082 (0=1.089)	704 (0=694)	2.824 (0=3.313)	1.417 (0=2.142)	935 (0=1.056)	446 (0=476)

Note: †p<0.1; *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001 / Control for yearly differences included / Due to the large Coef. and S.E. for the ideology variable in certain models, tests were re-run omitting this variable, but the effect of the gender variable remained consistent.

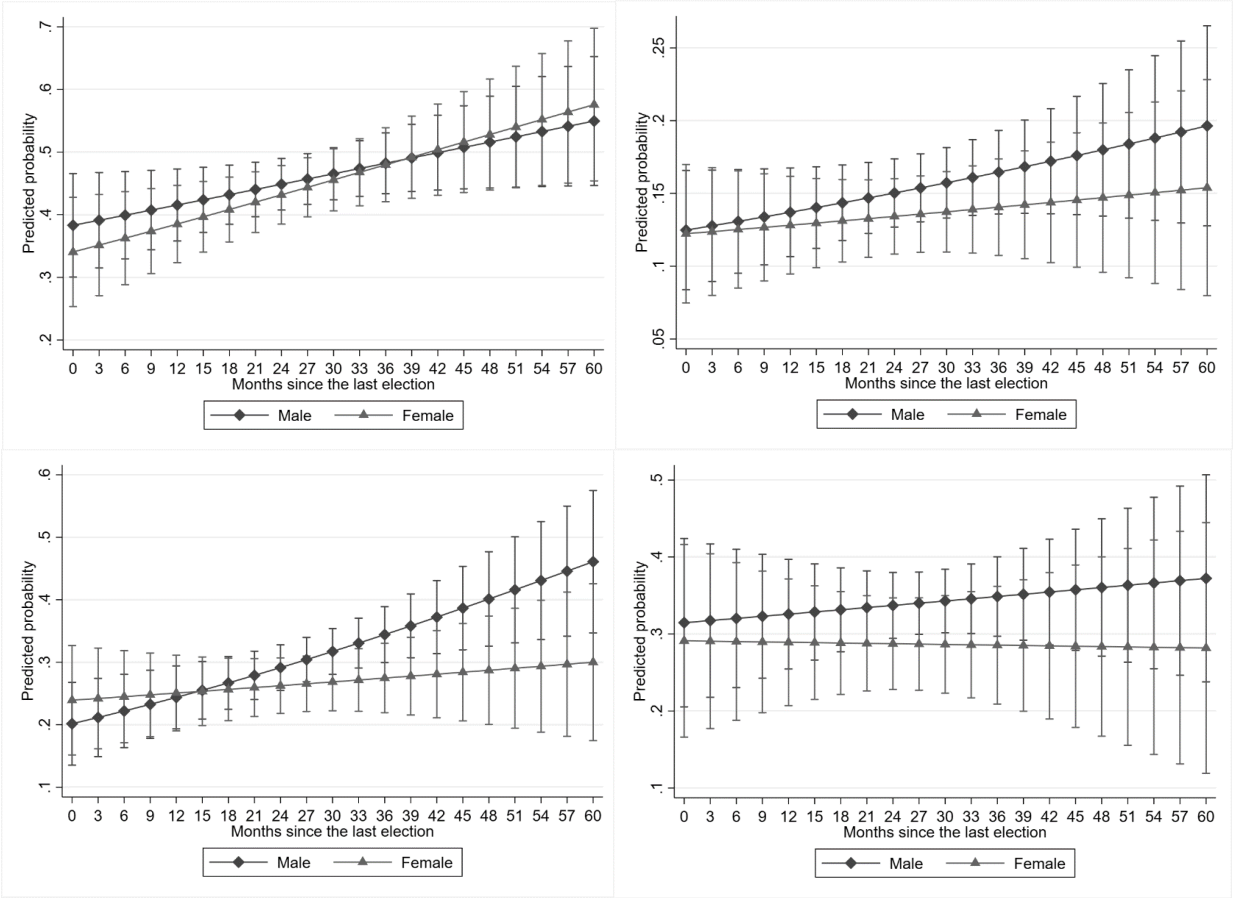
Appendix J Election proximity

Table J.1 Multi-level regressions testing probabilities of engaging in attacks during QTs by interacting gender and election proximity in the UK

	DV1: Employing attack (1=Yes)	**DV2: Getting targeted (1=Yes)**	**DV3: Attacking with incivility (1=Yes)**	**DV4: Getting targeted with incivility**
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
	Coef. (S.E.)	Coef. (S.E.)	Coef. (S.E.)	Coef. (S.E.)
Male politicians (ref.)				
Female politicians	**-.512 (.172) ****	**-1.078 (.278) *****	**-.852 (.404) ***	.136 (.564)
Male (ref.) X Elections				
Female politicians	.003 (.006)	.009 (.010)	-.027 (.018)	-.038 (.023)
Proximity to Elections	.003 (.005)	.003 (.006)	.010 (.007)	.034 (.013) *
Ideology	.791 (1.23)	2.782 (1.782)	.056 (2.343)	-8.188 (8.387)
Opposition MPs (ref.)				
Majority MPs	-2.103 (.146) ***	-3.411 (.315) ***	-.495 (.304)	.716 (1.240)
Cabinet politicians	3.721 (.599) ***	5.442 (.736) ***	2.306 (.320) ***	3.131 (.965) **
Constant	.046 (.244)	-1.567 (.365) ***	-1.052 (.428) *	-1.632 (1.390)
Variance (QT)	.000 (.051)	.000 (.119)	.000 (.232)	.000 (.341)
Variance (Parties)	.000 (.262)	.000 (.086)	.000 (.084)	.837 (.529)
N (total)	2.832	2.832	902	365
N (QTs)	115	115	115	115
N (min. politicians per QT)	14	14	3	1
N (max. politicians per QT)	37	37	17	6
AIC (empty model)	2.826 (0=3.313)	1.418 (0=2.142)	934 (0=1.056)	445 (0=476)

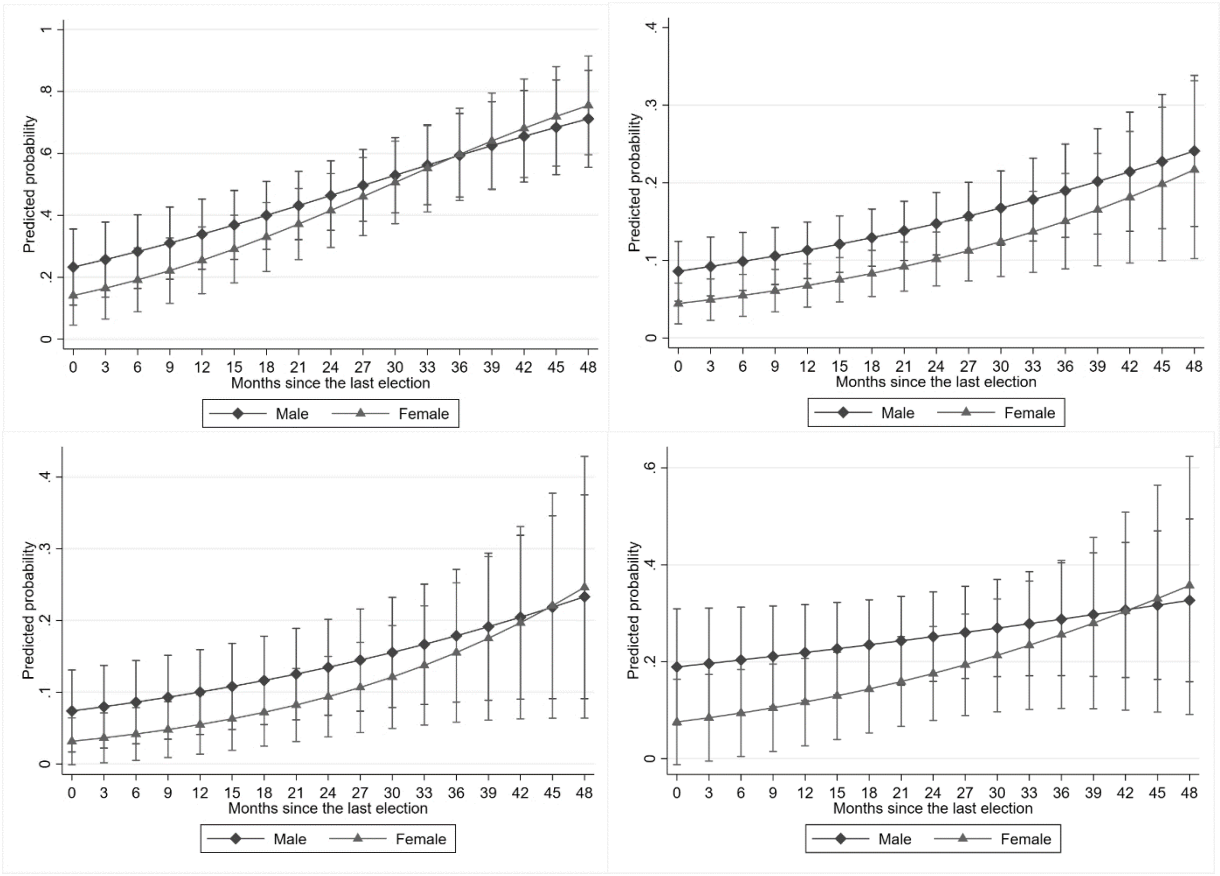
Note: †p<0.1; *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001 / Control for yearly differences included / Due to the large Coef. and S.E. for the ideology variable in certain models, tests were re-run omitting this variable, but the effect of the gender variable remained consistent.

Figure J.2 BELGIUM Predicted probabilities for employing attack (top-left), getting targeted (top-right), employing attack with incivility (bottom-left) and getting targeted with incivility (bottom-right) during QTs in Belgium



Note: Vertical lines indicate confidence intervals (90%) / Generated from the individual models run only on the Belgian sample

Figure J.2 CROATIA Predicted probabilities for employing attack (top-left), getting targeted (top-right), employing attack with incivility (bottom-left) and getting targeted with incivility (bottom-right) during QTs in Croatia



Note: Vertical lines indicate confidence intervals (90%) / Croatia has a 4-year electoral cycle / Generated from the individuals models run only on the Croatian sample

Appendix K Robustness checks

Appendix K.1 Count Dependent Variables

Table K.1.1 Negative binomial regressions testing the count of engagement in attacks during QTs

	DV1: N of attacks	**DV2: N of received attacks**	**DV3: N of employed uncivil attacks**	**DV4: N of received uncivil attacks**
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
	Coef. (S.E.)	Coef. (S.E.)	Coef. (S.E.)	Coef. (S.E.)
Male politicians (ref.)				
Female politicians	-.110 (.064) †	-.330 (.099) **	-.370 (.113) **	-.207 (.170)
Proximity to Elections	.008 (.001) ***	.007 (.001) ***	.009 (.002) ***	.009 (.003) **
Ideology	1.611 (.352) ***	.695 (.577)	2.905 (.550) ***	-.379 (.973)
Opposition MPs (ref.)				
Majority MPs	-1.591 (.054) ***	-2.234 (.125) ***	-.665 (.121) ***	-.067 (.294)
Cabinet politicians	-1.169 (.075) ***	1.091 (.083) ***	.382 (.127) **	.845 (.138) ***
Belgium (ref.)				
Croatia	.326 (.077) ***	.844 (.116) ***	-.167 (.126)	-.157 (.166)
UK	-.499 (.077) ***	.261 (.119) *	-.008 (.136)	.116 (.207)
Constant	.926 (.133) ***	-.399 (.195) *	3.419 (3.463)	.318 (.380)
N (total)	7.724	7.724	3.140	1.595
N (politicians)	1.581	1.581	881	409
AIC (empty model)	17.253 (19.761)	10.083 (11.532)	4.733 (5.158)	2.942 (3.140)

Note: †p<0.1; *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001 / Control for yearly differences included

Table K.1.2 Negative binomial regressions testing the count of engagement in attacks during QTs per each country

	BELGIUM				CROATIA				UK			
	N of attacks	N of received attacks	N of employed uncivil attacks	N of received uncivil attacks	N of attacks	N of received attacks	N of employed uncivil attacks	N of received uncivil attacks	N of attacks	N of received attacks	N of employed uncivil attacks	N of received uncivil attacks
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
	Coef. (S.E.)	Coef. (S.E.)	Coef. (S.E.)	Coef. (S.E.)	Coef. (S.E.)	Coef. (S.E.)	Coef. (S.E.)	Coef. (S.E.)	Coef. (S.E.)	Coef. (S.E.)	Coef. (S.E.)	Coef. (S.E.)
Male (ref.)												
Female	-.143 (.073) †	-.168 (.124)	-.122 (.102)	-.172 (.214)	.075 (.120)	-.238 (.171)	-.273 (.248)	-.085 (.349)	-.274 (.107) *	-.578 (.232) *	-.817 (.252) **	-.431 (.390)
Proximity to Elections	.010 (.002) ***	.004 (.003)	.009 (.004)	.004 (.006)	.019 (.004) ***	.014 (.005) *	.027 (.010) *	.027 (.010) *	.011 (.002) ***	.010 (.003) **	.020 (.005) ***	.019 (.007) **
Ideology	1.129 (.311) ***	1.293 (.603) *	2.130 (.362) ***	1.381 (1.202)	1.035 (.781)	-.572 (1.099)	1.675 (1.649)	-.005 (2.356)	.595 (1.230)	5.551 (2.701) *	1.146 (2.311)	-8.448 (4.299) *
Opposition (ref.)												
Majority	-1.356 (.078) ***	-.837 (.183) ***	-.813 (.164) ***	.535 (.399)	-1.932 (.094) ***	-3.015 (.240) ***	-.833 (.241) **	-.647 (.695)	-1.669 (.143) ***	-3.351 (.386) ***	-.327 (.307)	.128 (.858)
Cabinet	-2.132 (.119) ***	1.949 (.148) ***	-.616 (.230) **	1.487 (.288) ***	-1.499 (.106) ***	.552 (.110) ***	.026 (.229)	.411 (.215) †	1.967 (.178) ***	1.785 (.270) ***	1.716 (.292) ***	2.172 (.467) ***
Constant	.810 (.202) ***	-2.114 (.320) ***	-1.728 (.304)	-.836 (.599)	.950 (.238) ***	.725 (.341) *	1.569 (1.333)	.901 (.915)	1.852 (.283) ***	1.640 (.638) **	3.032 (4.239)	1.191 (.884)
N (total)	2.833	2.833	1.284	635	2.059	2.059	954	595	2.832	2.832	902	365
N (politicians)	368	368	269	130	403	403	245	169	810	810	367	110
AIC (empty model)	6.676 (7.244)	4.203 (4.452)	1.982 (2.038)	1.262 (1.283)	5.146 (5.789)	3.379 (3.749)	1.371 (1.376)	929 (917)	4.878 (5.261)	2.226 (2.446)	1.338 (1.380)	751 (769)

Note: †p<0.1; *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001 / Control for yearly differences included / Due to the large Coef. and S.E. for the ideology variable in certain models, tests were re-run omitting this variable, but the effect of the gender variable remained consistent.

Appendix K.2 Seniority / Backbenchers vs. Frontbenchers in the UK

Table K.2.1 Multi-level regressions testing probabilities of engaging in attacks during QTs by including variables on seniority and backbenchers vs. frontbenchers

	DV1: Employing attack (1=Yes)	**DV2: Getting targeted (1=Yes)**	**DV3: Attacking with incivility (1=Yes)**	**DV4: Getting targeted with incivility**
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
	Coef. (S.E.)	Coef. (S.E.)	Coef. (S.E.)	Coef. (S.E.)
Male politicians (ref.)				
Female politicians	-.221 (.110) *	-.212 (.200)	-1.042 (.246) ***	-.162 (.360)
Backbenchers (ref.)				
Frontbenchers	2.893 (.302) ***	3.400 (.238) ***	1.765 (.227) ***	1.898 (.397) ***
Seniority	-.003 (.005)	.014 (.008) †	.009 (.008)	-.006 (.016)
Proximity to Elections	.004 (.004)	.006 (.007)	.006 (.007)	.031 (.013) *
Ideology	.859 (1.277)	8.389 (3.782) *	.376 (2.547)	-6.719 (9.664)
Opposition MPs (ref.)				
Majority MPs	-1.825 (.150) **	-2.422 (.520) ***	.117 (.329)	2.206 (1.435)
Cabinet politicians	1.121 (.664) †	3.050 (.844) ***	1.097 (.357) **	2.634 (1.131)
Constant	-.266 (.255)	-3.664 (.788) ***	-1.688 (.470) ***	-2.924 (1.596) †
Variance (QT)	.076 (.232)	.000 (.290)	.000 (.648)	.000 (.323)
Variance (Parties)	.000 (.071)	.613 (.295)	.000 (.087)	.987 (.620)
N (total)	2.832	2.832	902	365
N (QTs)	115	115	115	115
N (min. politicians per QT)	14	14	3	1
N (max. politicians per QT)	37	37	17	6
AIC (empty model)	2.663 (0=3.313)	1.133 (0=2.142)	869 (0=1.056)	422 (0=476)

Note: †p<0.1; *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001 / Control for yearly differences included/ Due to the large Coef. and S.E. for the ideology variable in certain models, tests were re-run omitting this variable, but the effect of the gender variable remained consistent.

Chapter 3

Appendix L Issue salience data

Figure L.1 Share of attention devoted to all 21 issues in all attacks that were made

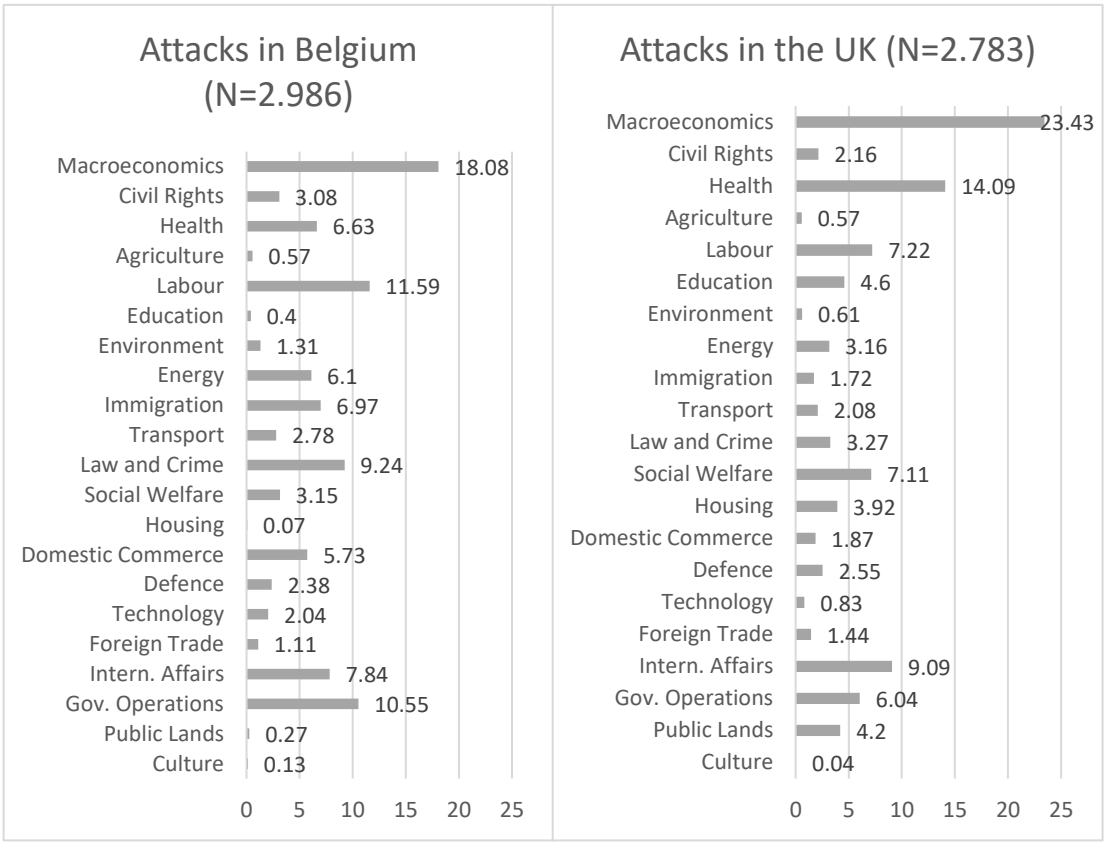


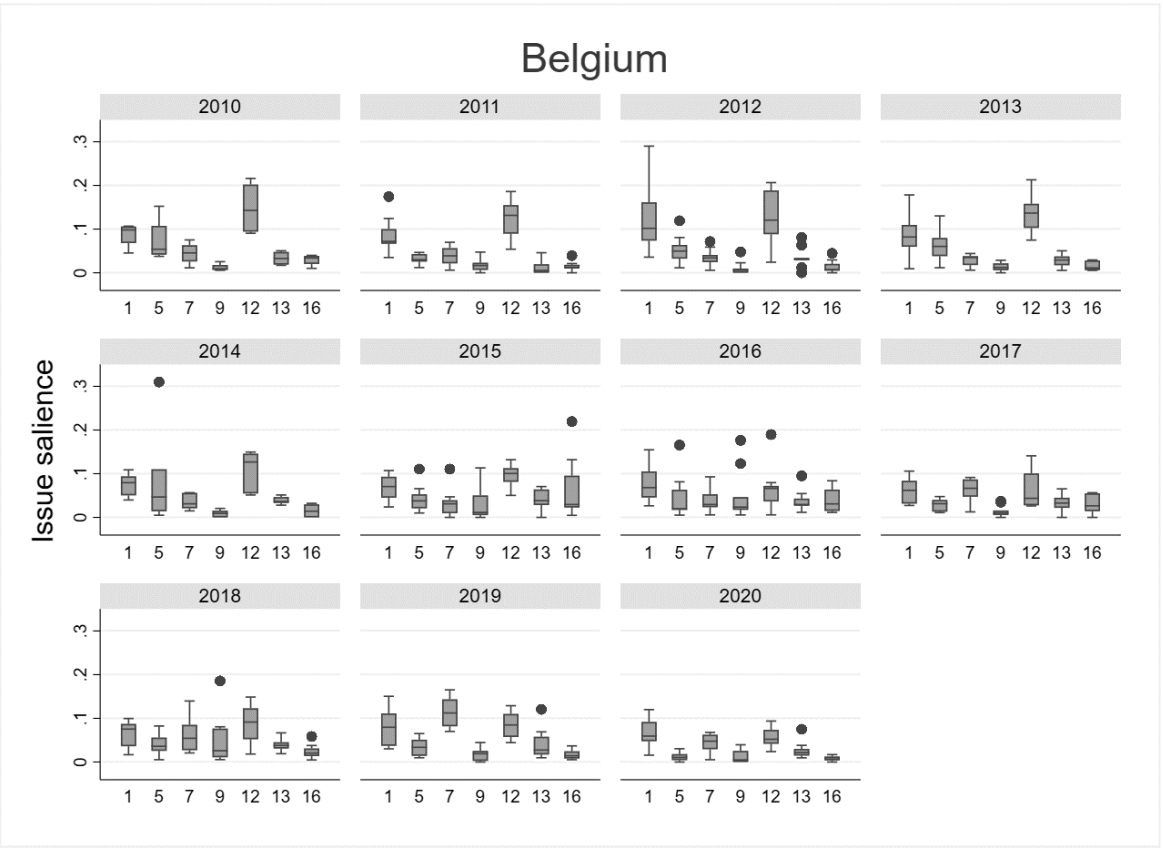
Table L.1 List of ENA issue codes in comparison to CAP codes (Belgium)

ISSUE (CAP CODE)	ISSUE (ENA)
Economy (1)	Economy
Labour (5)	Work
Environment (7)	Environment
Immigration (9)	Migration, integration and asylum seekers
Law and Order (12)	Court, Justice and Criminal Policy
Social Welfare (13)	Social security and health (only social security sub-codes): - Poverty and social exclusion - Neighbourhood development - Pensions - Social security in general - Unemployment benefits - Other benefits
Defence (16)	Defence and weapons

Table L.3 List of Ipsos MORI Issues in comparison to CAP codes (UK)

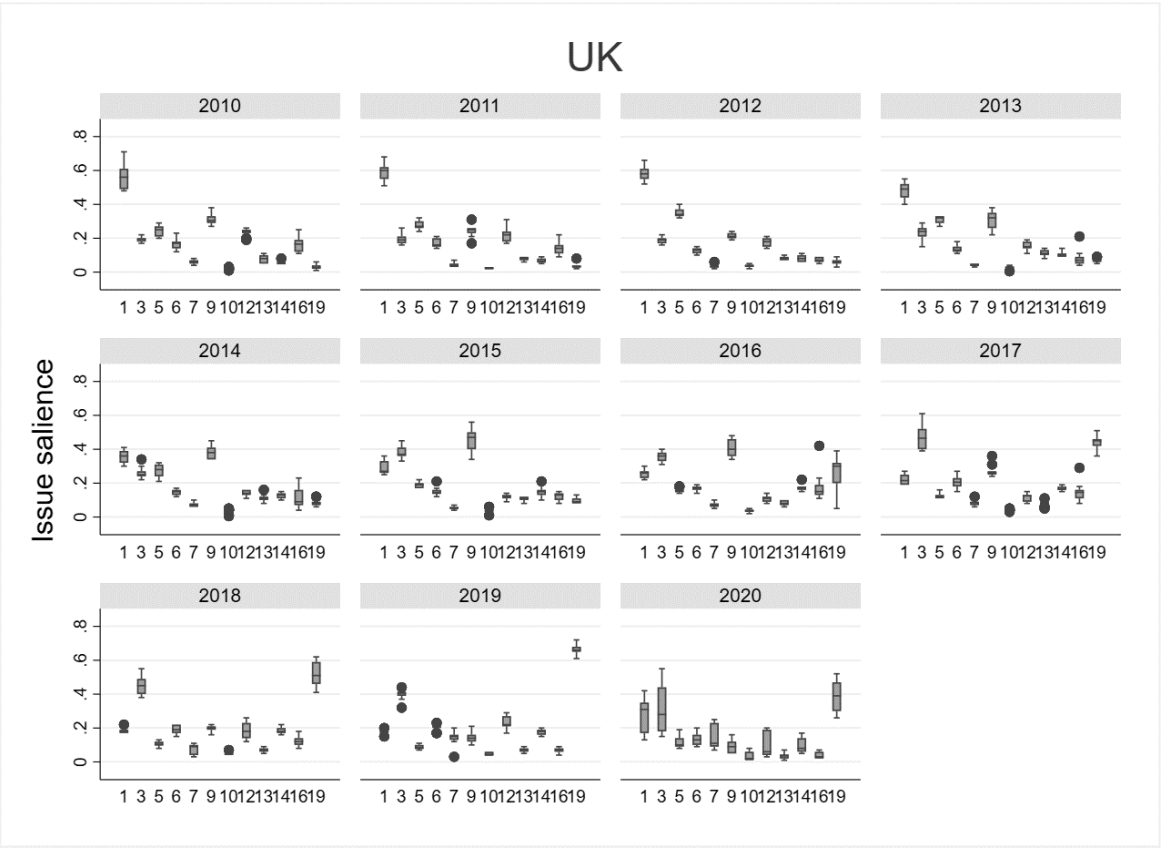
ISSUE (CAP CODE)	ISSUE (Ipsos MORI)
Economy (1)	Economy
Health (3)	NHS
Labour (5)	Unemployment/Factory closure/Lack of industry
Education (6)	Education/Schools
Environment (7)	Pollution/environment
Immigration (9)	Race relations/immigration
Transportation (10)	Transportation/Public transport
Law and Order (12)	Crime/law and order
Social Welfare (13)	Pensions/social security
Housing (14)	Housing
Defence (16)	Defence/Foreign Affairs/ Terrorism
International rel. (19)	EU/Europe/Brexit

Figure L.2 Boxplots showing the spread of the *issue salience* variable per year in Belgium



Note: X-axis indicates CAP issue codes (see Table L.1)

Figure L.3 Boxplots showing the spread of the *issue salience* variable per year in the UK



Note: X-axis indicates CAP issue codes (see Table L.2)

Appendix L.1 Issue attention in attack vs. non-attack speeches

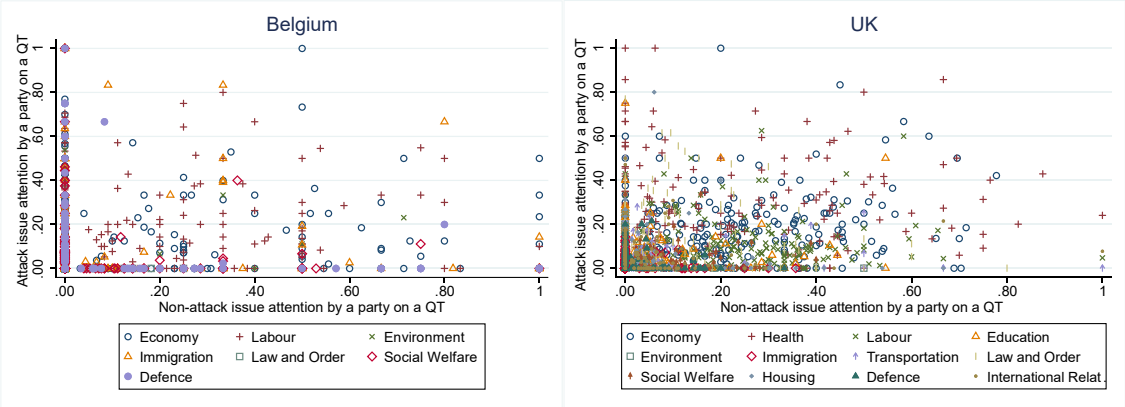
To investigate if issue attention differs between attack and non-attack speeches, we utilise the Comparative Agendas Project's (CAP) Dictionary, which categorises references to major policy issues in parliamentary speeches. Specifically, we identify references to key issues in speeches containing attacks and compare them to speeches without attacks for each party per Question Time (QT). As such, we are left with the dataset where each observation includes a party on a particular issue (e.g., Labour-Health) during a particular QT. For example, given that we examine 12 major issues from the CAP codebook for the UK, we observe each party's issue attention during QT 12 times for each issue (e.g., Conservatives-Economy on PMQ1; Conservatives-Defence on PMQ1; and so on).

There are two central variables in this data: issue attention in attack speeches and issue attention in non-attack speeches. For instance, if the Conservative party mentioned the economy 10 times in attack speeches during a PMQ session in April 2010, out of a total of 100 references to all major CAP issues in attack speeches during that PMQ sessions, the attention dedicated to the economy in attack speeches is calculated as .10. Conversely, if the Conservative party referenced the economy 25 times in non-attack speeches during a PMQ session in April 2010, out of 50 references to major CAP

issues in non-attack speeches, the attention devoted to the economy in non-attack speeches for that PMQ session is .50. Therefore, the total attention to issues for each party in attack or non-attack speeches sums up to 1. As in the main text, we calculate issue attention based on references to all major issues from the CAP codebook, but we particularly focus on issues that were studied.

The issue attention overlap between speeches with attacks and those without per party during QT is illustrated in Figure L.1.1 It's apparent that there's a difference in attention devoted to issues in attack speeches when compared to non-attack speeches. Many issues seem to receive attention either exclusively in attack speeches or in non-attack speeches, as evidenced by their placement along the x- or y-axis. This is furthermore confirmed by a weak correlation coefficient in Belgium (Pearson's r = .1106) and a relatively moderate one in the UK (Pearson's r = .3276). Even when considering all major CAP issues from the dictionary, the levels of issue attention differ between attack and non-attack speeches by a party on a QT (Pearson's r in Belgium = .0879; Pearson's r in the UK = .3770). Overall, these findings align with our initial expectation that the attention parties devote to attacking other parties on a particular issue varies from the attention they give to issues when not engaging in attacks.

Figure L.1.1 Scatter plot of issue attention in attack vs. non-attack speeches by a party in a QT



Note: Each data point corresponds to a major issue from the CAP codebook analysed in the main text. It illustrates the level of attention a particular party directed toward this issue during a QT, with attention in attack speeches on the y-axis and attention in non-attack speeches on the x-axis.

Appendix M Issue ownership data

Table M.1 and M.2 show a list of CAP issues that are used in our data while demonstrating the period for which they were measured. As such, to show the process of generating ownership per each party-issue observation, we will take examples from both Belgium and the UK. In Belgium, we assign CD&V in Belgium an ownership score of 15.07 for the CD&V-Economy observation for a period from January 2010 to May 2014 that was measured in the Belgium Election Survey of 2009 (roughly 15% of Flemish respondents assign economy to CD&V). Starting from May 2014 to December 2020 we assign CD&V an ownership score of 18.86 given that the new data was available from May 2014 (Belgium Election Survey of 2014). In the UK, due to a more frequent measurement of ownership, data can change more frequently. For example, we assign the Conservative party a measure of .35 from April 2014 to September 2014 (IPSOS MORI measure of the economy in March 2014) but change this score to .45 from October 2014 until May 2015 (IPSOS MORI measure of the economy in September 2014). For issues in which going back in time does not work (e.g. in Belgium defence ownership was only measured in 2014), we assign ownership scores that we have to the period in the past. Lastly, Table M.3 show levels of issue ownership between and within parties while Table D.4 show levels of issue ownership between each issue.

Table M.1 List of issues and years that ownership was measured for parties in Belgium

ISSUE (CAP CODE)	YEAR	NOTES
Economy (1)	2009; 2014	Measured in 2009 through taxation.
Labour (5)	2009; 2014	The level of ownership is measured by asking about (un)employment which CAP classifies as 1. However, the level of ownership on unemployment is inevitably linked to labour issues.
Environment (7)	2009; 2014	
Immigration (9)	2009; 2014	
Law and Order (12)	2009; 2014	Measured in 2014 only on crime.
Social Welfare (13)	2009	
Defence (16)	2014	

Table M.2 List of issues and years (months) that ownership was measured for parties in the UK

ISSUE (CAP CODE)	YEAR (MONTH)	NOTES
Economy (1)	2009 (9); 2010 (3; 10); 2011 (3;9); 2012 (5; 9); 2013 (3; 9); 2014 (3;9); 2015 (4); 2017 (4); 2018 (3); 2019 (12); 2020 (10)	
Health (3)	2009 (9); 2010 (3); 2011 (6); 2012 (2; 9); 2013 (9); 2014 (9); 2015 (4); 2017 (4); 2018 (6); 2019 (12); 2020 (10)	
Labour (5)	2009 (9); 2010 (3); 2012 (9); 2013 (9); 2014 (3); 2015 (4); 2020 (10)	The level of ownership is measured by asking about unemployment which CAP classifies as 1. However, the level of ownership on unemployment is inevitably linked to labour issues.
Education (6)	2009 (9); 2010 (3); 2012 (9); 2013 (9); 2014 (9); 2015 (9); 2017 (4); 2019 (12); 2020 (10)	
Environment (7)	2008 (8); 2012 (7); 2015 (4); 2019 (12); 2020 (10)	Level of ownership measured by asking about "Climate Change" in 2012.
Immigration (9)	2009 (9); 2010 (3); 2012 (9); 2013 (9); 2014 (9); 2015 (4); 2017 (4); 2019 (12); 2020 (10)	
Transportation (10)	2012 (9); 2015 (4)	

Law and Order (12)	2009 (9); 2010 (3); 2012 (9); 2013 (9); 2014 (9); 2015 (4)	
Social Welfare (13)	2008 (8); 2015 (4)	Level of ownership measured by asking about "Pensions".
Housing (14)	2008 (8); 2012 (9); 2013 (9); 2014 (9); 2015 (4)	
Defence (16)	2014 (9); 2015 (4)	
International rel. (19)	2007 (9); 2013 (2; 9), 2014 (9); 2015 (4); 2017 (4); 2018 (3; 7); 2019 (12); 2020 (10)	Level of ownership measured by asking about "Europe" and Brexit.

Table M.3 Descriptive statistics for issue ownership per party

		N	Mean	SD	Min	Max
BE	**Christian-Dem. (CD&V)**	721	19.9	18.6	1.2	61.4
	Green (Groen)	721	13.8	13.7	0.2	91.2
	National (N-VA)	721	9.1	8.2	0.7	28.4
	Liberal (Open-Vld)	721	13.2	12.9	0.3	49.6
	Radical Right (VB)	700	12.8	18.7	0.3	48.7
	Socialist (vooruit)	721	17.8	18.8	1	53.3
UK	**Labour**	1,380	24.2	7	10	46
	Conservative	1,380	25.7	7.7	9	52

Table M.4 Descriptive statistics for issue ownership per each issue

		N	Mean	SD	Min	Max
BE	**Economy**	615	13.9	14.3	0.5	49.6
	Labour	615	13.9	13.3	0.8	45.2
	Environment	615	15.8	33.2	0.3	91.2
	Immigration	615	14.9	14.0	2.2	48.7
	Law and Order	615	14.1	14.7	0.2	44
	Social Welfare	615	14.5	18.8	0.2	53.3
	Defence	615	13.9	21.4	0.6	61.4
UK	**Economy**	230	30.8	9.2	17	52
	Health	230	30.2	8.6	16	46
	Labour	230	29.3	3.4	22	40
	Education	230	29.5	3.7	23	36
	Environment	230	13	3.3	09	19
	Immigration	230	23.4	7.1	15	39
	Transportation	230	22.2	2.9	19	27
	Law and Order	230	25.6	4.7	19	33
	Social Welfare	230	24.5	2.3	22	28
	Housing	230	24.4	5.6	18	34
	Defence	230	22.7	6.3	16	30
	International Relation	230	23.7	7.1	17	48

Appendix N Minister control

Table N.1 List of Ministers we control for in Belgium

Issue (CAP code)	Minister	Party	Period
Economy (1) (Minister of Finance)	Steven Vanackere	CD&V	6 December 2011 - 5 March 2013
	Koen Geens	CD&V	5 March 2013 - 11 October 2014
	Johan Van Overtveldt	N-VA	11 October 2014 - 9 December 2018
	Alexander De Croo	Open-Vld	9 December 2018 - 1 October 2020
	Vincent Van Peteghem	CD&V	1 October 2020 - present
Economy (1) (Minister of Economy)	Vincent Van Quickenborne	Open Vld	25 November 2009 - 6 December 2011
	Johan Vande Lanotte	vooruit	6 December 2011 - 11 October 2014
	Kris Peeters	CD&V	11 October 2014 - 1 July 2019
	Wouter Beke	CD&V	1 July 2019 - 2 October 2019
	Nathalie Muylle	CD&V	2 October 2019 - 1 October 2020
Labour (5)	Monica De Coninck	vooruit	5 December 2011 - 11 October 2014
	Kris Peeters	CD&V	11 October 2014 - 1 July 2019
	Wouter Beke	CD&V	1 July 2019 - 2 October 2019
	Nathalie Muylle	CD&V	2 October 2019 - 1 October 2020
Environment (7)	-	-	-
Immigration (9)	Maggie De Block	Open-Vld	5 December 2011 - 11 October 2014
	Theo Francken	N-VA	11 October 2014 - 9 December 2018
	Maggie De Block	Open-Vld	9 December 2018 - 1 October 2020
	Sammy Mahdi	CD&V	1 October 2020 - present
Law and Order (12)	Annemie Turtelboom	Open-Vld	17 July 2009 - 6 December 2011
	Jan Jambon	N-VA	11 October 2014 - 9 December 2018
	Pieter De Crem	CD&V	9 December 2018 - 1 October 2020
	Annelies Verlinden	CD&V	1 October 2020 - present
Social Welfare (13)	Maggie De Block	Open-Vld	11 October 2014 - 1 October 2020
	Frank Vandenbroucke	vooruit	1 October 2020 - present
Defence (16)	Pieter De Crem	CD&V	21 December 2007 - 11 October 2014
	Steven Vandeput	N-VA	11 October 2014 - 12 November 2018
	Sander Loones	N-VA	12 November 2018 - 9 December 2018

Note: Environment was always held by Walloon parties in the period we studied

Appendix O Robustness checks

Appendix O.1 Government vs. Opposition

In Belgium, both opposing and governing parties abide according to H1 and H2 (Table O.1.1). Namely, while the interaction of the government vs. opposition status with salience or ownership is not significant, the main predictors are. However, running a three-way interaction between salience, ownership and status does show that when the opposition is compared to the government, the opposition does attack more on salient and issues they own. Furthermore, it appears that opposing parties are willing to attack issues they own regardless of salience while governing parties only engage in attacks on their own turf if this issue has high salience. As such, governing parties in Belgium are more prone to act in line with H3, but not opposing parties. In the UK, we run separate analyses for both major parties (Table O.1.2). We discover that the opposing (Labour) party, is more prone to abide according to the theory confirming all hypotheses, while the Conservative party is only driven by the salience of issues to attack more. These findings from both Belgium and the UK are in line with the negative campaigning literature which generally finds opposing parties as more hostile (Nai and Walter, 2015).

Table O.1.1 Multi-level regressions' output testing effects between gov. vs. opposition in Belgium

	Belgium		
	Model 1 **Salience X gov/opp**	**Model 2** **Ownership X gov/opp**	**Model 3** **Full interaction**
	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)
Independent variables			
Issue salience (t-1)	**.483 (.110) *****	**.465 (.085) *****	**.444 (.126) *****
Issue ownership	**.051 (.021) ***	**.063 (.026) ***	.046 (.035)
Issue salience (t-1) X Opp. (reference)	-.043 (.147)	-	-.337 (.200) †
Issue ownership) X Opp. (reference)	-	-.036 (.042)	-.109 (.058) †
Issue salience (t-1) X Issue ownership X Opp. (ref.)	-	-	**1.692 (.906) †**
Issue salience (t-1) X Issue ownership	-	-	.340 (.519)
Control variables			
Electoral cycle	.000 (.000)	.000 (.000)	.000 (.000)
Party status (ref. opposition)	-.028 (.011) *	-.025 (.011) *	-.011 (.014)
Having a minister (ref. no)	.006 (.011)	.006 (.011)	.008 (.011)
Niche party (ref. mainstream)	-.012 (.010)	-.013 (.010)	-.013 (.010)
Constant	.096 (.016)	.096 (.016) ***	.095 (.017)
N (observations)		4,305	
N (QTs)		103	
N (parties)		6	
N (issues)		7	
N (min. party-issue obs. per QT)		35	
N (max. party-issue obs. per QT)		42	
AIC (empty model)	-1,476 (-1,413)	-1,477 (-1,413)	-1,479 (-1,413)

Note: †p<0.1 *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.00; issue fixed-effects included in every model; t-1 is a weekly lag

Table O.1.2 Multi-level regressions' output testing effects between Conservative and Labour in the UK

	UK (Conservative)		UK (Labour)	
	Model 1 Base	**Model 2 Interaction**	**Model 3 Base**	**Model 4 Interaction**
	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)
Independent variables				
Issue salience (t-1)	**.213 (.034) *****	.083 (.151)	**.359 (.136) ****	.139 (.179)
Issue ownership	-.032 (.074)	-.145 (.148)	**.284 (.038) *****	.029 (.140)
Issue salience (t-1) X Issue ownership	-	.456 (.520)	-	**1.039 (.552) †**
Control variables				
Electoral cycle	-.000 (.000)	-.000 (.000)	-.000 (.000)	-.000 (.000)
Constant	.196 (.035) ***	.227 (.049) ***	-.006 (.036)	.046 (.045)
N (observations)	1380		1380	
N (QTs)	115		115	
N (issues)	12		12	
AIC (empty model)	-1,706 (-1629)	-1,705 (-1629)	-1,406 (-1326)	-1,408 (-1326)

Note: †p<0.1 *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.00; issue fixed-effects included in every model; t-1 is a monthly lag of salience

Appendix O.2 Electoral cycle

In both countries, we furthermore discover how the interaction of *salience* and *ownership* (H3) is stronger closer to elections as parties become more *vote*-seeking (Table O.2.1; Table O.2.2). Namely, issues that start getting higher salience closer to elections lead parties that own these issues to attack more compared to parties that do not own them.

Table O.2.1 Multi-level regressions' output testing effects throughout the electoral cycle in Belgium

	Belgium		
	Model 1 Salience X Cycle	**Model 2 Ownership X Cycle**	**Model 3 Full interaction**
	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)
Independent variables			
Issue salience (t-1)	**.317 (.146) ***	**.463 (.085) *****	**.357 (.182) †**
Issue ownership	**.051 (.021) ***	.046 (.035)	.065 (.050)
Issue salience (t-1) X Cycle	.006 (.004)	-	-.000 (.001)
Issue ownership X Cycle	-	.000 (.001)	-.002 (.001)
Issue salience (t-1) X Issue ownership	-	-	-.262 (.759)
Issue salience (t-1) X Issue ownership X Cycle	-	-	**.044 (.024) †**
Control variables			
Electoral cycle	.000 (.000)	.000 (.000)	.000 (.000)
Party status (ref. opposition)	-.031 (.009) **	-.031 (.009) **	-.031 (.009) **
Having a minister (ref. no)	.006 (.011)	.006 (.011)	.007 (.011)
Niche party (ref. mainstream)	-.012 (.010)	-.013 (.010)	-.014 (.010)
Constant	.104 (.017) ***	.097 (.017) ***	.094 (.034) **
N (observations)		4,305	
N (QTs)		103	
N (parties)		6	
N (issues)		7	
N (min. party-issue obs. per QT)		35	
N (max. party-issue obs. per QT)		42	
AIC (empty model)	-1,478 (-1,413)	-1,476 (-1,413)	-1,479 (-1,413)

Note: †p<0.1 *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.00; issue fixed-effects included in every model; t-1 in Belgium is a weekly lag

Table O.2.2 Multi-level regressions' output testing effects throughout the electoral cycle in the UK

	UK		
	Model 1 Salience X Cycle	**Model 2 Ownership X Cycle**	**Model 3 Full interaction**
	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)
Independent variables			
Issue salience (t-1)	**.196 (.034) *****	**.253 (.025) *****	.175 (.116)
Issue ownership	**.159 (.048) ****	.097 (.064)	.108 (.120)
Issue salience (t-1) X Cycle	**.003 (.001) ***	-	**-.009 (.004) ***
Issue ownership X Cycle	-	.002 (.002)	**-.008 (.004) ***
Issue salience (t-1) X Issue ownership	-	-	.036 (.428)
Issue salience (t-1) X Issue ownership X Cycle	-	-	**.050 (.017) ****
Control variables			
Electoral cycle	-.005 (.000) *	-.000 (.000)	.001 (.000)
Constant	.084 (.021) ***	.094 (.023) ***	.095 (.034) **
N (observations)		2,760	
N (QTs)		115	
N (parties)		2	
N (issues)		12	
N (min. party-issue obs. per QT)		24	
N (max. party-issue obs. per QT)		24	
AIC (empty model)	-3,096 (-2,955)	-3,091 (-2,955)	-3,105 (-2,955)

Note: †p<0.1 *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.00; issue fixed-effects included in every model; t-1 in the UK is a monthly lag

Appendix O.3 Having a minister

Next, interacting ministerial role in Belgium does show how having a minister on an issue party owns puts less pressure on parties to abide according to H2, and in extension, also H3 (Table O.3). Therefore, a party that enjoys incumbency perks and has the means to provide policy change and easily acquire and maintain ownership will be less pressured to attack this issue. Interestingly, having a minister on an issue you do not own leads to more attacks on this issue, possibly trying to build an ownership profile from a unique position as a party holds this portfolio in the executive government without pre-existing high ownership.

Table O.3 Multi-level regressions' output testing effect of having a minister on an issue in Belgium

	Belgium		
	Model 1 Salience X Minister	**Model 2 Ownership X Minister**	**Model 3 Full interaction**
	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)
Independent variables			
Issue salience (t-1)	**.502 (.090) *****	**.456 (.085) *****	**.331 (.108) ****
Issue ownership	**.050 (.021) ***	**.063 (.022) ****	.006 (.030)
Issue salience (t-1) X No minister (ref.)	-.277 (.204)	-	.415 (.348)
Issue ownership X No minister (ref.)	-	**-.140 (.061) ***	.023 (.086)
Issue salience (t-1) X Issue ownership	-	-	**1.214 (.436) ****
Issue salience (t-1) X Issue ownership X No minister (ref.)	-	-	**-4.271 (1.55) ****

Control variables			
Electoral cycle	.000 (.000)	.000 (.000)	.000 (.000)
Party status (ref. opposition)	-.030 (.009) **	-.031 (.009) **	-.031 (.009) **
Having a minister (ref. no)	.020 (.015)	.035 (.016) *	.023 (.023)
Niche party (ref. mainstream)	-.012 (.010)	-.012 (.010)	-.013 (.010)
Constant	.096 (.016) ***	.095 (.016) ***	.105 (.016) ***
N (observations)		4,305	
N (QTs)		103	
N (parties)		6	
N (issues)		7	
N (min. party-issue obs. per QT)		35	
N (max. party-issue obs. per QT)		42	
AIC (empty model)	-1,478 (-1,413)	-1,481 (-1,413)	-1,490 (-1,413)

Note: †p<0.1 *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.00; issue fixed-effects included in every model; t-1 in Belgium is a weekly lag

Appendix O.4 Niche vs. Mainstream

Furthermore, for Belgium, we interact niche status with our main interaction. Interacting party profiles does not lead to different outcomes and we confirm H1 and H3 that *salience* leads to more attacks, especially if a party *owns* this issue (Table O.4). However, it is predominantly niche parties that abide according to H2 by attack issues they own.

Table O.4 Multi-level regressions' output testing effect of niche vs. mainstream parties in Belgium

	Belgium		
	Model 1 Salience X Mainstream	**Model 2 Ownership X Mainstream**	**Model 3 Full interaction**
	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)
Independent variables			
Issue salience (t-1)	**.498 (.101) *** **	**.464 (.085) *** **	**.304 (.136) ***
Issue ownership	**.051 (.021) ***	.003 (.034)	-.055 (.044)
Issue salience (t-1) X Mainstream (ref.)	-.108 (.160)	-	.027 (.199)
Issue ownership X Mainstream (ref.)	-	**.085 (.048) †**	**.124 (.062) ***
Issue salience (t-1) X Issue ownership	-	-	**1.349 (.632) ***
Issue salience (t-1) X Issue ownership X Mainstream (ref.)	-	-	-.929 (.855)
Control variables			
Electoral cycle	.000 (.000)	.000 (.000)	.000 (.000)
Party status (ref. opposition)	-.031 (.009) **	-.029 (.009) **	-.031 (.009) **
Having a minister (ref. no)	.006 (.011)	.006 (.011)	.007 (.011)
Niche party (ref. mainstream)	-.007 (.013)	-.024 (.012) †	-.025 (.015)
Constant	.095 (.016) ***	.106 (.017) ***	.112 (.017) ***
N (observations)		4,305	
N (QTs)		103	
N (parties)		6	
N (issues)		7	
N (min. party-issue obs. per QT)		35	
N (max. party-issue obs. per QT)		42	
AIC (empty model)	-1,476 (-1,413)	-1,479 (-1,413)	(-1,413)

Note: †p<0.1 *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.00; issue fixed-effects included in every model; t-1 in Belgium is a weekly lag

Appendix O.5 Salience during debates

Next, we check whether our results hold when controlling for the salience of issues during QTs. Salience during QTs is calculated using the CAP dictionary which classifies references to all major policy issues from the CAP. As such, the salience presents the share of references to a specific issue during a QT. Using this measure of salience, we confirm all of our hypotheses. Parties issue more attacks on issues that have high salience (H1) during debates (which is also amplified by lagged issue salience variable used in main models), issues that they own (H2), and in case a party is an owner of a salient issue, it employs significantly more attacks on this issue (H3).

Table O.5 Multi-level mixed-effects regressions' output using attention devoted to attacking others on an issue during QTs

	Belgium		**UK**	
	Model 1 Base	**Model 2 Interaction**	**Model 3 Base**	**Model 4 Interaction**
	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)
Independent variables				
Issue salience in QT (t-1)	**.743 (.038) *****	**.665 (.048) *****	**1.030 (.034) *****	**.502 (.113) *****
Issue ownership	**.049 (.021) ***	.021 (.023)	**.135 (.046) ****	-.010 (.053)
Issue salience in QT (t-1) X Issue ownership		**.544 (.205) ****		**1.833 (.374) *****
Control variables				
Electoral cycle	.000 (.000)	.000 (.000)	-.000 (.000)	-.000 (.000)
Party status (ref. opposition)	-.031 (.009) **	-.031 (.009) **		
Having a minister (ref. no)	.005 (.010)	.004 (.010)		
Niche party (ref. mainstream)	-.013 (.010)	-.012 (.010)		
Constant	.055 (.015) ***	.060 (.015) ***	-.013 (.019)	.026 (.019)
N (observations)	4,305		2,760	
N (QTs)	103		115	
N (parties)	6		2	
N (issues)	7		12	
N (min. party-issue obs. per QT)	35		24	
N (max. party-issue obs. per QT)	42		24	
AIC (empty model)	-1,799 (-1,413)	-1,804 (-1,413)	-3,776 (-2,955)	-3,797 (-2,955)

Note: †p<0.1 *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.00; issue fixed-effects included in every model; t-1 in Belgium is a weekly lag and, in the UK, a monthly lag of salience

Appendix O.6 2020 omitted

Given that the year 2020 may be skewing our results due to health becoming a highly salient issue and causing the round-the-flag effect (Louwerse et al., 2021), we also explore if omitting this year in our models lead to different outcomes (Table O.6). Re-running main models with omitted 2020 shows the same results. We confirm all hypotheses in both Belgium and the UK.

Table F6.1 Multi-level regressions' output testing effects of omitted 2020

	Belgium		UK	
	Model 1 Base	**Model 2 Interaction**	**Model 3 Base**	**Model 4 Interaction**
	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)
Independent variables				
Issue salience (t-1)	**.456 (.090) ***	**.293 (.109) ****	**.281 (.026) *****	-.024 (.093)
Issue ownership	**.047 (.021) ***	-.007 (.030)	**.131 (.052) ***	.097 (.091)
Issue salience (t-1) X Issue ownership	-	**1.152 (.437) ****	-	**.695 (.333) ***
Control variables				
Electoral cycle	.000 (.000)	.000 (.000)	-.000 (.000)	-.000 (.000)
Party status (ref. opposition)	-.030 (.010) **	-.031 (.010) **	-	-
Having a minister (ref. no)	-.002 (.012)	-.001 (.012)	-	-
Niche party (ref. mainstream)	-.014 (.011)	-.015 (.011)	-	-
Constant	.111 (.017) ***	.119 (.017) ***	.093 (.022) ***	.131 (.029) ***
N (observations)	3,843		2,496	
N (QTs)	92		104	
N (parties)	6		2	
N (issues)	7		12	
N (min. party-issue obs. per QT)	35		24	
N (max. party-issue obs. per QT)	42		24	
AIC (empty model)	-1,129 (-1067)	-1,134 (-1067)	-2,984 (-2,836)	-2,986 (-2,836)

Note: †p<0.1 *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.00; issue fixed-effects included in every model; t-1 in Belgium is a weekly lag and, in the UK, a monthly lag of salience

Appendix O.7 Count of attacks / Binary ownership

We also transformed our dependent variable to a count measure that indicates the total number of attacks employed on an issue during a particular QT. Given that the variance is greater than the mean for our count dependent variable due to overdispersion (see footnote 1 in the main text), we employ negative binomial regressions which are appropriate for such dependent variables (Table O.7.1). We furthermore specify our models by indicating the panel structure of our data through party-issue observations that re-appear through QTs, that is, our model has party-issue fixed effects included. As is reported in the table, the results corroborate both H1 and H2. Therefore, we can expect a greater number of attacks to be employed on both salient issues and issues parties own, however, the interaction between salience and ownership in these models is insignificant. In addition, we also convert the ownership variable into a binary form, indicating whether a party is the owner of an issue based on having the highest score or not. By including this measure, we find consistent results (see Table O.7.2). Our analysis reveals that when high salience is combined with being the primary owner of an issue, it leads to increased attack attention on that particular issue compared to other parties.

Table O.7.1 Negative binomial regressions' output using the count dependent variable

	Belgium		UK	
	Model 1 Base	**Model 2 Interaction**	**Model 3 Base**	**Model 4 Interaction**
	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)
Independent variables				
Issue salience (t-1)	**5.599 (1.007) *****	**5.256 (1.369) *****	**2.626 (.275) *****	**2.987 (1.107) ****
Issue ownership	**1.367 (.493) ****	**1.230 (.614) ***	**1.493 (.698) ***	1.843 (1.251)
Issue salience (t-1) X Issue ownership	-	2.119 (5.630)		-1.271 (3.782)
Control variables				
Electoral cycle	.005 (.003) †	.005 (.003) †	.008 (.002) ***	.008 (.002) ***
Party status (ref. opposition)	-.849 (.188) ***	-.851 (.188) ***		
Having a minister (ref. no)	.082 (.201)	.082 (.201)		
Niche party (ref. mainstream)	-.824 (.199) ***	-.823 (.199) ***		
Constant	-2.072 (.230) ***	-2.046 (.240) ***	-1.608 (.298) ***	-1.708 (.421) ***
N (observations)	3,996		2,760	
N (QTs)	103		115	
N (parties)	6		2	
N (issues)	7		12	
AIC (empty model)	3,232 (3,322)	3,233 (3,322)	5,086 (5,240)	5,087 (5,240)

Note: †p<0.1 *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.00; issue fixed-effects included in every model; t-1 in Belgium is a weekly lag and, in the UK, a monthly lag of salience; N is lower in Belgium due to three groups of party-issue observations having no attacks (309 observations) preventing the model from including them in the analysis

Table O.7.2 Multi-level mixed-effects regression outputs using the binary ownership variable

	Belgium		UK	
	Model 1 Base	**Model 2 Interaction**	**Model 3 Base**	**Model 4 Interaction**
	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)
Independent variables				
Issue salience (t-1)	**.484 (.086) *****	.414 (.093) ***	.260 (.026) ***	.210 (.032) ***
Issue ownership (ref. no)	**.030 (.011) ***	.009 (.015)	.004 (.006)	-.012 (.009)
Issue salience (t-1) x Issue ownership (ref. no)		**.417 (.204) ***		**.099 (.039) ***
Control variables				
Electoral cycle	.000 (.000) †	.000 (.000)	.000 (.000)	.000 (.000)
Party status (ref. opposition)	-.029 (.009) **	-.030 (.009) **		
Having a minister (ref. no)	.006 (.011)	.007 (.011)		
Niche party (ref. mainstream)	-.014 (.011)	-.015 (.011)		
Constant	.060 (.025) *	.063 (.025) *	.126 (.018) ***	.134 (.018) ***
N (observations)	4,305		2,760	
N (QTs)	103		115	
N (parties)	6		2	
N (issues)	7		12	
N (min. party-issue obs. per QT)	35		24	
N (max. party-issue obs. per QT)	42		24	
AIC (empty model)	-1.477 (-1.418)	-1.479 (-1.418)	-3.061 (-2.948)	-3.064 (-2.948)

Note: †p<0.1 *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.00

Appendix O.8 Other models

Lastly, we also utilise different models to test our theory (Table O.8). Tobit regressions are used as an appropriate method for skewed dependent variables with multiple zeros. While these models do not show a significant impact of the interaction *between* ownership and salience (H3), they do confirm that salience and ownership lead to more attacks in Belgium and the UK showing strong support for both H1 and H2 with Models 1 and 3 being better for explaining the variation in our DV – see AIC scores. Regardless, the weakness of these models in comparison to the ones in the main text is that they do not allow us to account for the multi-level and panel nature of our data where observations reappear through time.

Table O.8 Tobit regressions' output

	Belgium		**UK**	
	Model 1 Base	**Model 2 Interaction**	**Model 3 Base**	**Model 4 Interaction**
	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)
Independent variables				
Issue salience (t-1)	**3.953 (.773) *****	**3.493 (.960) *****	**.635 (.075) *****	**.436 (.258) †**
Issue ownership	**.762 (.179) *****	**.596 (.274) ***	**.380 (.134) ****	.192 (.269)
Issue salience (t-1) X Issue ownership		2.917 (3.626)		.734 (.912)
Control variables				
Electoral cycle	.002 (.002)	.002 (.002)	.000 (.000)	.000 (.000)
Party status (ref. opposition)	-.540 (.092) ***	-.546 (.093) ***		
Having a minister (ref. no)	.117 (.107)	.120 (.107)		
Niche party (ref. mainstream)	-.252 (.083) **	-.254 (.083) **		
Constant	-1.227 (.138) ***	-1.195 (.143) ***	-.217 (.057) ***	-.167 (.084) *
N (observations)	4,305		2,760	
N (QTs)	103		115	
N (parties)	6		2	
N (issues)	7		12	
AIC (empty model)	2,730 (3,001)	2,732 (3,001)	2,070 (2,597)	2,071 (2,597)

Note: †p<0.1 *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.00; issue fixed-effects included in every model; t-1 in Belgium is a weekly lag and, in the UK, a monthly lag of salience

Chapter 4

Appendix P Descriptive information on electoral cycles and parties

Table P.1 Electoral cycles and parties examined

Country	Electoral Cycle Length	Electoral Cycle Type	Parties Examined
Belgium	January 2010 – June 2010	Incomplete - Snap elections	CD&V; DéFI; Ecolo; Groen; LDD; MR; N-VA; Open Vld; PS; VB; cdH; sp.a
	June 2010 – May 2014	Complete - Regular elections	CD&V; DéFI; Ecolo; Groen; LDD; MR; N-VA; Open Vld; PS; VB; cdH; sp.a
	May 2014 – May 2018	Complete - Regular elections	CD&V; DéFI; Ecolo; Groen; MR; N-VA; Open Vld; PP; PS; PVDA-PTB; VB; cdH; sp.a
	May 2018 - December 2020	Unknown	CD&V; DéFI; Ecolo; Groen; MR; N-VA; Open Vld; PS; PVDA-PTB; VB; cdH; sp.a
Croatia	January 2010 – December 2011	Complete - Regular elections	HDSSB: HDZ; HNS; HSLS; HSP; HSS; HSU; Hrvatski laburisti; IDS; SDP; SDSS
	December 2011 – November 2015	Complete - Regular elections	HDSSB; HDZ; HNS; HSP AS; HSS; HSU; Hrvatski laburisti; IDS; OraH; Reformisti; SDP; SDSS
	November 2015 – September 2016	Incomplete - Snap elections	HDSSB; HDZ; HNS; HSLS; HSP AS; HSS; HSU; Hrvatski laburisti; IDS; MOST; SDP; SDSS
	September 2016 - July 2020	Complete - Regular election	365 MB; HDSS; HDZ; HNS; HSS; HSU; IDS; MOST; SDP; SDSS; Živi zid;
	July 2020 – December 2021	Unknown	HDZ; HKS; HNS; HSLS; HSS; HSU; IDS; MOST; Reformisti; SDP; SDSS
UK	January 2010 – May 2010	Complete - Regular election	Con; Lab; LD; PC; SNP
	May 2010 – May 2015	Complete - Regular election	Con; Green; Lab; LD; PC; SNP; UKIP
	May 2015 – June 2017	Incomplete - Snap election	Con; Green; Lab; LD; PC; SNP; UKIP
	June 2017 – December 2019	Incomplete - Snap election	Con; Green; Lab; LD; PC; SNP
	December 2019 – December 2020	Unknown	Con; Green; Lab; LD; PC; SNP; UKIP

Note: The table provides descriptive information on the electoral cycles and parties examined. We examined the attack behaviour of all parties that had seats in parliament in an electoral cycle and are also part of the CHES dataset. The abbreviation list for parties is available in Table P.2.

Table P.2 Parties' abbreviations

Country	Abbreviation	Party Name	Party Name (English)
Belgium	CD&V	Christen-Democratisch en Vlaams	Christian Democratic and Flemish
	DéFI	Démocrate, Fédéraliste, Indépendant	Democratic, Federalist, Independent
	Ecolo	-	Ecologist
	Groen	-	Green
	MR	Mouvement Réformateur	Reformist Movement
	N-VA	Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie	New Flemish Alliance
	Open Vld	Open Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten	Open Flemish Liberals and Democrats
	PP	Parti populaire	People's Party
	PS	Parti socialiste	Socialist Party
	PVDA-PTB	Parti du Travail de Belgique	Workers' Party of Belgium
	VB	Vlaams Belang	Flemish Interest
	cdH (now Les Engagés)	Centre Démocrate Humaniste	Humanist Democratic Centre
	sp.a (now Vooruit)	Socialistische Partij Anders	Socialist Party Differently
Croatia	364 MB	Bandić Milan 365 - Stranka rada i solidarnosti	Bandić Milan 365 – Labour and Solidarity Party
	HDSSB	Hrvatski demokratski savez Slavonije i Baranje	Croatian Democratic Alliance of Slavonia and Baranja
	HDZ	Hrvatska demokratska zajednica	Croatian Democratic Union
	HSLS	Hrvatska socijalno-liberalna stranka	Croatian Social Liberal Party
	HSP	Hrvatska stranka prava	Croatian Party of Rights
	HSP AS	Hrvatska stranka prava dr. Ante Starčević	Croatian Party of Rights — Dr. Ante Starčević
	HSS	The Croatian Peasant Party	Croatian Peasant Party
	HSU	Croatian Party of Pensioners	Hrvatska stranka umirovljenika
	Hrvatski laburisti	-	Croatian Labourists
	IDS	Istarski demokratski sabor	Istrian Democratic Assembly
	ORaH	Održivi razvoj Hrvatske	Sustainable Development of Croatia
	Reformisti	Narodna stranka - reformisti	People's Party - Reformists

	SDP	Socijaldemokratska partija Hrvatske	Social Democratic Party of Croatia
	SDSS	Samostalna Demokratska Srpska Stranka	Independent Democratic Serb Party
UK	Con	The Conservative Party	-
	Lab	The Labour Party	-
	LD	The Liberal Democrats	-
	Green	The Green Party	-
	PC	Plaid Cymru	-
	SNP	Scottish National Party	-
	UKIP	UK Independence Party	-

Appendix Q Coding scheme for content of negativity in Belgium and Croatia

Table Q.1 Coding scheme examples from Belgium

ATTACK TYPE	SPEECH CONTRIBUTION
Policy Civil	***You say that you will provide supervision to the scenario. Nope! What is requested is to have the worst scenario evaluated,*** *the one that costs the most, by the Ondraf. Then Engie Electrabel would pay the necessary funds, even if they are reimbursed afterwards.* Jean-Marc Nollet, Ecolo, 12.7.2018
Policy Uncivil	*Second, Prime Minister, on prisons, I hear you repeat what you said last week. How much did we advance? Zero centimeter. This is the reality!* ***After three weeks of strike in the prisons, we did not advance in a centimeter! The prison union manager says this government destroys public services. You are not a rogue state, but a thug state.*** Marco Van Hees, PVDA, 19.5.2016
Trait Civil	***Madam minister, your answer was one of the strangest answers I heard in this parliament. "I thought so." "It was just an idea." "Maybe that could be a good thing." You are a minister, you should not think, you have to do!*** Kristof Calvo, Goren, 16.1.2014
Trait Uncivil	*Mr Di Rupo, I must confess that I have a certain admiration for you. After a pleiade of MPs here ask you questions, you manage to say nothing (…)* ***You proclaim blah blah blah and don't answer any specific question except the one about 0.7%.*** Jan Jambon, N-VA, 8.11.2012.
Policy and Trait Civil	*Dear colleagues of the N-VA,* ***I understand that you are getting nervous, because this week the N-VA communicated that the content of the migration pact was very problematic. However, the N-VA has abstained during the discussions in the European Parliament. It was so problematic that people did not even want to vote against it. Friends, if you have problems with the pact, act as drivers. Sit down at the table, pronounce it, because all other people of the majority have apparently read something else. Stop your quarrel. Act as drivers.*** Meryame Kitir, sp.a, 22.11.2018
Policy and Trait Uncivil	***Mr. State Secretary, I call you a kamikaze pilot, because you are launching a new escape route plan this week without consulting the Flemish Region, without consulting the Brussels Region, even without consulting the Brussels Airport airport,*** *who nevertheless an interested party in the file seems.* Tanguy Veys, VB, 19.7.2012

Table Q.2 Coding scheme examples from Croatia

ATTACK TYPE	SPEECH CONTRIBUTION
Policy **Civil**	***I followed the statements given by the respected Mr. Marić*** *(…). However,* ***the answer that it is difficult to think about the alternative is not an answer that is acceptable to the workers, nor to the inhabitants of Istria or Pula, because I believe that none of us is not a goal to extinguish production in Uljanik, as well as in other shipyards and that another marina has been coined in their place. Thank you very much.*** Peđa Grbin, SDP, 17.1.2019
Policy **Uncivil**	*Škegrina's policies from the 1990s were remembered for the citizens in that it brought to the depletion of workers and enormous enrichment, the rich in small number of people, the so-called, tycoon.* ***They remained remembered for the idea of 200 wealthy families and the people as a livestock of a small tooth. Is the reduction of income tax rates from 45% to 40% for those with the highest incomes Mrs. Prime Minister's return to that policy?*** Marin Jurjević, SDP, 19.5.2010
Trait **Civil**	*Do not allow these escapades* ***by the Prime Minister who is now taking the right to interpret the Rules of Procedure, though no law, nor this Rules of Procedure allow. And I think the Rules of Procedure have been injured there too. He should holds his legal opinion for himself.*** Davorin Mlakar, HDZ, 10.4.2013
Trait **Uncivil**	*Unfortunately,* ***I have to say that you were really limpid, I knew exactly what you would say.*** *(…)* ***I think you will all soon pray to God, that we are not real, and not just Gordan Jandroković to prevent us from coming to Vinkovci Autumn, so that you could dancing a fir wheel in peace.*** Bruna Esih, NHR, 19.9.2018
Policy and Trait **Civil**	***The right of a serious country is to have one serious prime minister. Unfortunately, Croatia does not have this. (…) I am sorry that this government has no will and strength and responsibility to release one law in a parliamentary procedure that had to be improved and it was not a big job. Thank you very much.*** Anka Mrak-Taritaš, GLAS, 24.4.2019
Policy and Trait **Uncivil**	*Namely, three weeks ago you also announced new public investment projects this time worth HRK 12.8 billion.* ***And instead of using these projects to correct the injustice to Slavonia and Baranja, with these projects, you put salt on the early impoverished and neglected Slavonia. (…) I would say our people, so where your soul Mrs. Prime Minister. What did Slavonia and Baranja deserve such a stepmother relationship?*** Dinko Burić, HDSSB, 6.4.2011

Appendix R Descriptive information and graphs

Descriptive statistics of parties' average attack behaviour in a QT session are available in Table R.1. On average, approximately one-third of speech acts in a QT session consist of attacks. Across all three countries, over 70% of parties' attacks in QT sessions are focused on policy criticism. However, there are notable differences in the average use of trait and uncivil attacks among the three countries. Trait attacks on average make up 40% of the attacks in a QT session in Belgium and the UK, while in Croatia, they account for over 60%. Additionally, although all three countries' parties employ uncivil attacks less frequently, the average usage of incivility in a QT is higher in Belgium, with 25% of attack speech acts including incivility, compared to 17% in the UK and 18% in Croatia.

Table R.1 Parties' average attack behaviour in QT (in %)

Country		Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Belgium (N=103)	**Attacks**	**33.23**	**8.85**	**10.60**	**68.96**
	- Policy attacks	83.77	12.59	37.5	100
	- Trait attacks	42.29	16.51	0	75
	- Uncivil attacks	25.33	11.58	0	61.9
Croatia (N=43)	**Attacks**	**36.73**	**8.53**	**22.88**	**58.57**
	- Policy attacks	72.29	11.47	49.23	95.55
	- Trait attacks	60.85	12.54	37.03	87.30
	- Uncivil attacks	17.76	6.99	0	34.92
UK (N=115)	**Attacks**	**30.95**	**8.91**	**9.43**	**50.79**
	- Policy attacks	72.05	13.64	25	100
	- Trait attacks	47.29	14.97	8.33	84.61
	- Uncivil attacks	17.09	10.54	0	52.38

Figure R.1 Share of attacks, policy attacks, trait attacks, and uncivil attacks per QT over time

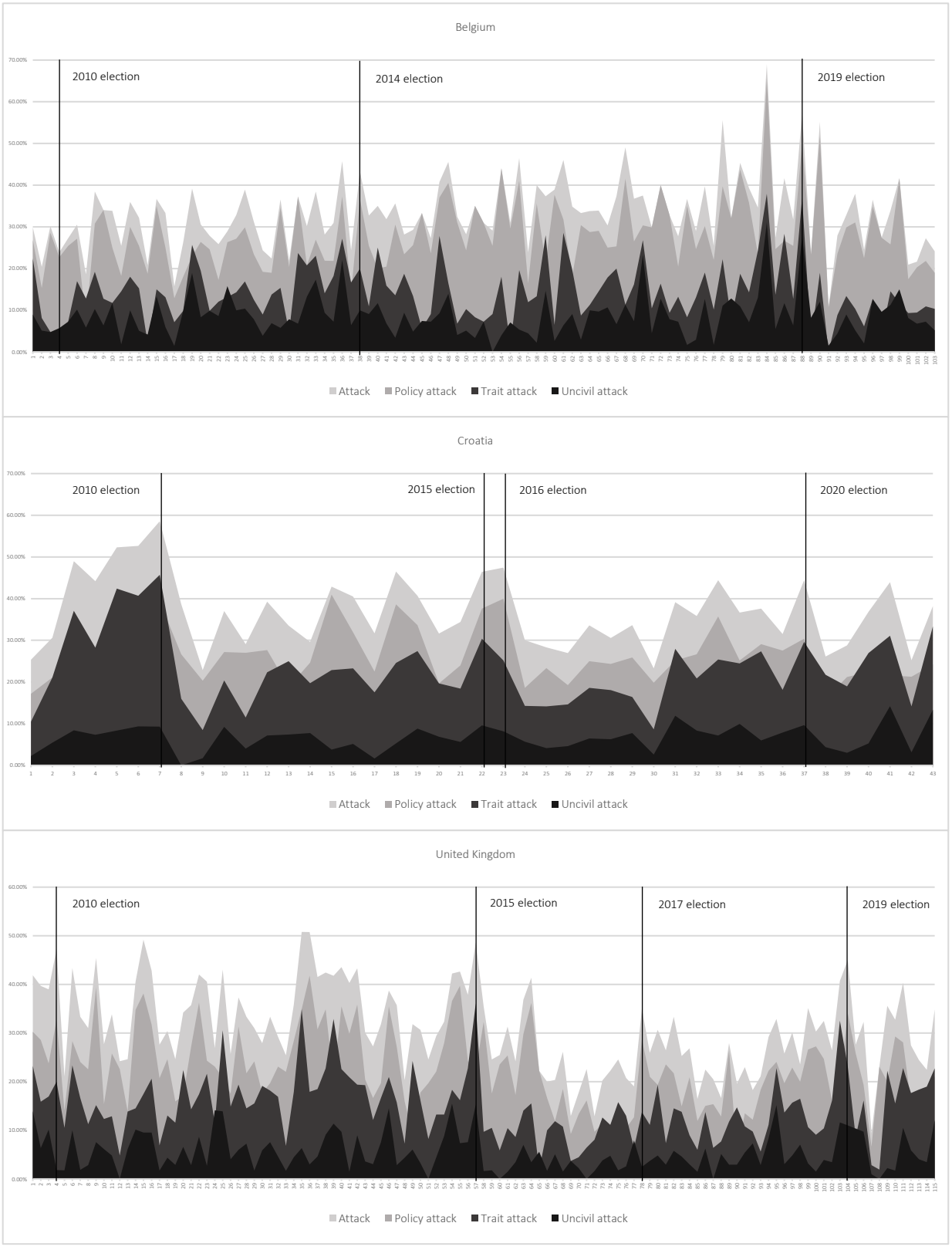
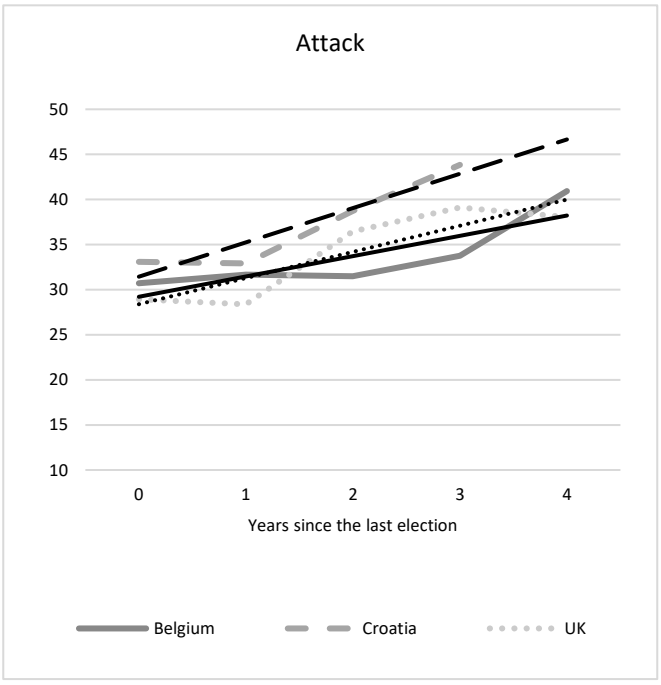
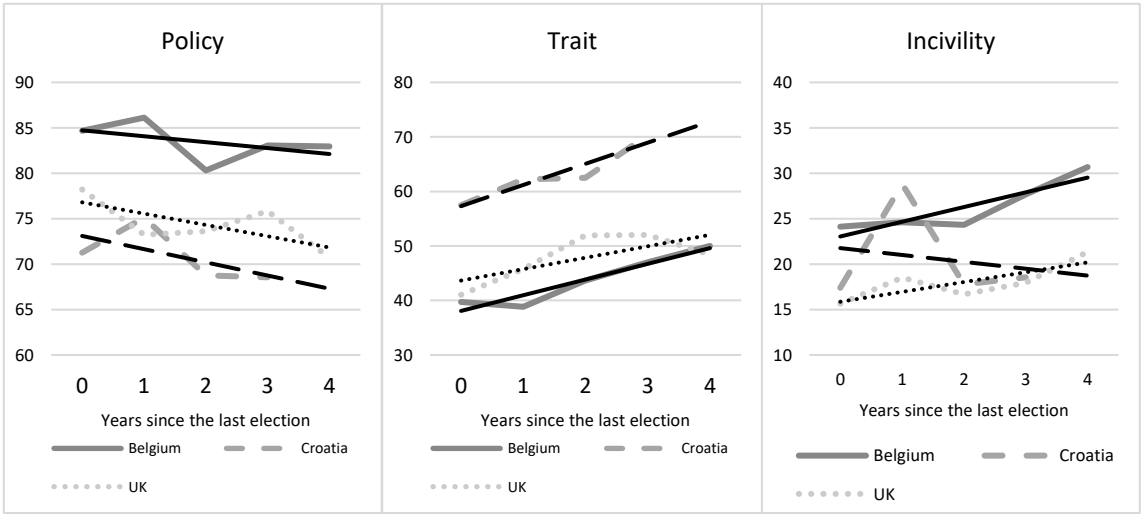


Figure R.2 Share of attacks in all speeches (y-axis) per year since the last election



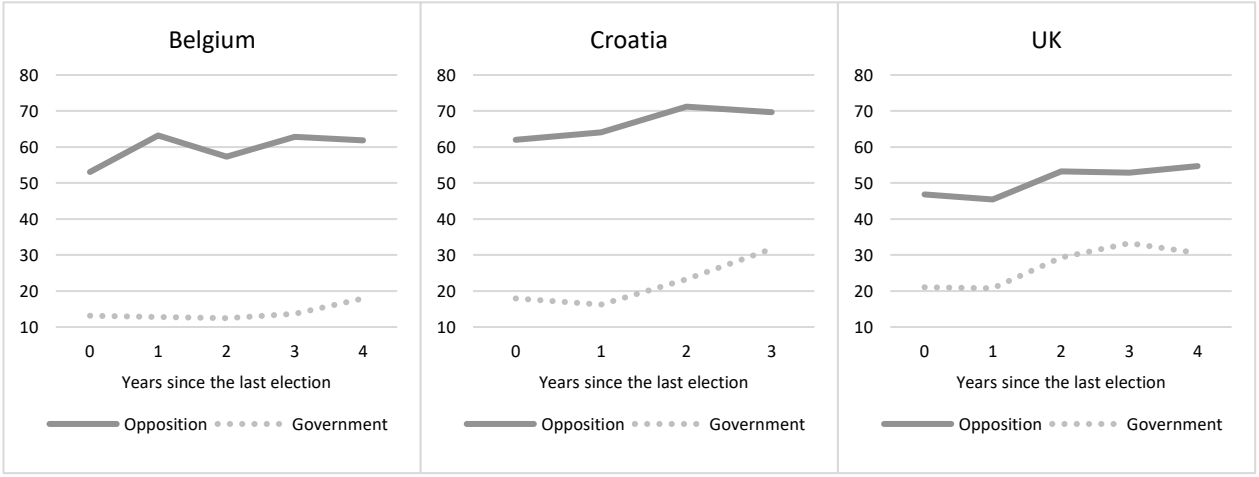
Note: Trend lines are indicated in black and represent countries' patterns (e.g. dotted black trend line represents the UK)

Figure R.3 Share of policy, trait, and uncivil criticism in all attacks (y-axis) per year since the last election



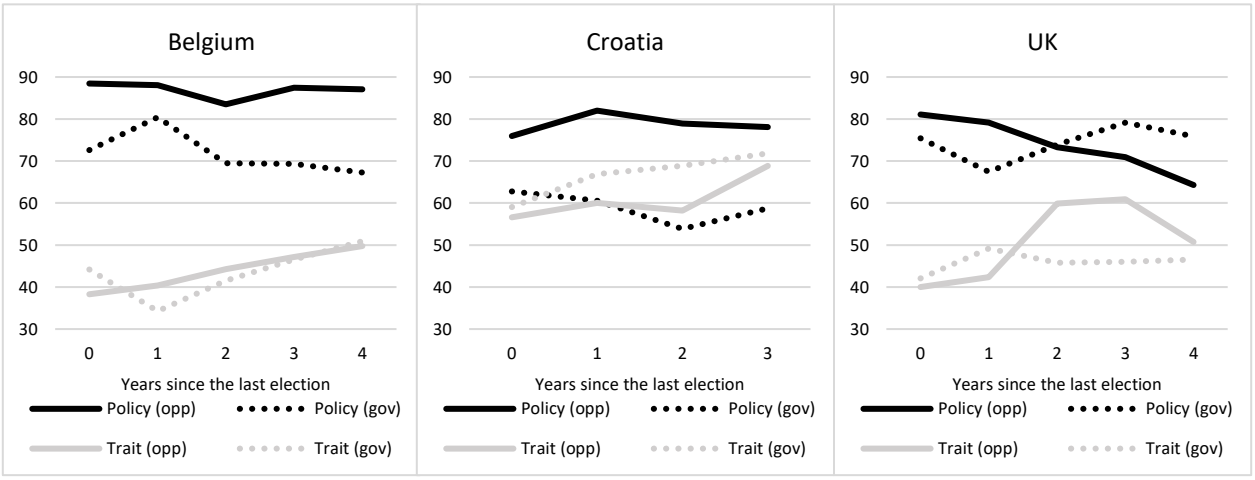
Note: Trend lines are indicated in black and represent countries' patterns (e.g. dotted black trend line represents the UK)

Figure R.4 Government and opposition parties' share of attacks in all speech acts (y-axis) per year since the last election



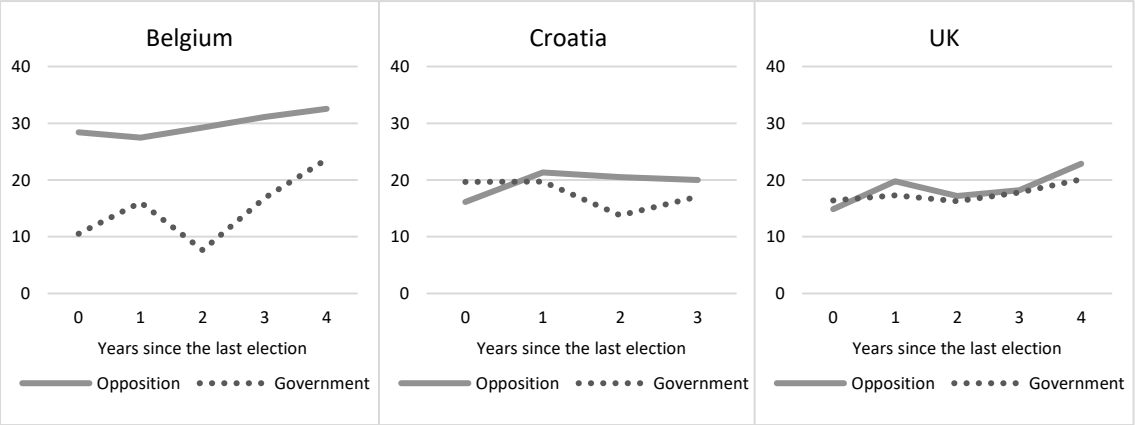
Note: A completed electoral cycle lasts 4 years in Croatia and 5 years in Belgium and the UK. The length of the electoral cycle is displayed on the x-axis.

Figure R.5 Government and opposition parties' share of policy and trait attacks in all attacks (y-axis) per year since the last election.



Note: A complete electoral cycle lasts 4 years in Croatia and 5 years in Belgium and the UK. The length of the electoral cycle is displayed on the x-axis.

Figure R.6 Government and opposition parties' share of incivility in all attacks (y-axis) per year since the last election



Note: A complete electoral cycle lasts 4 years in Croatia and 5 years in Belgium and the UK. The length of the electoral cycle is displayed on the x-axis.

Appendix S Main models with public approval control

Table S.1 The effect of the electoral cycle on the use of attacks, trait attacks, policy attacks, and uncivil attacks in QTs controlling for public approval

	MODEL 1 DV1: Use of attacks (1=Yes)	**MODEL 2 DV2: Use of policy attacks(1=Yes)**	**MODEL 3 DV3: Use of trait attacks(1=Yes)**	**MODEL 4 DV4: Use of uncivil attacks (1=Yes)**
	Coef. (S.E.)	**Coef. (S.E.)**	**Coef. (S.E.)**	**Coef. (S.E.)**
IVs				
Electoral cycle	**.009 (.002) *****	**-.012 (.004) ****	**.014 (.003) *****	**.009 (.003) ****
Public approval (t-1)	-3.960 (.553) ***	-3.019 (.564) ***	2.949 (.684) ***	2.430 (.773) **
Opposition (ref.)				
Government	-1.961 (.070) ***	-.695 (.090) ***	.097 (.099)	-.454 (.121) ***
Ideological extremity	.480 (.963)	.907 (.687)	.697 (.836)	3.543 (.912) ***
Man MP (ref.)				
Woman MP	-.268 (.052) ***	.177 (.097) †	-.253 (.084) **	-.567 (.110) ***
Belgium (ref.)				
Croatia	-.195 (.272)	-.665 (.209) **	.557 (.251) *	-.271 (.251)
UK	.550 (.381)	.090 (.224)	-.241 (.313)	-.101 (.328)
Constant	.831 (.327) *	2.415 (.338) ***	-1.459 (.339) ***	-2.750 (.392) ***
Variance (Parties)	.530 (.102)	.049 (.088)	.365 (.109)	.330 (.103)
Variance (QTs)	.290 (.029)	.513 (.059)	.370 (.050)	.271 (.076)
N (total)	12.538	4.306	4.306	4.306
N (QTs)	180	180	180	180
N (min. per QT)	23	5	5	5
N (max. per QT)	162	82	82	82
AIC (empty model)	14.139 (0=15.135)	4.665 (0=4.720)	5.668 (0=5.691)	4.076 (0=4.125)

Note: Models are multilevel logistic regression analyses. The dependent variables are all dichotomous (1=Yes; 0=No). All models include year dummies, but these are not displayed. †p<0.1; *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Appendix T Interaction effects

Appendix T.1 Interaction effects: Electoral cycle X public approval

In this analysis, we test whether risk-acceptant parties that are losing in the polls are more likely to engage in attack behaviour closer to elections (H5). We find that parties that are losing in the public approval polls are more likely to attack compared to parties that are doing well in the polls, especially closer to elections, at a significance level of p<0.1 (Table T.1). There is no effect of public approval and electoral cycle interaction on parties' use of policy, trait and uncivil attacks.

Table T.1 The effect of the electoral cycle in interaction with public approval on parties' use of attacks, trait attacks, policy attacks, and uncivil attacks in QTs

	MODEL 1 **DV1: Use of attacks (1=Yes)**	**MODEL 2** **DV2: Use of policy attacks (1=Yes)**	**MODEL 3** **DV3: Use of trait attacks (1=Yes)**	**MODEL 4** **DV4: Use of uncivil attacks (1=Yes)**
	Coef. (S.E.)	**Coef. (S.E.)**	**Coef. (S.E.)**	**Coef. (S.E.)**
IVs				
Electoral cycle	.017 (.005) **	-.005 (.010)	.012 (.007)	.009 (.008)
Elect. X approval (t-1)	**-.031 (.017) †**	-.021 (.032)	.008 (.025)	.000 (.029)
Public approval (t-1)	-2.534 (.657) ***	-2.494 (1.369) **	2.772 (.880) **	2.415 (1.024) *
Opposition (ref.)				
Government	-1.980 (.071) ***	-.708 (.092) ***	.101 (.099)	-.454 (.122) ***
Ideological extremity	.465 (.988)	.913 (.691)	.696 (.833)	3.543 (.913) ***
Man MP (ref.)				
Woman MP	-.265 (.052) ***	.179 (.097) †	-.254 (.084) **	-.567 (.110) ***
Belgium (ref.)				
Croatia	-.205 (.279)	-.654 (.209) **	.556 (.251) *	-.271 (.251)
UK	.558 (.391)	.090 (.224)	-.241 (.312)	.101 (.328)
Constant	.670 (.345) †	2.266 (.401) ***	-1.411 (.371) ***	-2.746 (.432) ***
Variance (Parties)	.199 (.057)	.052 (.085)	.363 (.109)	.331 (.104)
Variance (QTs)	.304 (.031)	.513 (.059)	.370 (.050)	.271 (.076)
N (total)	12.538	4.306	4.306	4.306
N (QTs)	180	180	180	180
N (min. per QT)	23	5	5	5
N (max. per QT)	162	82	82	82
AIC (empty model)	14.301 (0=15.135)	4.667 (0=4.720)	5.670 (0=5.691)	4.078 (0=4.125)

Note: Models are multilevel logistic regression analyses. The dependent variables are all dichotomous (1=Yes; 0=No). All models include year dummies, but these are not displayed. †p<0.1; *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Appendix T.2 Interaction effects: Electoral cycle X government vs. opposition

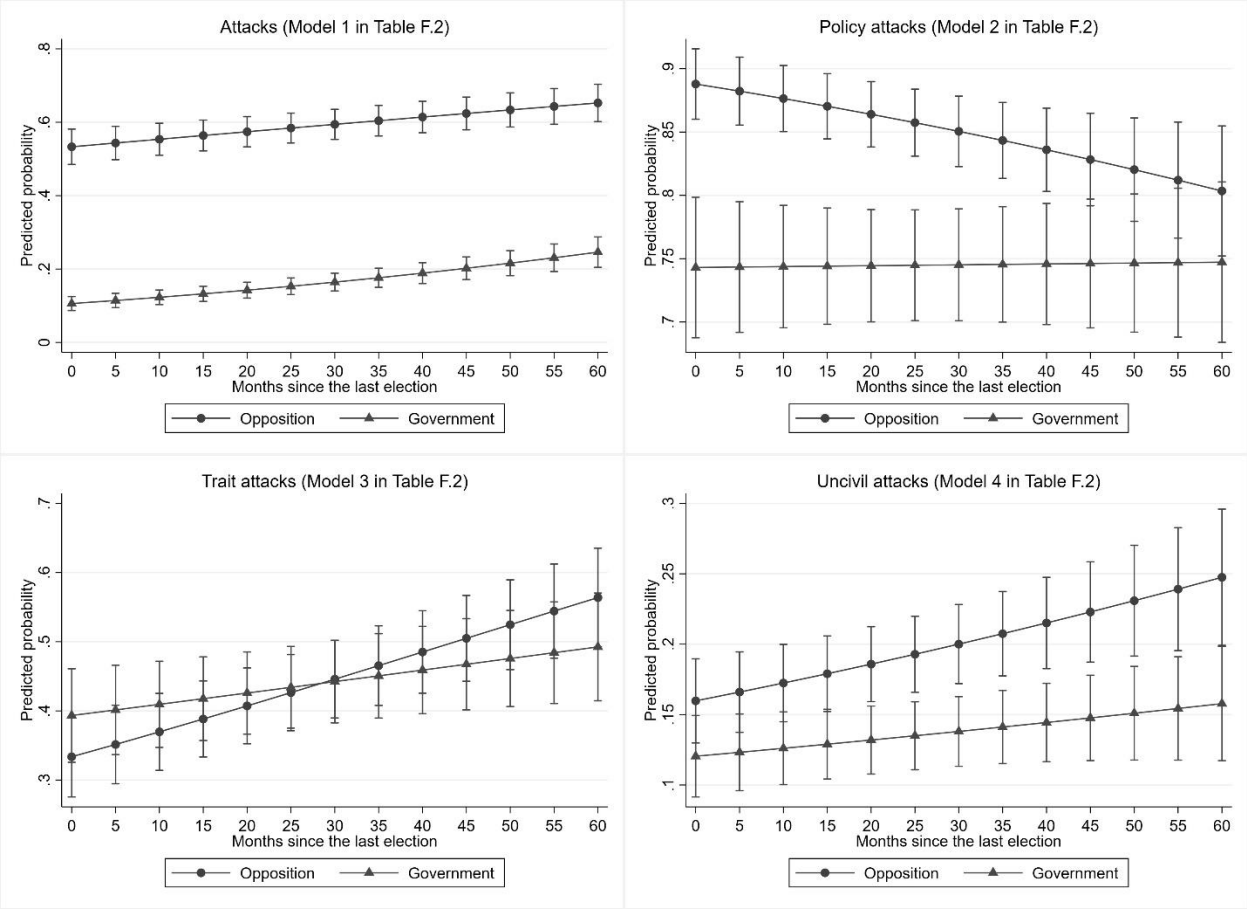
We furthermore test H5 by examining whether the effect of the electoral cycle on negative campaigning differs between government and opposition parties. We consider opposition parties to be more risk-acceptant than government parties and we, therefore, expect that these parties change their attack behaviour the most the closer we move to the elections. We identify a significant party heterogeneity in the effect of the electoral cycle on government and opposition parties' overall use of attacks, policy, and trait attacks (Table T.2). Contrary to our hypothesis, we find that it is governing parties' that are impacted more by the electoral cycle in their overall attack behaviour than opposition parties. However, both government and opposition parties attack more towards the end of the electoral cycle, but in doing so, it is the opposition parties that take more risk by reducing their use of policy attacks (Figure T.2). Furthermore, it is opposing parties that predominantly take the risk by relying on trait attacks significantly more as parties reach the end of the electoral cycle compared to the government (Figure T.2).

Table T.2 Estimating the effect of the electoral cycle in interaction with government vs. opposition on attacks, policy attacks, trait attacks, and uncivil attacks

	MODEL 1 **DV1: Use of attacks (1=Yes)**	**MODEL 2** **DV2: Use of policy attacks(1=Yes)**	**MODEL 3** **DV3: Use of trait attacks(1=Yes)**	**MODEL 4** **DV4: Use of uncivil attacks (1=Yes)**
	Coef. (S.E.)	**Coef. (S.E.)**	**Coef. (S.E.)**	**Coef. (S.E.)**
IVs				
Electoral cycle	**.008 (.002) ****	**-.011 (.004) ****	**.015 (.003) *****	**.009 (.003) ****
Elect. cycle X Opp (ref.)				
Government	**.009 (.002) *****	**.011 (.004) ****	**-.009 (.003) ***	-.003 (.004)
Opposition (ref.)				
Government	-2.258 (.083) ***	-.998 (.150) ***	.262 (.130) *	-.335 (.158) *
Ideology	.378 (.760)	-.056 (.943)	1.022 (.985)	2.641 (.748) ***
Man MP (ref.)				
Woman MP	-.194 (.042) ***	.294 (.083) ***	-.365 (.068) ***	-.451 (.085) ***
Belgium (ref.)				
Croatia	.173 (.203)	-.073 (.279)	.047 (.277)	-.681 (.228) **
UK	-.076 (.251)	-.513 (.305) †	.271 (.331)	.062 (.236)
Constant	.195 (.256)	2.055 (.357) ***	-1.061 (.337) **	-2.011 (.292) ***
Variance (Parties)	.450 (.080)	.487 (.103)	.580 (.111)	.357 (.082)
Variance (QTs)	.344 (.026)	.553 (.051)	.397 (.041)	.328 (.054)
N (total)	18,612	6,218	6,218	6,218
N (QTs)	261	261	261	261
N (min. per QT)	29	7	7	7
N (max. per QT)	168	82	82	82
AIC (empty model)	20.328 (0= 22.385)	6.411 (0= 6.726)	8.214 (0= 8.538)	6.086 (0= 6.405)

Note: Models are multilevel logistic regression analyses. The dependent variables are all dichotomous (1=Yes; 0=No). All models include year dummies, but these are not displayed. †p<0.1; *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Figure T.2 Predicted probabilities of attacks, policy attacks, trait attacks, and uncivil attacks when interacting electoral cycle and government vs. opposition



Note: Vertical lines indicate 90% confidence intervals holding other variables at their mean

Appendix T.3 Interaction effects: Electoral cycle X ideology

More ideologically extreme parties are less likely to get into office. The support base of ideologically radical parties expects these parties to attack and might therefore have a higher tolerance for negative campaigning than the support base of more mainstream parties, which reduces the risk of voter backlash. Thus, ideologically extreme parties are likely to be more risk-acceptant. At the same time, they can be less sensitive to electoral incentives, as for these parties increasing their supporter base is only possible at the cost of becoming more moderate over time. When we interact the variable electoral cycle with the variable ideological extremity, we do not find any significant results (Table T.3). The effect of the electoral cycle on parties' attack behaviour does not differ between mainstream and ideologically extreme parties.

Table T.3 The effect of the electoral cycle in interaction with ideology on parties' use of attacks, policy attacks, trait attacks, and uncivil attacks

	MODEL 1 DV1: Use of attacks (1=Yes)	**MODEL 2 DV2: Use of policy attacks(1=Yes)**	**MODEL 3 DV3: Use of trait attacks(1=Yes)**	**MODEL 4 DV4: Use of uncivil attacks (1=Yes)**
	Coef. (S.E.)	**Coef. (S.E.)**	**Coef. (S.E.)**	**Coef. (S.E.)**
IVs				
Electoral cycle	.009 (.003) **	-.014 (.006) *	.014 (.004) **	.011 (.005) *
Elect. cycle X Ideological extremity	.023 (.014)	.047 (.026) †	-.015 (.018)	-.017 (.021)
Opposition (ref.)				
Government	-2.038 (.057) ***	-.685 (.093) ***	.012 (.084)	-.440 (.099) ***
Ideological extremity	-.193 (.832)	-1.220 (1.136)	1.421 (1.084)	3.096 (.941) **
Man MP (ref.)				
Woman MP	-.196 (.042) ***	.292 (.083) ***	-.361 (.068) ***	-.451 (.085) ***
Belgium (ref.)				
Croatia	.183 (.202)	-.071 (.273)	.046 (.273)	-.684 (.228) **
UK	-.065 (.250)	-.506 (.297) †	.271 (.325)	.067 (.237)
Constant	.180 (.261)	2.104 (.368) ***	-1.023 (.343) **	-2.059 (.311) ***
Variance (Parties)	.448 (.081)	.467 (.101)	.568 (.109)	.357 (.082)
Variance (QTs)	.345 (.026)	.552 (.051)	.398 (.041)	.328 (.054)
N (total)	18,612	6,218	6,218	6,218
N (QTs)	261	261	261	261
N (min. per QT)	29	7	7	7
N (max. per QT)	168	82	82	82
AIC (empty model)	20.337 (0= 22.385)	6.414 (0= 6.726)	8.220 (0= 8.538)	6.086 (0= 6.405)

Note: Models are multilevel logistic regression analyses. The dependent variables are all dichotomous (1=Yes; 0=No). All models include year dummies, but these are not displayed. †p<0.1; *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Appendix U Sensitivity Analyses

Appendix U.1 Different measures of electoral proximity

We examined whether the found results are dependent on a specific operationalisation of the electoral cycle variable. We ran analyses with alternative measures. The first alternative operationalisation measures the moment in the electoral cycle as the remaining months until the actual (regular or snap) elections (Table U.1.1) and the second alternative operationalisation measures the moment in the electoral cycle as the remaining months to the end of the parliamentary term, i.e. the maximum possible tenure of the parliamentary term (Table U.1.2). For both alternative measures a significant negative coefficient indicates an increase in the probability of using (specific) attacks. We find using these alternative measures that throughout the electoral cycle parties' use of attacks, trait attacks, and uncivil attacks increases. We do not find an effect of the electoral cycle on parties' use of policy attacks. In addition, we also examine potential non-linearities by incorporating a categorical variable indicating the number of years since the previous election (Table U.1.3). Our findings indicate a gradual rise in the likelihood of employing attacks, trait attacks, and uncivil attacks as we move farther away from the previous election, which supports the linearity of the effects across all models. Thus, we can conclude that the main findings are not conditional on a specific operationalisation of the electoral cycle.

Table U.1.1 The effect of the electoral cycle on parties' use of attacks, policy attacks, trait attacks, and uncivil attacks using an alternative measure (number of months until the actual election date)

	MODEL 1 DV1: Use of attacks (1=Yes)	**MODEL 2 DV2: Use of policy attacks(1=Yes)**	**MODEL 3 DV3: Use of trait attacks(1=Yes)**	**MODEL 4 DV4: Use of uncivil attacks (1=Yes)**
	Coef. (S.E.)	**Coef. (S.E.)**	**Coef. (S.E.)**	**Coef. (S.E.)**
IVs				
Election date (months until)	**-.005 (.002) ***	.003 (.004)	**-.007 (.003) ***	**-.006 (.003) †**
Opposition (ref.)				
Government	-2.091 (.060) ***	-.694 (.096) ***	.044 (.088)	-.500 (.104) ***
Ideological extremity	.212 (.770)	-.260 (.921)	1.161 (.907)	2.584 (.767) **
Man MP (ref.)				
Woman MP	-.208 (.045) ***	.225 (.087) *	-.330 (.072) ***	-.459 (.092) ***
Belgium (ref.)				
Croatia	.105 (.204)	-.010 (.270)	-.015 (.254)	-.702 (.228) **
UK	-.164 (.250)	-.451 (.293)	.133 (.301)	.055 (.238)
Constant	.663 (.255) **	1.638 (.341) ***	-.352 (.311)	-1.550 (.284)
Variance (Parties)	.441 (.080)	.453 (.099)	.509 (.100)	.353 (.083)
Variance (QTs)	.357 (.028)	.553 (.053)	.402 (.042)	.322 (.059)
N (total)	16,359	5,579	5,579	5,579
N (QTs)	229	229	229	229
N (min. per QT)	29	7	7	7
N (max. per QT)	168	82	82	82
AIC (empty model)	18.096 (0= 19.453)	5.802 (0= 5.845)	7.435 (0= 7.447)	5.401 (0= 5.457)

Note: Models are multilevel logistic regression analyses. The dependent variables are all dichotomous (1=Yes; 0=No). All models include year dummies, but these are not displayed. In these analyses, the number of observations is lower than the number of observations in the main analyses presented in the manuscript. We dropped all observations from the current electoral cycle, as we do not know when the next elections will be held. †p<0.1; *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Table U.1.2 The effect of the electoral cycle on parties' use of attacks, policy attacks, trait attacks, and uncivil attacks using an alternative measure (number of months until the regular end of the parliamentary term)

	MODEL 1 DV1: Use of attacks (1=Yes)	MODEL 2 DV2: Use of policy attacks(1=Yes)	MODEL 3 DV3: Use of trait attacks(1=Yes)	MODEL 4 DV4: Use of uncivil attacks (1=Yes)
	Coef. (S.E.)	Coef. (S.E.)	Coef. (S.E.)	Coef. (S.E.)
IVs				
End of the term (months until)	**-.013 (.002) *** **	.005 (.003)	**-.012 (.002) *** **	**-.007 (.002) ** **
Opposition (ref.)				
Government	-2.045 (.056) ***	-.691 (.093) ***	.012 (.084)	-.439 (.099) ***
Ideological extremity	.363 (.757)	-.012 (.912)	1.021 (.966)	2.637 (.747) ***
Man MP (ref.)				
Woman MP	-.197 (.042) ***	.291 (.083) ***	-.360 (.068) ***	-.450 (.085) ***
Belgium (ref.)				
Croatia	.033 (.202)	-.013 (.271)	-.090 (.272)	-.772 (.228) **
UK	-.053 (.250)	-.499 (.295) †	.275 (.325)	.064 (.236)
Constant	.839 (.250) **	1.561 (.335) ***	-.239 (.323)	-1.516 (.277) ***
Variance (Parties)	.447 (.081)	.463 (.101)	.566 (.109)	.356 (.081)
Variance (QTs)	.343 (.026)	.550 (.051)	.395 (.041)	.328 (.054)
N (total)	18,612	6,218	6,218	6,218
N (QTs)	261	261	261	261
N (min. per QT)	29	7	7	7
N (max. per QT)	168	82	82	82
AIC (empty model)	20.337 (0= 22.385)	6.416 (0= 6.726)	8.218 (0= 8.538)	6.084 (0= 6.405)

Note: Models are multilevel logistic regression analyses. The dependent variables are all dichotomous (1=Yes; 0=No). All models include year dummies, but these are not displayed. †p<0.1; *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Table U.1.3 The effect of the electoral cycle on parties' use of attacks, policy attacks, trait attacks, and uncivil attacks using an alternative measure (years since the last election)

	MODEL 1 DV1: Use of attacks (1=Yes)	MODEL 2 DV2: Use of policy attacks(1=Yes)	MODEL 3 DV3: Use of trait attacks(1=Yes)	MODEL 4 DV4: Use of uncivil attacks (1=Yes)
	Coef. (S.E.)	**Coef. (S.E.)**	**Coef. (S.E.)**	**Coef. (S.E.)**
IVs				
Election year = 0 (ref.)				
= 1	.070 (.079)	.004 (.141)	.093 (.106)	.111 (.113)
= 2	**.298 (.094) ****	-.202 (.160)	**.320 (.122) ****	.056 (.128)
= 3	**.444 (.101) *****	-.229 (.172)	**.448 (.131) ****	**.248 (.134) †**
= 4	**.533 (.122) *****	-.226 (.209)	**.515 (.158) ****	**.465 (.163) ****
Opposition (ref.)				
Government	-2.046 (.056) ***	-.697 (.093) ***	.015 (.084)	-.427 (.099) ***
Ideological extremity	.365 (.758)	-.027 (.914)	1.033 (.967)	2.642 (.751) ***
Man MP (ref.)				
Woman MP	-.196 (.042) ***	.292 (.083) ***	-.361 (.068) ***	-.444 (.085) ***
Belgium (ref.)				
Croatia	.152 (.202)	-.059 (.271)	.021 (.273)	-.681 (.228) **
UK	-.066 (.250)	-.511 (.296) †	.272 (.325)	.037 (.237)
Constant	.190 (.253)	1.879 (.343) ***	-.871 (.329) **	-1.864 (.287) ***
Variance (Parties)	.447 (.081)	.465 (.101)	.567 (.109)	.359 (.082)
Variance (QTs)	.349 (.026)	.546 (.051)	.395 (.041)	.317 (.055)
N (total)	18,612	6,218	6,218	6,218
N (QTs)	261	261	261	261
N (min. per QT)	29	7	7	7
N (max. per QT)	168	82	82	82
AIC (empty model)	20.343 (0= 22.385)	6.420 (0= 6.726)	8.224 (0= 8.538)	6.088 (0= 6.405)

Note: Models are multilevel logistic regression analyses. The dependent variables are all dichotomous (1=Yes; 0=No). All models include year dummies, but these are not displayed. †p<0.1; *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Appendix U.2 Second-order elections

Furthermore, we examine whether the effect of the electoral cycle on parties' use of attack behaviour in parliament holds when we consider that other electoral cycles are taking place parallel to the parliamentary electoral cycle, respectively local (Belgium, Croatia, UK), European (Croatia, UK), and presidential (Croatia) elections. All variables measuring the effect of the electoral cycle of these second-order elections on parties' use of negative campaigning in parliament operationalising the electoral cycles as the number of months that are left until these elections take place. All these second-order elections are fixed in time, unlike parliamentary elections that can take place at any moment in time. Belgium is omitted from the analyses in which we also model the effect of the European elections as they took place on the same dates as parliamentary elections during the study period (2014; 2019). Only Croatia has presidential elections. The analyses reveal no significant impact for any of the other electoral cycles on parties' attack behaviour in parliament and that while controlling for the effect of the second-order electoral cycles the effect of the electoral cycle of the first-order elections on parties' use of negative campaigning in parliament remains.

Table U.2 The effect of the local, EU, and presidential electoral cycle on parties' attack behavior

	LOCAL (Belgium, Croatia, UK)		EU (Croatia, UK)		PRESIDENTIAL (Croatia)	
	MODEL 1: DV1: Use of attacks (1=Yes)	**MODEL 2: DV1: Use of attacks (1=Yes)**	**MODEL 3: DV1: Use of attacks (1=Yes)**	**MODEL 4: DV1: Use of attacks (1=Yes)**	**MODEL 5: DV1: Use of attacks (1=Yes)**	**MODEL 5: DV1: Use of attacks (1=Yes)**
	Coef. (S.E.)	**Coef. (S.E.)**	**Coef. (S.E.)**	**Coef. (S.E.)**	**Coef. (S.E.)**	**Coef. (S.E.)**
Local elections	-.003 (.002)	-.001 (.002)	-	-	-	-
EU elections	-	-	.001 (.003)	-.001 (.003)	-	-
Presidential elections	-	-	-	-	-.007 (.015)	.004 (.013)
Parliament elections	-	**.012 (.002) *****	-	**.012 (.002) *****	-	**.030 (.008) *****
Opposition (ref.)						
Government	-1.815 (.037) ***	-1.813 (.037) ***	-1.626 (.050) ***	-1.629 (.050) ***	-2.163 (.075) ***	-2.163 (.075)
Ideological extremity	1.960 (.215) ***	1.975 (.215) ***	2.078 (.436) ***	2.140 (.435) ***	.120 (.615)	.133 (.615)
Man MP (ref.)						
Woman MP	-.154 (.042) ***	-.142 (.042) **	-.236 (.055) ***	-.234 (.055) ***	.062 (.087)	.068 (.087)
Constant	.092 (.152)	-.378 (.161) *	.388 (.209) †	.182 (.198)	1.267 (.875)	-.288 (.883)
N (total)	17.645	17.645	10.769	10.769	4.599	4.599
N (QTs)	248	248	139	139	39	39
N (min. per QT)	29	29	40	40	72	72
N (max. per QT)	168	168	168	168	168	168
AIC (empty model)	19.529 (0=20.779)	19.496 (0=20.779)	12.469 (0=13.273)	12.449 (0=13.273)	5.053 (0=58.76)	5.044 (0=58.76)

Note: Models are multilevel logistic regression analyses. N is smaller and different due to the availability of observations. E.g. the 2020 local elections in the UK were postponed indefinitely due to the COVID pandemic and Croatia was not a member of the EU until 2013. The dependent variables are all dichotomous (1=Yes; 0=No). All models include year and country dummies, but these are not displayed. †p<0.1; *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Appendix U.3 Country differences

Additionally, we ran the main models from the manuscript omitting each country (Table U.3.1). As was the case in the main text, we confirm H1, H3, and H4 in all models. However, we do see that the impact of the electoral cycle on the use of incivility (H4) is less significant in models that include Belgium. We furthermore test our findings regarding opposition vs. government differences from Appendix F.2, i.e. that opposition is more prone to risk-taking by attacking more on traits and less on policy closer to elections (Table U.3.2). Namely, we identify that it is predominantly in the UK that the opposition parties take a risk by increasing trait and decreasing policy attacks as proximity to elections increases. The effect of the government increasingly using attacks closer to elections (Appendix T.2) appears to be driven by Croatia. Finally, we also test our findings regarding the impact of public approval and the electoral cycle on the overall use of attack (Appendix T.1). We identify that the effect of public approval in interaction with the electoral cycle is particularly present when the UK is omitted (Table U.3.3 – Model 1-3). See the visualisation of these findings in Figure U.3.

Table U.3.1 The effect of the electoral cycle on parties' use of attacks, policy attacks, trait attacks, and uncivil attacks in QTs omitting one country at a time.

	CROATIA AND THE UK (Belgium omitted)				BELGIUM AND THE UK (Croatia omitted)				BELGIUM AND CROATIA (UK omitted)			
	MODEL 1 DV1: Attack	MODEL 2 DV2: Policy	MODEL 3 DV3: Trait	MODEL 4 DV4: Incivility	MODEL 5 DV1: Attack	MODEL 6 DV2: Policy	MODEL 7 DV3: Trait	MODEL 8 DV4: Incivility	MODEL 9 DV1: Attack	MODEL 10 DV2: Policy	MODEL 11 DV3: Trait	MODEL 12 DV4: Incivility
	Coef. (S.E.)	Coef. (S.E.)	Coef. (S.E.)	Coef. (S.E.)	Coef. (S.E.)	Coef. (S.E.)	Coef. (S.E.)	Coef. (S.E.)	Coef. (S.E.)	Coef. (S.E.)	Coef. (S.E.)	Coef. (S.E.)
IVs												
Electoral cycle	**.013 (.002) *** **	**-.011 (.004) ** **	**.017 (.003) *** **	**.013 (.004) ** **	**.010 (.002) *** **	-.003 (.004) **	**.007 (.003) * **	**.006 (.003) † **	**.014 (.003) *** **	-.005 (.005) **	**.016 (.004) *** **	**.007 (.004) † **
Opposition (ref.)												
Government	-2.022 (.071) ***	-.613 (.109) ***	.064 (.101)	-.369 (.122) **	-1.790 (.078) ***	-.351 (.140) *	-.195 (.114) †	-.567 (.136) ***	-2.219 (.062) ***	-.953 (.102) ***	.116 (.094)	-.415 (.111) ***
Ideo. Extremity	-1.337 (1.225)	-1.743 (2.004)	1.286 (1.953)	1.567 (1.598)	1.576 (.744) *	.754 (.844)	.546 (.651)	2.754 (.654) ***	.354 (.812)	.072 (.862)	1.080 (1.105)	2.903 (.841) **
Man MP (ref.)												
Woman MP	-.312 (.054) ***	.179 (.099) †	-.166 (.088) †	-.742 (.123) ***	-.263 (.049) ***	.213 (.103) *	-.437 (.080) ***	-.422 (.100) ***	-.001 (.054)	.528 (.107) ***	-.484 (.084) ***	-.286 (.099) **
Constant	.713 (.306) *	2.347 (.532) ***	-1.228 (.477) *	-2.616 (.457) ***	-.182 (.251)	1.725(.361) ***	-.701 (.278) *	-1.909 (.254) ***	-.343 (.295)	1.765 (.420) ***	-1.065 (.400) **	-2.136 (.342) ***
Variance (Parties)	.493 (.104)	.700 (.187)	.814 (.187)	.436 (.150)	.349 (.088)	.331 (.090)	.264 (.074)	.241 (.080)	.468 (.094)	.401 (.121)	.645 (.134)	.401 (.098)
Variance (QTs)	.306 (.030)	.455 (.056)	.316 (.051)	.282 (.075)	.333 (.029)	.579 (.059)	.410 (.047)	.362 (.061)	.343 (.035)	.598 (.071)	.387 (.053)	.285 (.069)
N (total)	12.151	4.147	4.147	4.147	13.550	4.346	4.346	4.346	11.523	3.943	3.943	3.943
N (QTs)	158	158	158	158	218	218	218	218	146	146	146	146
N (min. per QT)	40	7	7	7	29	7	7	7	29	7	7	7
N (max. per QT)	168	82	82	82	104	39	39	39	168	82	82	82
AIC (empty model)	13.832 (14.812)	4.689 (4.717)	5.461 (5.471)	3.867 (3.909)	14.840 (15.416)	4.279 (4.279)	5.867 (5.894)	4.304 (4.345)	11.960 (13.421)	3.852 (3.949)	5.093 (5.125)	4.003 (4.035)

Note: Models are multilevel logistic regression analyses. The dependent variables are all dichotomous (1=Yes; 0=No). All models include year and country dummies, but these are not displayed. †p<0.1; *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Table U.3.2 The effect of the electoral cycle in interaction with government vs. opposition on parties' attacks, policy attacks, trait attacks, and uncivil attacks in QT omitting one country at a time.

	CROATIA AND THE UK (Belgium omitted)				BELGIUM AND THE UK (Croatia omitted)				BELGIUM AND CROATIA (UK omitted)			
	MODEL 1 DV1: Attack	MODEL 2 DV2: Policy	MODEL 3 DV3: Trait	MODEL 4 DV4: Incivility	MODEL 5 DV1: Attack	MODEL 6 DV2: Policy	MODEL 7 DV3: Trait	MODEL 8 DV4: Incivility	MODEL 9 DV1: Attack	MODEL 10 DV2: Policy	MODEL 11 DV3: Trait	MODEL 12 DV4: Incivility
	Coef. (S.E.)	Coef. (S.E.)	Coef. (S.E.)	Coef. (S.E.)	Coef. (S.E.)	Coef. (S.E.)	Coef. (S.E.)	Coef. (S.E.)	Coef. (S.E.)	Coef. (S.E.)	Coef. (S.E.)	Coef. (S.E.)
IVs												
Electoral cycle	.005 (.003)	-.022 (.005) ***	.024 (.004) ***	.016 (.004) **	.008 (.002) **	-.010 (.005) *	.011 (.003) **	.006 (.004) †	.011 (.003) **	-.001 (.006)	.016 (.004) ***	.008 (.004) *
Elect. cycle X Opp												
Government	**.012 (.002) *** **	**.018 (.004) *** **	**-.013 (.004) ** **	-.006 (.005)	**.004 (.002) †**	**.015 (.005) ** **	**-.010 (.004) * **	-.002 (.005)	**.007 (.003) ** **	-.008 (.006)	-.000 (.005)	-.004 (.006)
Opposition (ref.)												
Government	-2.316 (.101) ***	-1.119 (.174) ***	.413 (.115) **	-.180 (.191)	-1.933 (.110) ***	-.844 (.213) ***	.107 (.170)	-.486 (.206) *	-2.393 (.102) ***	-.735 (.184) ***	.139 (.162)	-.298 (.199)
Ideo. Extremity	-1.244 (1.223)	-1.709 (.2.078)	1.200 (1.997)	1.539 (1.594)	1.546 (.750) *	.655 (.886)	.588 (.668)	2.768 (.652) ***	.368 (.809)	.089 (.847)	1.078 (1.106)	2.911 (.842) **
Man MP (ref.)												
Woman MP	-.306 (.054) ***	.177 (.099) †	-.169 (.088) †	-.742 (.123) *	-.259 (.049) ***	.240 (.104) *	-.452 (.080) ***	-.424 (.101) ***	-.001 (.054)	.547 (.107) ***	-.484 (.084) ***	-.282 (.099) **
Constant	.884 (.309) **	2.668 (.554) ***	-1.418 (.490) **	-2.714 (.463) ***	-.102 (.256)	1.994 (.380)***	-.845 (.287) **	-1.948 (.305) ***	-.266 (.296)	1.658 (.424) ***	-1.071 (.402) **	-2.169 (.344) ***
Variance (Parties)	.493 (.102)	.746 (.194)	.840 (.191)	.436 (.151)	.353 (.088)	.356 (.091)	.274 (.075)	.239 (.080)	.467 (.093)	.390 (.120)	.646 (.134)	.401 (.098)
Variance (QTs)	.308 (.030)	.459 (.056)	.313 (.051)	.279 (.075)	.334 (.029)	.584 (.059)	.410 (.047)	.361 (.061)	.340 (.035)	.598 (.072)	.387 (.053)	.282 (.069)
N (total)	12.151	4.147	4.147	4.147	13.550	4.346	4.346	4.346	11.523	3.943	3.943	3.943
N (QTs)	158	158	158	158	218	218	218	218	146	146	146	146
N (min. per QT)	40	7	7	7	29	7	7	7	29	7	7	7
N (max. per QT)	168	82	82	82	104	39	39	39	168	82	82	82
AIC (empty model)	13.817 (14.812)	4.677 (4.717)	5.454 (5.471)	3.867 (3.909)	14.834 (15.416)	4.272 (4.279)	5.863 (5.894)	4.307 (4.345)	11.952 (13.421)	3.851 (3.949)	5.095 (5.125)	4.005 (4.035)

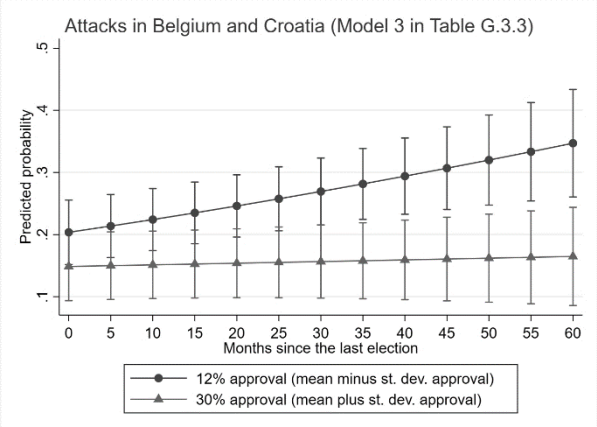
Note: Models are multilevel logistic regression analyses. The dependent variables are all dichotomous (1=Yes; 0=No). All models include year and country dummies, but these are not displayed. †p<0.1; *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Table U.3.3 The effect of the electoral cycle in interaction with public approval on parties' use of attacks in QTs omitting one country at a time

	MODEL 1 Use of attacks (Belgium omitted) (1=Yes)	MODEL 2 Use of attacks (Croatia omitted) (1=Yes)	MODEL 3 Use of attacks (UK omitted) (1=Yes)
	Coef. (S.E.)	**Coef. (S.E.)**	**Coef. (S.E.)**
IVs			
Electoral cycle	.021 (.006) **	.009 (.006)	.018 (.006) **
Elect. X Public approval (t-1)	**-.036 (.020) †**	-.012 (.020)	**-.056 (.027) ***
Public approval (t-1)	-2.843 (.726) ***	-1.904 (.749) *	-2.121 (1.048) *
Opposition (ref.)			
Government	-2.015 (.075) ***	-1.312 (.137) ***	-2.218 (.085) ***
Ideological extremity	-.150 (2.054)	1.259 (.967)	.062 (1.051)
Male politicians (ref.)			
Female politicians	-.296 (.057) ***	-.419 (.066) ***	-.029 (.074)
Constant	.458 (.478)	.396 (.338)	.489 (.423)
Variance (Parties)	.812 (.191)	.405 (.102)	.578 (.132)
Variance (QTs)	.294 (.032)	.213 (.038)	.273 (.044)
N (total)	10.899	7.926	6.251
N (QTs)	148	139	73
N (min. per QT)	38	23	23
N (max. per QT)	162	73	162
AIC (empty model)	11.137 (0=13.342)	9.147 (0=9.299)	6.682 (0=7.633)

Note: Models are multilevel logistic regression analyses. The dependent variables are all dichotomous (1=Yes; 0=No). All models include year/country dummies, but these are not displayed. †p<0.1; *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Figure U.3 Predicted probabilities of attacks when interacting electoral cycle and public approval in Croatia and Belgium



Note: Vertical lines indicate 90% confidence intervals holding other variables at their mean. The length of the electoral cycle is displayed on the x-axis.

Appendix U.4 Electoral cycle

Lastly, we test whether our results are driven by specific electoral cycles. We do so by omitting from our models one electoral cycle at a time (see Table U.4). We show that in or exclusion of specific electoral cycles does not impact our findings. Across all models, we find positive and significant coefficients for the effect of the electoral cycle on parties' use of attacks (H1), trait attacks (H3), and uncivil attacks (H4). In addition, the size of our effects does not seem to deviate when excluding certain electoral cycles, further showing the consistency of our main findings. However, when we exclude the electoral cycle of government Michel (2014-2019) in Belgium, we also find support for the expectation of parties' decreasing usage of policy attacks (H2) closer to elections. The inclusion of the observations of the period of government Michel in our analyses seems to suppress this relationship.

Table U.4 The effect of the electoral cycle on parties' use of attacks, policy attacks, trait attacks, and uncivil attacks in QT by omitting one electoral cycle at a time

Omitted electoral cycle		**MODEL GROUP 1 DV1: Use of attacks (1=Yes)**	**MODEL GROUP 2 DV2: Use of policy attacks(1=Yes)**	**MODEL GROUP 3 DV3: Use of trait attacks(1=Yes)**	**MODEL GROUP 4 DV4: Use of uncivil attacks (1=Yes)**
	IV:	**Coef. (S.E.)**	**Coef. (S.E.)**	**Coef. (S.E.)**	**Coef. (S.E.)**
All included	**Electoral cycle**	**.012 (.002) *****	**-.005 (.003)**	**.012 (.002) *****	**.007 (.002) ****
Leterme (N=316)	**Electoral cycle**	.013 (.002) ***	-.005 (.003)	.012 (.002) ***	.007 (.002) **
Di Rupo (N=2.078)	**Electoral cycle**	.012 (.002) ***	-.006 (.003) †	.012 (.002) ***	.007 (.003) *
Michel (N=3.117)	**Electoral cycle**	.013 (.002) ***	-.011 (.004) **	.017 (.003) ***	.014 (.003) ***
Wilmes/De Croo (N=821)	**Electoral cycle**	.012 (.002) ***	-.005 (.003)	.011 (.002) ***	.007 (.002) *
Kosor (N=947)	**Electoral cycle**	.010 (.002) ***	-.004 (.003)	.009 (.002) **	.007 (.003) *
Milanović (N=1.728)	**Electoral cycle**	.012 (.002) ***	-.003 (.003)	.010 (.009) ***	.005 (.003) †
Orešković (N=112)	**Electoral cycle**	.013 (.002) ***	-.005 (.003)	.011 (.002) ***	.007 (.002) **
Plenković I (N=1.593)	**Electoral cycle**	.012 (.002) ***	-.005 (.003)	.011 (.002) ***	.008 (.003) *
Plenković II (N=682)	**Electoral cycle**	.012 (.002) ***	-.005 (.003)	.012 (.002) ***	.007 (.009) **
Brown (N=195)	**Electoral cycle**	.012 (.002) ***	-.006 (.003)	.013 (.002) ***	.007 (.003) *
Cameron I (N=3.248)	**Electoral cycle**	.016 (.002) ***	-.005 (.004)	.013 (.003) ***	.007 (.003) *
Cameron II/May I (N=1.203)	**Electoral cycle**	.012 (.002) ***	-.003 (.003)	.011 (.002) ***	.006 (.002) *
May II/Johnson I (N=1.822)	**Electoral cycle**	.012 (.002) ***	-.006 (.003)	.013 (.002) ***	.008 (.003) **
Johnson II (N=621)	**Electoral cycle**	.012 (.002) ***	-.005 (.003)	.011 (.002) ***	.007 (.002) **

Note: Models are multilevel logistic regression analyses. The dependent variables are all dichotomous (1=Yes; 0=No). All models include all controls from the main models in the manuscript, but these are not displayed. †p<0.1; *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Chapter 5

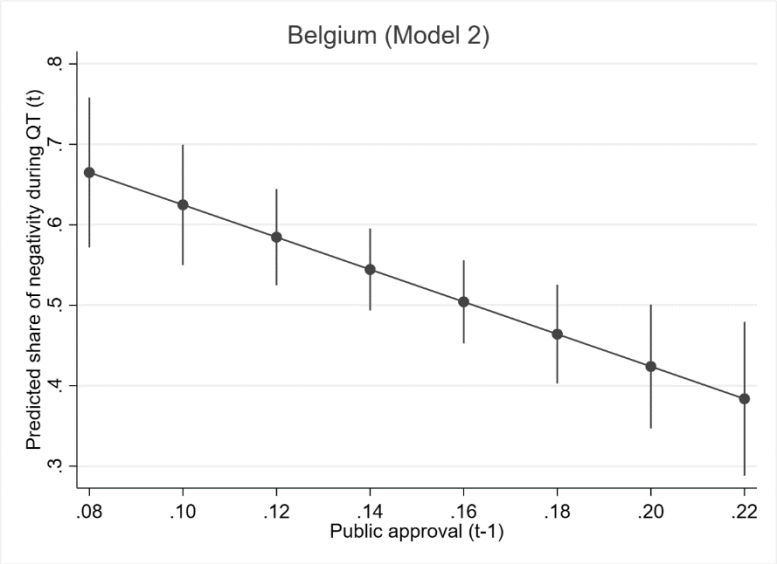
Appendix V Parties acknowledging approval polls from the media in their social media posts

Party	Ideology	Date	Facebook post
CD&V	Christian-Democrats	17.5.2019	CD&V is the strongest riser in the Great Poll of VTM NIEUWS compared to the last poll.
Conservatives	Conservatives	4.5.2015	With polls predicting 50 SNP MPs, Ed Miliband and then the country would be in their grip. Vote Conservative on Thursday to stop this from happening - and SHARE to let friends know.
DéFI	Liberal	4.10.2018	The major Ipsos Political Barometer sponsored by RTL and Le Soir was released on Thursday 4 October. DéFI is making further progress in Wallonia with 6.9% of voting intentions for the May 2019 legislative elections.
Groen	Green	4.10.2018	*NEW POLL* "Green has never scored higher than today" Something is moving in society. Support our campaign and help us grow further 💚 ☑
HDZ	Christian-Democrats	8.10.2020	HDZ is still in overwhelming leadership with 30.4% support from citizens! According to the RTL.hr research, the SDP is 18.2% behind us by more than 12 percentage points. And this despite the election of a new president.
MR	Liberal	2.2.2017	"Great Barometer: Charles Michel, third favorite personality in Flanders" [only link is attached]
N-VA	Nationalist	22.5.2014	The N-VA remains the largest party with 29.8% in the latest poll by VTM Nieuws and De Morgen. Every vote counts.
Open-Vld	Liberals	12.10.2020	Thank you for trusting Prime Minister Alexander De Croo to lead the country during this difficult period. In the same poll by HLN.be and VTM, our party is also progressing slightly. An encouragement to continue the work.
PVDA-PTB	Radical left	7.12.2018	Good news! 😆 The PVDA is the strongest riser on the left in the new VTM poll.
SDP	Social-Democrats	30.10.2019	There is no coalition with the party on the dock, whose members had to leave the government this summer on suspicion of corruption. When we come to power, we will recover the economy, restore optimism and create new jobs. [approval polls attached]
Vooruit	Socialist	19.6.2020	The road is still long, but one thing is now clear: We are on the right track. Thank you for your trust. We continue to build #AllTogetherForward. New approach increasingly appreciated: 9.6% (Poll 14/03) -> 12.5% (Poll 19/06).
VB	Radical right	11.12.2020	The only poll that counts is the election. But of course this poll is a boost. It is good to know that so many Flemish people are behind us today. That gives us a great responsibility. We are already continuing our work to put OUR people first!

Note: These Facebook posts dominantly included attachments to the media sources that reported these polls. Posts were scrapped using CrowdTangle.

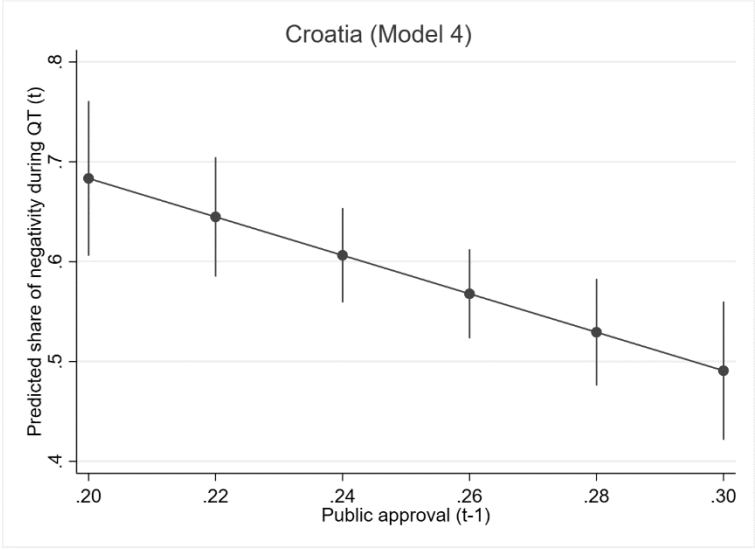
Appendix W Predicted negativity share on the last QT

Figure W.1 Predicted negativity share on the last QT before an election in Belgium



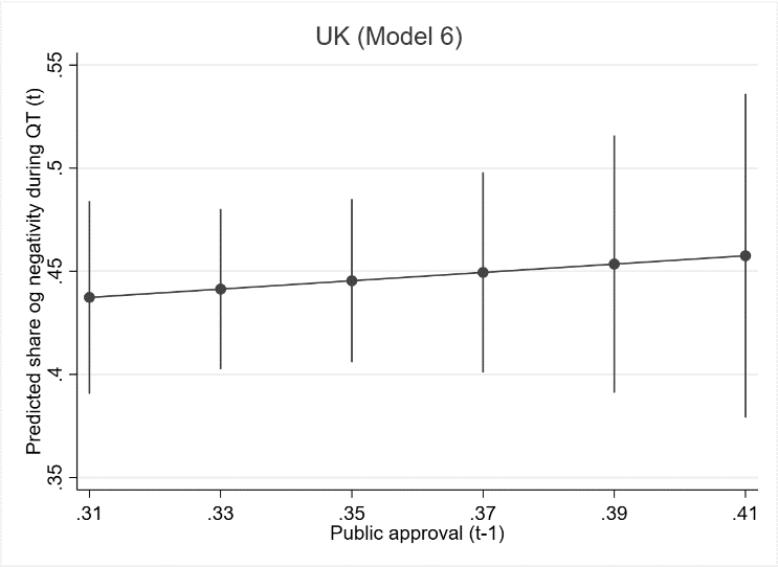
Note: The X-axis represents predicted approval rating with the mean approval in the middle. Vertical lines indicate the 90% confidence interval holding other variables at their mean.

Figure W.2 Predicted negativity share on the last QT before an election in Croatia



Note: The X-axis represents predicted approval rating with the mean approval in the middle. Vertical lines indicate the 90% confidence interval holding other variables at their mean.

Figure W.3 Predicted negativity share on the last QT before an election in the UK



Note: The X-axis represents predicted approval rating with the mean approval in the middle. Vertical lines indicate the 90% confidence interval holding other variables at their mean.

Appendix X Robustness checks

Appendix X.1 Differences between government and opposition

This is the first robustness test in which I explore if interacting party status (government vs. opposition) affects how politicians respond to public approval during the electoral cycle. Hence, I run interaction of public approval and the electoral cycle together with the government vs. opposition status to inspect if any side may be more prone to use negativity based on their approval. In all countries, there is no difference between government and opposing parties with the main interaction between approval and the electoral cycle remaining negative and significant in Belgium and Croatia (Table X.1). Note that the main effect of public approval has a significant positive effect in Croatia, which is a likely product of a higher public approval stimulating more negativity for the frontrunners at the start of the electoral cycle (see Figure 1 in the main text). Still, this inspection confirms that actors are equally responsive to public approval later in the electoral cycle whether they find themselves in the opposition or the government in both countries.

Table X.1 Time-series regressions testing the impact on the usage of negativity by actors during QTs

	Belgium		Croatia	
	Model 1 Approval X Status	Model 2 Interaction X Status	Model 3 Approval X Status	Model 4 Interaction X Status
	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)
IVs				
Public approval (t-1)	-.61 (.50)	.09 (.56)	.08 (.44)	**2.23 (.96) ***
Public approval (t-1) X Election	-	**- .04 (.01) ****	-	**-.09 (.03) ****
Public approval (t-1) X Party status (ref. opp)	.91 (.82)	.27 (1.00)	-1.26 (.84)	-2.89 (1.63) †
Public approval (t-1) X Election X Party status (ref. opp)	-	.03 (.03)	-	.05 (.06)
Election X Party status (ref. opp)	-	-.01 (.00)	-	-.01 (.01)
Controls				
Election (months since)	.00 (.00) **	.01 (.00) ***	.00 (.00)	.02 (.01) **
Party status (ref. opposition)	-.53 (.19) **	-.41 (.20) *	-.13 (.21)	.22 (.44)
Region (ref. Flanders)	.06 (.20)	.03 (.20)	-	-
Competitor's approval (t-1)	-	-	.57 (.34)	.67 (.40) †
Negativity usage (t-1)	-.07 (.05)	-.09 (.05) †	.07 (.08)	-.01 (.09)
Constant	.59 (.13) ***	.51 (.13) ***	.49 (.15) **	.02 (.24)
N (observations)	353		84	
N (QTs)	32		42	
N (actors)	12		2	
R^2 (adjusted)	.39	.41	.84	.86

Note: †p<0.1 *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.00

Appendix X.2 Years since the last election

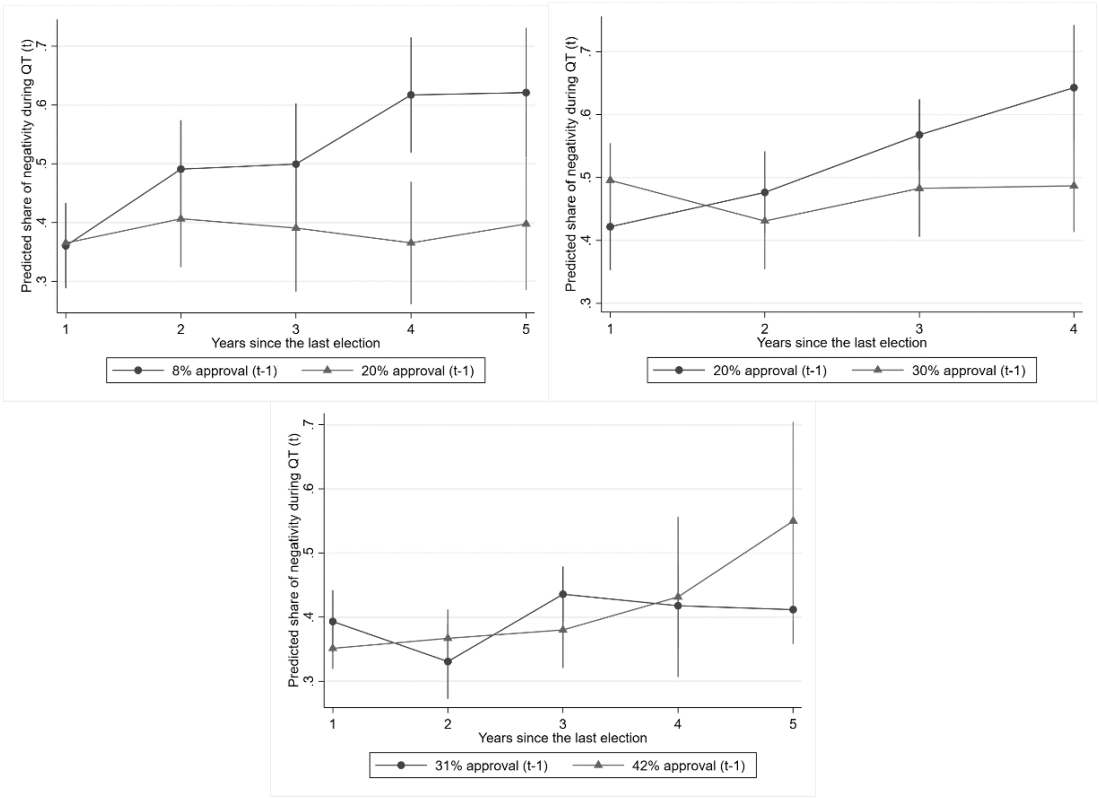
This is the second robustness test that explores if different patterns of responses to approval can be observed on a categorical, yearly level. This is why the IV on the electoral cycle was transformed into a categorical variable indicating different years since the last election. Interacting this categorical variable with the public approval variable indicates similar findings to the ones presented in the paper. These regressions (Table X.2) show how coefficients for using negativity in Belgium and Croatia go down as public approval increases going from one year to another after the previous election. These effects become significant just as was identified in the main text (for Belgium at the start of the second half of the term; for Croatia during the second half of the term). In the UK, no significant relationship can be identified. Visualisation of these findings is available in Figure X.2.

Table X.2 Time-series regressions testing the impact on the usage of negativity by actors during QTs

	Belgium	Croatia	UK
	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)
IVs			
Public approval (t-1)	.03 (.48)	.74 (.60)	-.38 (.34)
Public approval (t-1) X Election year (ref. 1)			
Election year = 2	-.64 (.52)	-1.19 (.76)	.70 (.56)
Election year = 3	-.01 (.67)	**-1.59 (.82) †**	-.12 (.49)
Election year = 4	**-1.83 (.65) ****	**-2.30 (1.09) ***	.51 (.97)
Election year = 5	**-1.63 (.71) ***	-	1.64 (1.05)
Controls			
Election year (ref. 1)			
Election year = 2	.18 (.08) *	.29 (.19)	-28 (.21)
Election year = 3	.20 (.10) †	.46 (.20) *	.08 (.18)
Election year = 4	.40 (.11) ***	.68 (.28) *	-.13 (.33)
Election year = 5	.39 (.12) **	-	-.49 (.35)
Party status (ref. opposition)	-.37 (.08) ***	-.52 (.06) ***	-
Region (ref. Flanders)	.05 (.19)	-	-
Competitor's approval (t-1)	-	.61 (.36)	.22 (.21)
Negativity usage (t-1)	-.10 (.05) †	-.01 (.09)	.26 (.07) ***
Constant	.51 (.13) ***	.38 (.19) †	.33 (.17) †
N (observations)	353	84	212
N (QTs)	32	42	106
N (actors)	12	2	2
R^2 (adjusted)	.41	.84	.37

Note: †p<0.1 *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.00 / The election year variable reference category 1 indicates period during the first year after the previous election.

Figure X.2 Predicted probabilities for using negativity during QTs (t) throughout years based on high or low approval (t-1) in Belgium (left), Croatia (right), and the UK (bottom)



Note: The x-axis represents the electoral cycle which is shorter in Croatia (4 years) than in Belgium and the UK (5 years) / Vertical lines indicate the 90% confidence interval.

Appendix X.3 Proximity towards the end of the parliamentary term and actual elections

Appendix X.3.1 Parliamentary term

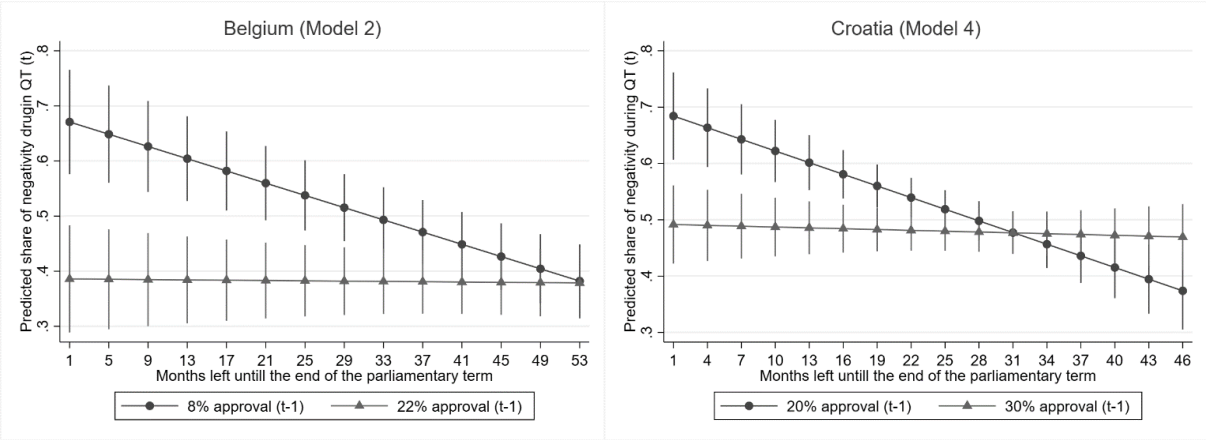
Regarding the end of the parliament term, we can see that the results highly corroborate findings from the main text. We have a significant and positive coefficient for the interaction between public approval and the end of the parliamentary term (Table X.3.1). This means that public approval does impact actors differently throughout the electoral cycle considering the end of the parliamentary term. Plotting these results shows how closer to the end of the parliamentary term, low approval actors in Belgium and Croatia become more negative while high approval actors keep their negativity use constant (Figure X.3.1).

Table X.3.1 Time-series regressions testing the impact of proximity to the end of the parliamentary term

	Belgium		Croatia		UK	
	Model 1 Base	Model 2 Interaction	Model 3 Base	Model 4 Interaction	Model 5 Base	Model 6 Interaction
	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)
IVs						
Public approval (t-1)	-.40 (.45)	**-2.07 (.71) ****	-.34 (.39)	**-1.99 (.73) ****	-.22 (.20)	.21 (.58)
Public approval (t-1) X Parl. term	-	**.04 (.01) *****	-	**.06 (.02) ***	-	-.01 (.01)
Controls						
Parl. term (months until end)	-.00 (.00) **	-.01 (.00) ***	-.00 (.00) **	-.02 (.01) **	-.00 (.00) *	.00 (.00)
Party status (ref. opposition)	-.34 (.08) ***	-.35 (.08) ***	-.44 (.05) ***	-.52 (.06) ***	-	-
Competitor's approval (t-1)	-	-	.64 (.34) †	.69 (.33) *	.13 (.20)	.14 (.20)
Region (ref. Flanders)	.07 (.19)	.04 (.20)	-	-	-	-
Negativity usage (t-1)	-.07 (.05)	-.09 (.04)	.08 (.09)	.02 (.09)	.29 (.06) ***	.29 (.06) ***
Constant	.72 (.12) ***	.99 (.15) ***	.68 (.15) ***	1.17 (.24) ***	.36 (.11) **	.21 (.22)
N (observations)	353		84		212	
N (QTs)	32		42		106	
N (actors)	12		2		2	
R^2 (adjusted)	.39	.41	.83	.85	.36	.41

Note: †p<0.1 *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.00

Figure X.3.1 Predicted negativity (share in all speech contributions by a party) during QTs (t) throughout the electoral cycle operationalised as proximity to the end of the parliamentary term based on high or low approval (t-1) in Belgium and Croatia



Note: The x-axis represents the electoral cycle (Belgium - 5 years; Croatia - 4 years). / Vertical lines indicate the 90% confidence interval holding other variables at their mean.

Appendix X.3.2 Election date

Regarding the actual elections (not used in Belgium because there were no snap elections so this measure correlates with the pervious one) we lose the significant effect of the interaction between public approval and elections in Croatia (likely an outcome of the unexpected snap election in 2016 which this model

accounts for). Regardless, the relationships go in a hypothesised direction and the main effect of public approval is negative with borderline significance (p=.08). Furthermore, increases in the main competitor's approval in Croatia do lead to more negativity usage which is in line with the theory (i.e. if your competitor does well in approval at *t-1*, you attack more at *t*). In the UK, however, controlling for the fact that the country had experienced periods of both regular (2010; 2015) and snap (2017; 2019) elections does show some support that the lower approval leads to more negativity usage. We see this in both models, with borderline significance for the public approval variable (p=.05 in Model 3 and p=.09 in Model 4). While this shows some support for the theory in the UK, considering all other findings and low significance, we cannot conclude that this finding is robust.

Table X.3.2 Time-series regressions testing the impact of proximity to the actual date of the election

	Croatia		UK	
	Model 1 Base	Model 2 Interaction	Model 3 Base	Model 4 Interaction
	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)
IVs				
Public approval (t-1)	-.46 (.34)	**-1.28 (.74) †**	**-.42 (.21) †**	**-.57 (.33) †**
Public approval (t-1) X Election date	-	.04 (.03)	-	.01 (.02)
Controls				
Election date (months until)	-.00 (.00) ***	-.01 (.01) **†**	.00 (.00)	-.00 (.01)
Party status (ref. opposition)	-.44 (.05)	-.48 (.06) ***	-	-
Competitor's approval (t-1)	.67 (.35) **†**	**.70 (.34) ***	-.33 (.22)	-.35 (.21)
Negativity usage (t-1)	.09 (.09)	.06 (.09)	.28 (.07) ***	.28 (.07) ***
Constant	.72 (.16) ***	.94 (.25) ***	.55 (.12) ***	.59 (.15) ***
N (observations)	72		196	
N (QTs)	36		98	
N (actors)	2		2	
R^2 (adjusted)	.85	.85	.37	.38

Note: †p<0.1 *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.00 / N is smaller because QTs that have taken place after last elections had to be omitted

Appendix X.4 Absolute number of negative speeches

Furthermore, the DV on negativity was transformed into a count variable that indicates the absolute number of speech contributions that had negativity in them. Poisson regressions[40] were run per country with fixed effects on the party level to inspect if approval has an impact on the absolute number of negative speech contributions (Table X.4). These regressions are in line with the results from the main text but show some interesting patterns. In Belgium, there is no impact of approval on the total absolute

[40] In all three countries there is no overdispersion in the DV (i.e. variance is lower compared to mean) making Poisson regressions more suitable compared to negative-binominal or zero-inflated regressions, all of which are appropriate for count DVs.

number of attacks but negative coefficients do indicate a negative relationship in which higher approval negatively impacts the total number of negative speech contributions as the election draws nearer. The same is identified in Croatia, but in this particular case, we also see that the competitor's approval also impacts the absolute number of negative speeches (see also Appendix X.2). In other words, if HDZ in Croatia goes up in polls, politicians from SDP in Croatia will issue more negative speech units likely as a response to the rise on the other side. In the UK, we identify relationships in line with H2 as the coefficients in the interaction between approval and elections are negative. However, this finding is yet again below the significance threshold.

Table X.4 Poisson regressions testing the impact on the absolute number of negativity by actors during QTs

	Belgium		Croatia		UK	
	Model 1 Base	Model 2 Interaction	Model 3 Base	Model 4 Interaction	Model 5 Base	Model 6 Interaction
	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)
IVs						
Public approval (t-1)	.74 (1.26)	.90 (1.40)	-.39 (.67)	-.03 (1.39)	-1.00 (.53) †	.05 (.93)
Public approval (t-1) X Election	-	-.01 (.03)	-	-.02 (.05)	-	-.05 (.03)
Competitor's approval (t-1)	-	-	**2.58 (.66) *****	**2.60 (.67) *****	-.01 (.53)	-.05 (.52)
Election (months since)	.01 (.00) *	.01 (.01)	.01 (.00) ***	.02 (.05)	.01 (.00) ***	.02 (.01) †
Party status (ref. opposition)	-.68 (.23) **	-.68 (.24) **	.11 (.10)	.08 (.12)	-	-
Region (ref. Flanders)	-.21 (.53)	-.21 (.52)	-	-	-	-
N (observations)	353		84		212	
N (QTs)	32		42		106	
N (actors)	12		2		2	

Note: †p<0.1 *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.00

Appendix X.5 PMs/Opposition Leaders in the UK

Next, I explore if the share of negativity employed by Prime Ministers and Opposition Leaders in the UK indicates any significant findings. I use fixed effects on individuals (dropping observations when someone steps in for the PM or the OL, e.g. Nick Clegg during Cameron's first cabinet or Harriet Harman during Labour's internal party elections) and explore if approval operationalised as individual approval (Model 1), disapproval (Model 2), net approval (satisfaction minus dissatisfaction; Model 3) or party approval (Model 4) affect their negativity. As can be seen, none of them show any significant influence on negativity employed by PMs and OLs. However, if dissatisfaction with the PM or the OL increases, it causes the other side to be more negative (this is not impacted by the electoral cycle; not reported here). It may be that

this finding is driven by a possible incentive to push the opponent further down if the public perceives him/her unfavourably.

Table X.5 Time-series regressions testing the impact on the usage of negativity by PMs/OLs in the UK

	Model 1 PMs and OLs Individual approval	Model 2 PMs and OLs Individual disapproval	Model 3 PMs and OLs Net individual approval	Model 4 PMs and OLs Party approval
	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)
IVs				
Public approval (t-1)	.07 (.32)	.10 (.23)	-.01 (.14)	-.14 (.63)
Public approval (t-1) X Election	-.00 (.01)	.00 (.01)	-.00 (.01)	-.01 (.02)
Controls				
Election	.00 (.00)	-.00 (.01)	.00 (.00)	.00 (.01)
Party status (ref. opposition)	-.33 (.12) **	-.38 (.14) **	-.38 (.13) **	-.34 (.12) **
Competitor's approval (t-1)	.11 (.17)	**.31 (.13) ***	-.10 (.09)	.01 (.32)
Negativity usage (t-1)	.00 (.07)	-.02 (.07)	-.00 (.07)	.03 (.07)
Constant	.56 (.16) ***	.48 (.17) **	.64 (.10) ***	.65 (.27) *
N (observations)	174	174	174	179
N (QTs)	91	91	91	94
N (actors)	7	7	7	7
R^2 (adjusted)	.57	.56	.56	.58

Note: †p<0.1 *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.00

Appendix X.6 Trends in public approval

To furthermore robust findings that better approval goes hand in hand with less negativity, I also observe trends in public approval. This is done by subtracting approval at *t-1* with approval at *t-2* and shows if an actor is in a trend of rise (positive values) or fall (negative values). Using this approach in regressions does not indicate any significant findings. This is likely due to the operationalisation of approval in a trend way. In other words, operationalising approval as trends does not capture high vs. low approval a party can have through the years or closer to the election. Rather, it tells us about potential short-term changes in approval which is limiting. For example, an actor could be enjoying high approval for several years with small changes that go up or down on several occasions (which in this case shift between negative and positive values). This likely diminishes the statistical significance of the approval, unlike when the actual approval is considered (as was the case in the main text). Still, however, it is indicative that even in this setting, we see that positive approval trends closer to elections usually mean lower usage of negativity in Belgium (Model 2) while in Croatia, similar to the previous tests (Appendix X.5), we see that an increase in the main competitor's approval leads to more negativity which is in line with the theory (Model 4). Lastly, running models in the UK does show some proof of the expected relationships, but unfortunately, as is the case with most models from the UK, this finding is below the significance threshold.

Table X.6 Time-series regressions testing the impact of trends on negativity

	Belgium		Croatia		UK	
	Model 1 Base	Model 2 Interaction	Model 3 Base	Model 4 Interaction	Model 5 Base	Model 6 Interaction
	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)
IVs						
Trend (t-1)	-.23 (.63)	.33 (1.29)	-.07 (.97)	-.09 (1.16)	-.28 (.30)	.35 (.45)
Trend (t-1) X Election	-	-.02 (.04)	-	.00 (.07)	-	-.03 (.01) †
Controls						
Election (months since)	.00 (.00) **	.00 (.00) **	.00 (.00) **	.00 (.00) **	.00 (.00) **	.00 (.00) **
Party status (ref. opposition)	-.35 (.08) ***	-.35 (.08) ***	-.44 (.05) ***	-.44 (.05) ***	-	-
Region (ref. Flanders)	.08 (.19)	.08 (.19)	-	-	-	-
Competitor's approval (t-1)	-	-	.78 (.31) *	.78 (.31) *	.13 (.21)	.15 (.20)
Negativity usage (t-1)	-.09 (.05) †	-.09 (.05) †	.08 (.08)	.07 (.09)	.28 (.06) ***	.27 (.06) ***
Constant	.49(.10) ***	.50 (.10) ***	.41 (.10) ***	.41 (.10) ***	.19 (.09) *	.19 (.09) *
N (observations)	348		84		200	
N (QTs)	32		42		100	
N (actors)	12		2		2	
R^2 (adjusted)	.37	.38	.84	.84	.39	.38

Note: †p<0.1 *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.00 / N is smaller for Belgium and the UK compared to other models due to data unavailability of public approval at t-2

Appendix X.7 Second-order elections

Next, in each country, I explore if different elections could indicate different patterns. Specifically, I focus on local and EU elections (not in Belgium because EU elections take place on the same date as the parliamentary elections). These variables on elections are operationalised to indicate the exact number of months left until these elections because they are fixed and actors know when to anticipate them (the same approach was used to calculate the end of the parliamentary term in Appendix X.3.1). As can be seen from these models (Appendix X.7), while there is a significant effect of the interaction between approval and parliamentary elections in Belgium and Croatia, as reported in the main text, no statistically significant effect exists when looking at the other elections.

Table X.7 Time-series regressions testing the impact of different elections on the usage of negativity

	Model 1 Belgium Local elections	Model 2 Croatia Local elections	Model 3 Croatia EU elections	Model 4 UK Local elections	Model 5 UK EU elections
	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)
IVs					
Public approval (t-1)	-.80 (.70)	.52 (.64)	-1.17 (.81)	-.56 (.38)	-.58 (.53)
Public approval (t-1) X Election	.01 (.01)	-.04 (.02) †	.02 (.02)	.01 (.06)	.01 (.01)
Controls					
Election	-.00 (.00) *	.01 (.01)	-.00 (.00)	-.01 (.02)	-.00 (.00)
Party status (ref. opposition)	-.36 (.09) ***	-.46 (.05) ***	-.43 (.05)	-	-
Competitor's approval (t-1)	-	.63 (.36) †	.46 (.38)	-.30 (.20)	-.27 (.24)
Region (ref. Flanders)	.06 (.20)	-	-	-	-
Negativity usage (t-1)	-.07 (.05)	.07 (.09)	.08 (.09)	.30 (.07) ***	.27 (.07) ***
Constant	.77 (.15) ***	.40 (.20) †	.81 (.24) **	.61 (.18) **	.58 (.23) *
N (observations)	353	84	84	200	188
N (QTs)	32	2	2	100	94
N (actors)	12	42	42	2	2
R^2 (adjusted)	.40	.82	.82	.39	.35

Note: †p<0.1 *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.00 / N is smaller for the UK in these models as I drop observations in the UK after EU elections 2019 due to Brexit, and for local elections, I drop observations post-March 2020 as regular local elections scheduled for May 2020 had to be postponed to a later date due to the COVID pandemic.

Appendix X.8 Dropping controls

Due to the potential strong effect of the lagged DV variables (i.e. negativity usage at *t-1*) and the main competitor's approval (which may correlate highly with the main party approval in Croatia and the UK), I test if dropping these two controls show any other patters. As can be seen in both Belgium and Croatia, omitting these two variables does not change the outcome of the main analyses. This further indicates that our results for both countries are robust. In the UK, however, dropping the lagged negativity usage (which had strong significance in the main models), shows that actors go less negative if they do well in approval, but surprisingly, they also increase negativity closer to the election (Model 4). This particular relationship could be due to the low backlash effect in two-party systems (see the conclusion in the main text), where actors who perform well are willing to risk going negative closer to the election. They may do this because they ride the wave of their popularity knowing that partisan voters would not leave them. This makes negativity a safe strategy to employ from a favourable approval to persuade volatile voters on their side. Still, knowing that negativity does have strong autocorrelation in the UK (and with a significant drop in R^2 value for this model), this finding and possible interpretation should be taken with caution, especially because no other robustness test showed significant positive relationships between approval and the electoral cycle in the UK.

Table X.8 Time-series regressions testing the impact on the usage of negativity omitting controls

	Model 1 Belgium	Model 2 Croatia	Model 3 Croatia	Model 4 UK	Model 5 UK
	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)
IVs					
Public approval (t-1)	.13 (.49)	**1.06 (.61) †**	.68 (.62)	**-.88 (.34) ***	-.46 (.34)
Public approval (t-1) X Election	**-.04 (.01) ****	**-.06 (.02) ****	**-.06 (.03) ***	**.03 (.01) ***	.01 (.01)
Controls					
Election		.02 (.01) ***	.02 (.01) ***	-.01 (.00) *	-.00 (.00)
Party status (ref. opposition)	-.33 (.08) ***	-.53 (.03) ***	-.52 (.05) ***	-	-
Competitor's approval (t-1)	-	.60 (.32) †	Omitted	.03 (.21)	Omitted
Region (ref. Flanders)	.06 (.20)	-	-	-	-
Negativity usage (t-1)	Omitted	Omitted	.04 (.09)	Omitted	.28 (.06) ***
Constant	.44 (.12) **	.27 (.18)	.49 (.15) **	.65 (.15) ***	.41 (.13) **
N (observations)	353	86	84	214	212
N (QTs)	32	2	2	107	106
N (actors)	12	43	42	2	2
R^2 (adjusted)	.40	.85	.84	.10	.41

Note: †p<0.1 *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.00

Appendix X.9 Dropping 2020 due to COVID

Given the potential effect the COVID pandemic may have caused in negativity usage, I dropped all observations from 2020 in my data and I re-run the same regressions from the main text again. These regressions show almost identical relationships.

Table X.9 Time-series regressions testing the impact on the usage of negativity omitting 2020

	Belgium		Croatia		UK	
	Model 1 Base	Model 2 Interaction	Model 3 Base	Model 4 Interaction	Model 5 Base	Model 6 Interaction
	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)
IVs						
Public approval (t-1)	-.55 (.55)	.01 (.56)	-.40 (.35)	1.06 (.75)	-.18 (.21)	-.33 (.40)
Public approval (t-1) X Election	-	**-.04 (.01) ****	-	**-.07 (.03) ***	-	.01 (.02)
Controls						
Election (months since)	.00 (.00) **	.01 (.00) ***	.00 (.00) *	.02 (.01) *	.00 (.00) *	-.00 (.01)
Party status (ref. opposition)	-.17 (.14)	-.22 (.14)	-.43 (.05) ***	-.51 (.06) ***	-	-
Competitor's approval (t-1)	-	-	.67 (.36) †	.65 (.34) †	-.11 (.21)	-.09 (.21)
Negativity usage (t-1)	-.09 (.04) †	-.10 (.05) *	.09 (.09)	.02 (.09)	.26 (.07) ***	.26 (.07) ***
Constant	.57 (.10) ***	.50 (.10) ***	.54 (.16) **	.24 (.20)	.35 (.13) **	.40 (.17) *
N (observations)	323		78		196	
N (QTs)	29		39		98	
N (actors)	12		2		2	
R^2 (adjusted)	.35	.37	.83	.84	.36	.36

Note: †p<0.1 *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.00

Appendix X.10 Reverse causality

Lastly, as was stated in the main text, there is no reverse causality at stake. I identify strong autocorrelation in public approval meaning that actors that do well continue to perform well in approval and vice-versa (Appendix N.1). When the lagged public approval variable is dropped, negativity remains an insignificant predictor in Belgium but not in Croatia and the UK. In these two countries, the main effect of negativity leads to less approval, but closer to elections negativity may pay off. Regardless, because these models do not account for autocorrelation, we cannot say with certainty that such a finding is robust. Therefore, this leaves us with a conclusion that negativity in parliaments has no (or minimal) impact on public approval.

Table X.10.1 Reverse causality: Time-series regressions testing the impact on public approval (DV)

	Belgium		Croatia		UK	
	Model 1 Base	Model 2 Interaction	Model 3 Base	Model 4 Interaction	Model 5 Base	Model 6 Interaction
	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)
IVs						
Negativity (t-1)	.00 (.00)	.01 (.01)	-.00 (.01)	-.01 (.01)	.00 (.02)	- .03 (.03)
Negativity (t-1) X Election	-	-.00 (-00)	-	.00 (.00)	-	.00 (.00)
Controls						
Election (months since)	-.00 (.00)	-.00 (.00)	.00 (.00) †	-.00 (.00)	.00 (.00) *	- .00 (.00) †
Party status (ref. opposition)	.01 (.00)	.01 (.00)	-.00 (.00)	-.00 (00)	-	-
Region (ref. Flanders)	-.00 (.01)	-.00 .00	-		-	-
Public approval (t-1)	.78 (.03) ***	.78 (.03) ***	.99 (.02) ***	.98 (.02) ***	.79 (.04) ***	.78 (.04) ***
Constant	.03 (.01) ***	.03 (.01) ***	-.00 (.01)	.01 (.01)	.08 (.02) ***	.09 (.02) ***
N (observations)	305		86		196	
N (QTs)	28		43		98	
N (actors)	12		2		2	
R^2 (adjusted)	.92	.92	.97	.97	.70	.70

Note: †p<0.1 *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.00

Table X.10.2 Reverse causality: Time-series regressions testing the impact on public approval (DV) while omitting control for the autocorrelation

	Belgium		Croatia		UK	
	Model 1 Base	Model 2 Interaction	Model 3 Base	Model 4 Interaction	Model 5 Base	Model 6 Interaction
	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)
IVs						
Negativity (t-1)	.00 (.01)	.00 (.01)	-.08 (.04) *	**-.19 (.04) *** **	-.02 (.02)	**-.10 (.03) ** **
Negativity (t-1) X Election	-	-.00 (.00)	-	**.01 (.00) ** **	-	**.00 (.00) ** **
Controls						
Election (months since)	-.00 (.00)	.00 (.00)	.00 (.00)	-.00 (.00) **	-.00 (.00) ***	-.00 (.00) ***
Party status (ref. opposition)	.01 (.01)	.01 (.01)	-.01 (.02)	-.00 (.02)	-	-
Region (ref. Flanders)	-.04 (.02) †	-.04 (.01) †	-	-	-	-
Public approval (t-1)	Omitted	Omitted	Omitted	Omitted	Omitted	Omitted
Constant	.16 (.01) ***	.16 (.01) ***	.29 (.03) ***	.33 (.03) ***	.39 (.01) ***	.43 (.01) ***
N (observations)	305		86		200	
N (QTs)	28		43		100	
N (actors)	12		2		2	
R^2 (adjusted)	.02	.02	.16	.33	.15	.20

Note: †p<0.1 *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.00

Chapter 6

Appendix Y Examples of coding negativity and incivility in Belgium and yearly trends

Table Y Examples of coding negativity and incivility in speeches

Neg.	Incivility	Politician	QT	Speech
No (0)	No (0)	Rachid Madrane (PS)	7.6.2012	*Mr. Prime Minister, we welcome the rapid and firm position of your government with regard to strengthening the fight against radicalism (…)*
		Kathleen Verhelst (Open-Vld)	19.11.2020	*Madam Chairwoman, Minister, on Women's Entrepreneur's Day, I enjoy being here as an entrepreneur, but also as a politician. I like to express my concern, because tomorrow is the day for all entrepreneurs.*
		Barbara Pas (VB)	19.11.2015	*I assumed that the answer would be passed on to a fellow minister. His presence came as a very big surprise to me. I am very grateful that he came here himself. Sir, that is to your credit.*
		Sarah Smeyers (N-VA)	2.4.2010	*Madam Minister, I really hope from the bottom of my heart that there will be no relaxation in the area of the guidance of the unemployed by the RVA.*
Yes (1)	No (0)	Charles Michel (MR)	8.2.2018	*Madam MP the way in which your question is posed shows an imperfect or incomplete knowledge of the way the government deals with this issue.*
		Peter Luykx (N-VA)	11.3.2010	*You cite a number of reasons to justify the King's visit, including the historical links, for what they are still worth today. But, Prime Minister, there are not one, not a thousand, but hundreds of thousands of reasons not to go to Congo.*
		Gwenaëlle Grovonius (PS)	18.1.2018	*You talk about efficiency, about results. The least you could do is apply this concept to yourself and respect your own commitments (…)*
		Monica De Coninck (sp.a)	26.4.2018	*However, I do not accept that so many children disappear in this country. I think there should be a priority action plan, not just from you, but from the entire government.*
	Yes (1)	Marco Van Hees (PVDA)	2.7.2015	*Minister, I note that in addition to playing the role of the Smurf with glasses, you also play the role of the happy Smurf – "it will be better tomorrow".*
		Jan Jambon (N-VA)	8.11.2012.	*After a pleiade of MPs here ask you questions, you manage to say nothing (…) You proclaim blah blah blah and don't answer any specific question except the one about 0.7%.*
		Véronique Caprasse (DéFI)	1.6.2017	*You are in a real quagmire, Madam Minister. (…) This situation is very disturbing, you are playing a dangerous game, both for public health in the south of the country and for democracy.*
		Tanguy Veys (VB)	6.2.2014	*You wash your hands in innocence, then no longer like a Walloon Houdini, but like Pontius Pilate.*

Figure Y.1 Share of QT speeches with negativity (%) through the years (y-axis)

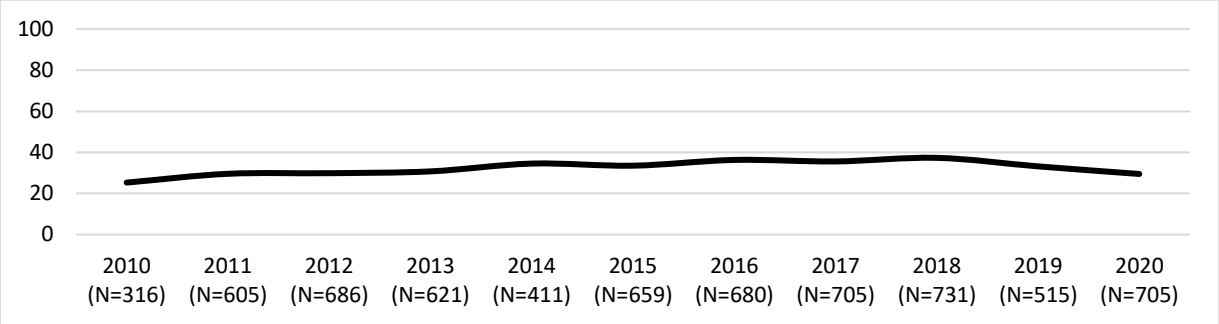


Figure Y.2 Share of QT negative speeches with incivility (%) through the years (y-axis)

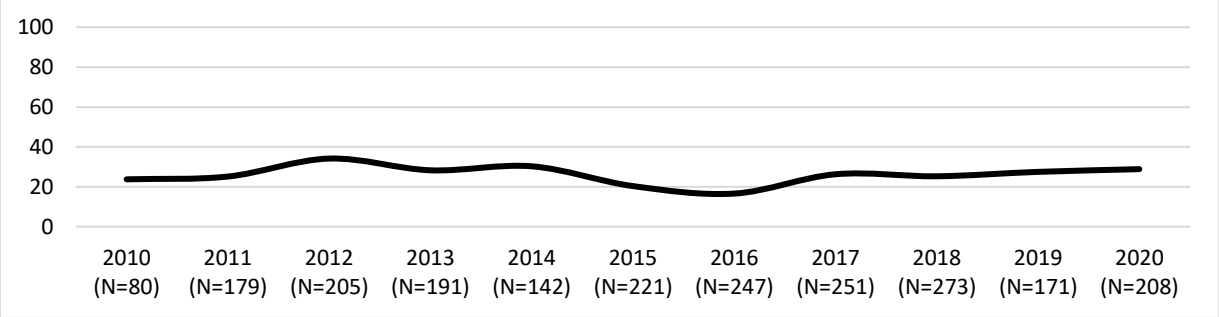


Figure Y.3 Share of politicians using negativity in QTs (%) through the years (y-axis)

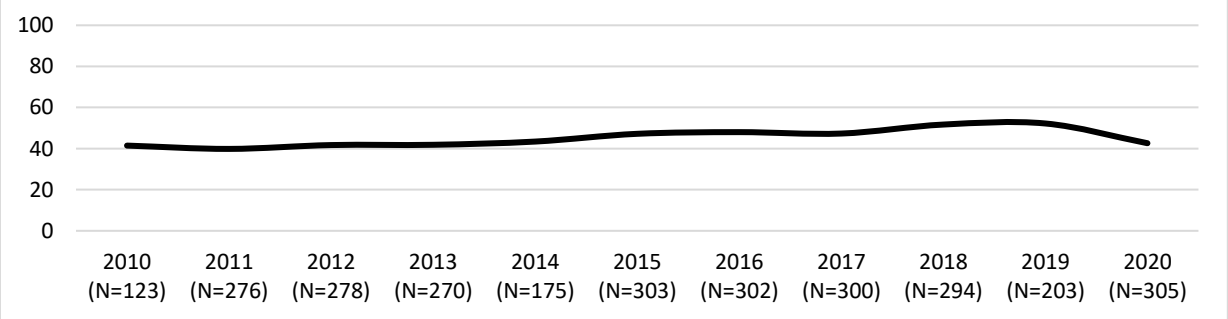
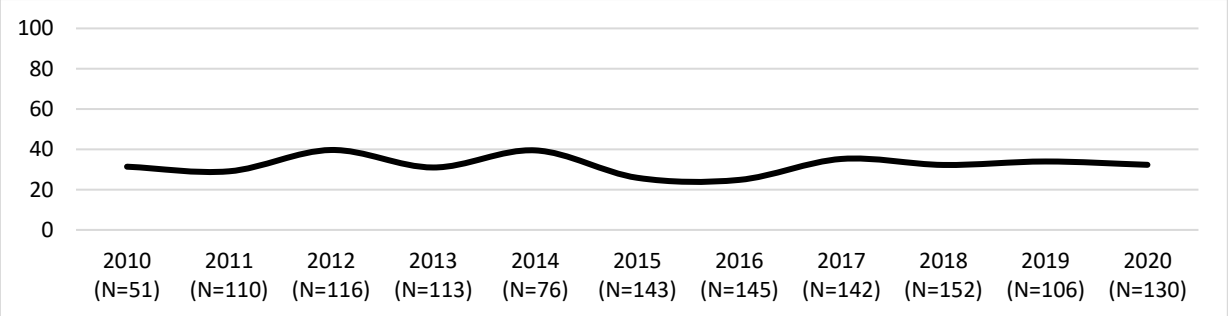


Figure Y.4 Share of negative politicians using incivility in QTs (%) through the years (y-axis)



Appendix Z Sensitivity analyses

These sensitivity analyses are run to ensure the validity of the main findings. First, recording the media access variable to include only public or private news does not lead to different relationships (Table Z.1): politicians who go negative, and especially those that are uncivil, are more likely to be reported in both the private and public prime-time TV news (H1; H2). However, these relationships are only statistically significant for public prime-time TV news. This may be the result of the nature of the public broadcast which has a greater responsibility to report on politicians that debate in parliament, as opposed to private TV news. For example, while QT in Belgium is taking place at noon, the Flemish public broadcast VRT does not only stream the debate but also has a special program *Villa politica* during which politicians answer reporters' questions. As such, negativity bias when reporting on parliamentary debates at prime-time 7 pm news is more present on the public broadcast.

Second, using count dependent variables[41] and applying negative binomial regressions further supports the theory (Table Z.2). Politicians can not only expect to get featured in the news but will also have more media appearances following negativity (H1) and the same applies to incivility usage (H2). As the number of appearances due to negativity increases, politicians also use more negativity in the process (H3). Therefore, not only are politicians more likely to go negative by attacking someone as was shown in the main models, but they also employ more attacks on politicians as their previous negative behaviour attracts greater media coverage.

Third, I also run models by separating politicians into control (no media access following negativity ever) and treatment groups (did experience media access at least once), finding a significant effect in line with H3 (Table Z.3). The average probability of going negative increases by 17.8% when we compared the treatment group that got media access following negativity to the control group that failed to get media access despite being negative (.45 to .53).

Fourth, including the public approval[42] control (Table Z.4), which removes a significant portion of data, shows that negativity (H1) and incivility bias (H2) still holds. The average probability of media access

[41] For media access, the count variable includes the exact number of appearances in prime-time TV news following QT. For example, a politician featured in three news stories following QT has a value of 3. For negativity, the count variable indicates the number of attacks politicians employed. So, a politician who attacked during a particular QT two ministers has a value of 2.

[42] This is a lagged variable measuring politicians' parties public approval based on aggregated voting intentions in a period before a sampled QT (e.g. public approval from April is attributed to politicians for QT in May). Polls were conducted by various agencies (mostly Ipsos) and got featured on the main TV news in Belgium (VRT; RTBF; VTM; RTL). Unfortunately, these data are only available between 2014 and 2020 and do not include small parties such as

is 68.4% higher for politicians that go negative during QT (.09 to .16), and for those that go negative, the average probability of media access is 40.4% greater in case they use incivility (.08 to .11). In addition, politicians do use more negativity on a QT if they have more experience with media access following negativity (H3), but this effect appears to be significant between treatment vs. control groups and less significant for the cumulative media access. Still, the average probability of going negative does increase if a politician gains more media coverage after negativity. For instance, the average probability increases by around 2.5% for each new media access following negativity. In addition, the average probability of going negative is 14.2% higher for politicians that are in the treatment group that received media access following negativity compared to the control group that never experiences media access despite being negative (.48 to .55).

Fifth, removing the year 2020 due to the COVID pandemic still confirms the theoretical expectations (Table Z.5). However, when removing 2020, we do gain an even stronger effect for negativity bias (H1) and reinforcement of negative behaviour (H3). More specifically, it does appear that during the COVID pandemic, there was slightly less incentive to report on negative politicians and politicians were less incentivised to go negative despite having experienced media appearances following negativity. Regardless, including or excluding 2020 does not indicate any deviation from the expected theoretical relationships.

PP that were also present in parliament. Hence, the N drops by almost 40% in models that include public approval control.

Appendix Z.1 Public vs. private TV news

Table Z.1 Multi-level logistic regressions testing the probability of gaining media access in public (Model 1) and private (Model 2) TV news

	Model 1 (public)	**Model 2 (private)**
	DV: Media access (1=Yes) (t)	
	Coef. (SE)	**Coef. (SE)**
Independent variables		
Negativity (ref. no) (t-1)	**1.464 (.256) *****	**.548 (.320) †**
Incivility (ref. no) (t-1)	**.823 (.232) *****	.284 (.309)
Control variables		
Electoral cycle	.007 (.006)	.001 (.006)
Opposition MP (ref.)		
Majority MP	.124 (.267)	.117 (.366)
Minister	1.801 (.312) ***	2.582 (.365) ***
Deputy PM	2.385 (.357) ***	3.126 (.406) ***
PM	6.054 (.585) ***	5.470 (.534) ***
Ideology	-1.527 (1.074)	1.638 (1.254)
Man (ref.)		
Woman	-.345 (.220)	-.316 (.249)
Flanders (ref.)		
Wallonia	-1.757 (.248) ***	-1.436 (.263) ***
Constant	-3.966 (.492) ***	-4.484 (.607) ***
Variance (QTs)	.411 (.147)	.325 (.150)
Variance (Politicians)	.521 (.196)	.364 (.191)
N (observations)	2.829	2.829
N (QTs)	103	103
N (individual politicians)	367	367
N (min. politicians per QT)	13	13
N (max. politicians QT)	37	37
AIC (empty model)	1.552 (0= 1.719)	1.175 (0=1.314)

Note: †p<0.1 *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.00

Appendix Z.2 Count dependent variables

Table Z.2 Negative binomial regressions testing the number of media access (Model 1) and the number of going negativity (Model 2)

	Model 1	**Model 2**
	DV: Media access (count) (t)	**DV: Negativity (count) (t)**
	Coef. (SE)	**Coef. (SE)**
Independent variables		
Negativity (ref. no) (t-1)	**.875 (.160) *****	-
Incivility (ref. no) (t-1)	**.508 (.158) ****	-
Cumulative media access (t-1)	-	**.078 (.014) *****
Control variables		
Electoral cycle	.005 (.003)	.007 (.001) ***
Opposition MP (ref.)		
Majority MP	.185 (.187)	-1.230 (.067) ***
Minister	1.798 (.177) ***	-2.126 (.137) ***
Deputy PM	2.248 (.187) ***	-2.500 (.191) ***
PM	3.835 (.187) ***	-1.545 (.212) ***
Ideology	.378 (.574)	.804 (.188) ***
Man (ref.)		
Woman	-.117 (.117)	-.089 (.050) *
Flanders (ref.)		
Wallonia	-1.083 (.117) ***	-.100 (.051) †
Constant	-2.275 (.343) ***	1.106 (.140) ***
N (observations)	2.829	2.537
N (QTs)	103	103
N (individual politicians)	367	234
N (min. politicians per QT)	13	13
N (max. politicians QT)	37	35
AIC (empty model)	2.631 (0= 3.203)	6.350 (0=7.444)

Note: †p<0.1 *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.00

Appendix Z.3 Control vs. treatment group

Table Z.3 Multi-level logistic regressions testing the probability of gaining using negativity based on control vs. treatment groups of politicians

	Model 1
	DV: Negativity (1=Yes) (t)
	Coef. (SE)
Independent variables	
Control (ref.)	
Treatment	**.494 (.132) *****
Control variables	
Electoral cycle	.007 (.004) †
Opposition MP (ref.)	
Majority MP	-2.032 (.133) ***
Minister	-3.158 (.203) ***
Deputy PM	-3.364 (.263) ***
PM	-2.465 (.352) ***
Ideology	1.887 (.565) **
Man (ref.)	
Woman	.000 (.120)
Flanders (ref.)	
Wallonia	-.117 (.128)
Constant	.646 (.232) ***
Variance (QTs)	.098 (.062)
Variance (Politicians)	.182 (.064)
N (observations)	2.537
N (QTs)	103
N (individual politicians)	234
N (min. politicians per QT)	13
N (max. politicians QT)	35
AIC (empty model)	2.652 (0=3.031)

Note: †p<0.1 *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.00

Appendix Z.4 Public approval control

Table Z.4 Multi-level logistic regressions testing the probability of gaining media access (Model 1) and using negativity (Model 2;3) while including public approval

	Model 1	**Model 2**	**Model 3**
	DV: Media access (1=Yes) (t)	**DV: Negativity (1=Yes) (t)**	
	Coef. (SE)	**Coef. (SE)**	**Coef. (SE)**
Independent variables			
Negativity (ref. no) (t-1)	**1.506 (.316) *** **	-	-
Incivility (ref. no) (t-1)	**.627 (.289) ***	-	-
Cumulative media access (t-1)	-	.074 (.047)	-
Control (ref.)			
Treatment	-	-	**.418 (.165) ** **
Control variables			
Public approval (t-1)	-2.262 (2.046)	-1.889 (1.072) †	-1.847 (1.058) †
Electoral cycle	.001 (.006)	.007 (.004)	.008 (.004) †
Opposition MP (ref.)			
Majority MP	.355 (.354)	-1.935 (.177) ***	-1.944 (.176) ***
Minister	3.014 (.440) ***	-2.856 (.253) ***	-2.978 (.258) ***
Deputy PM	3.143 (.514) ***	-3.281 (.342) ***	-3.316 (.334) ***
PM	6.945 (.872) ***	-1.664 (.446) ***	-1.806 (.433) ***
Ideology	-.613 (1.481)	1.988 (.701) **	2.071 (.689) **
Man (ref.)			
Woman	-.618 (.290) *	-.052 (.145)	-.040 (.142)
Flanders (ref.)			
Wallonia	-2.098 (.337) ***	-.175 (.157)	-.062 (.165)
Constant	-3.485 (.642) ***	1.069 (.282) ***	.888 (.294) **
Variance (QTs)	.336 (.154)	.150 (.074)	.149 (.074)
Variance (Politicians)	.690 (.290)	.075 (.072)	.059 (.071)
N (observations)	1.765	1.575	1.575
N (QTs)	65	65	65
N (individual politicians)	259	173	173
N (min. politicians per QT)	13	13	13
N (max. politicians QT)	37	33	33
AIC (empty model)	1.025 (0=1146)	1.690 (0=1.865)	1.686 (0=1.865)

Note: †p<0.1 *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.00

Appendix Z.5 2020 year omitted

Table Z.5 Multi-level logistic regressions testing the probability of gaining media access (Model 1) and using negativity (Model 2) while omitting 2020

	Model 1	**Model 2**
	DV: Media access (1=Yes) (t)	**DV: Negativity (1=Yes) (t)**
	Coef. (SE)	**Coef. (SE)**
Independent variables		
Negativity (ref. no) (t-1)	**1.233 (.251) *****	-
Incivility (ref. no) (t-1)	**.684 (.227) ****	-
Cumulative media access (t-1)	-	**.153 (.053) ****
Control variables		
Electoral cycle	.002 (.006)	.006 (.004)
Opposition MP (ref.)		
Majority MP	.025 (.258)	-2.096 (.140) ***
Minister	1.871 (.297) ***	-3.056 (.207) ***
Deputy PM	2.637 (.358) ***	-3.499 (.279) ***
PM	5.707 (.624) ***	-2.523 (.385) ***
Ideology	-.678 (1.058)	1.491 (.597) *
Man (ref.)		
Woman	-.420 (.220) †	-.099 (.126)
Flanders (ref.)		
Wallonia	-1.921 (.246) ***	-.219 (.127) †
Constant	-3.415 (.479) ***	.947 (.234) ***
Variance (QTs)	.334 (.123)	.164 (.066)
Variance (Politicians)	.495 (.180)	.085 (.063)
N (observations)	2.524	2.273
N (QTs)	92	92
N (individual politicians)	323	201
N (min. politicians per QT)	13	13
N (max. politicians QT)	37	35
AIC (empty model)	1.605 (0=1.766)	2.353 (0=2.707)

Note: †p<0.1 *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.00