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

Parties' Attack Behaviour in Parliaments: Who Attacks Whom and When

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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.

Key-words
Party Behaviour; Attack Politics; Parliaments

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, 2014). 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, 2014).

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 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.

[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?*

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, 2014). 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, 2014), 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

Cases, Data, and Method

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, 2020). 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).

[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).

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 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[3]; 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 scrapped 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

[3] This time frame is selected because it allows to study attack behaviour from a longitudinal perspective while capturing periods of several parliamentary terms (4 in Belgium and 5 in Croatia and the UK).

scrapped and raw data had every *speech contribution* as an observation (N = 23,991; see online Appendix A) 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).[4] 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 (Online Appendix B outlines 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.[5] 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

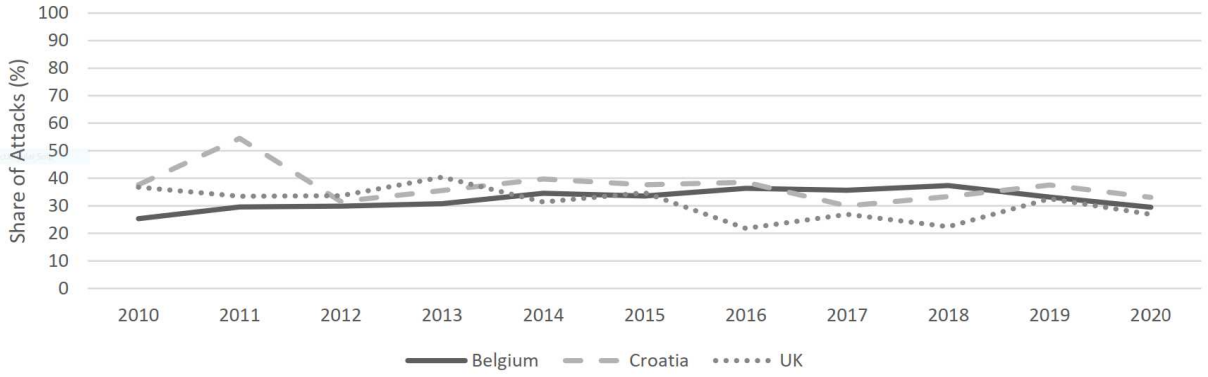
[4] As such, each unit in raw data mostly showcase full transcripts of questions and answers, but given that observations are all possible speech units, if someone interrupted someone while speaking, then more observations are present. For example, if someone interrupted the PM while speaking, then there are three units: PM's answer before interruption, interruption itself, and PM's answer after interruption. See examples in online Appendix A.

[5] 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).

(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 online Appendix C 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 online Appendix D). 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%).[6] [7]

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

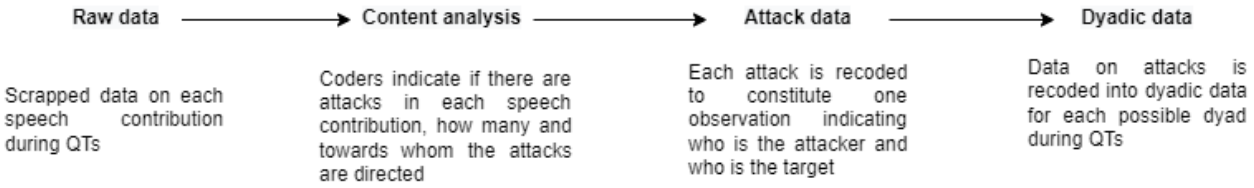
In total, 9,099 attacks were gathered and compiled into data that included information on (i) *the attacker* and (ii) *the target* (see Appendix D). To be able to test my hypotheses, I recoded this data into dyadic data where each dyad constitutes a unit of observation of whether one party chose to attack another party during a particular QT (total N = 21,254; per-country information in Appendix E). In other

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

[7] 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).

words, the final dataset shows for each QT whether somebody from party A decided to attack someone from party A[8], 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 E 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.

Figure 2. Methodological steps leading to dyadic data



Note: See more in Appendix A (raw data), B/C (content analysis), D (attack data), and E (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.[9]

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

[8] Intra-party attacks are also considered.

[9] 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%.

closeness[10] (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 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, 2014).

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 E for descriptive statistics for each variable).

Method

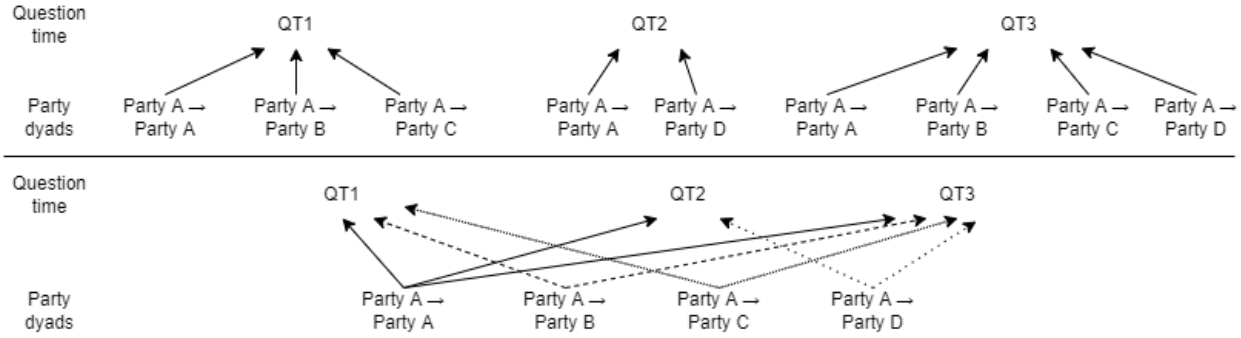
Given that the final dataset has a hierarchical structure, mixed-effects multilevel logistical regressions are used to test the hypotheses. There are two levels in this model, namely, (i) a specific QT that is nested in a parliamentary term within one country (N=257) and (ii) all possible party dyads during that particular QT (Min = 9; Max = 169; Mean = 73.1; per country info in Appendix E). 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 nested in higher level QTs in which they appear; see Figure 3).[11] 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

[10] 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).

[11] 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.

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).

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

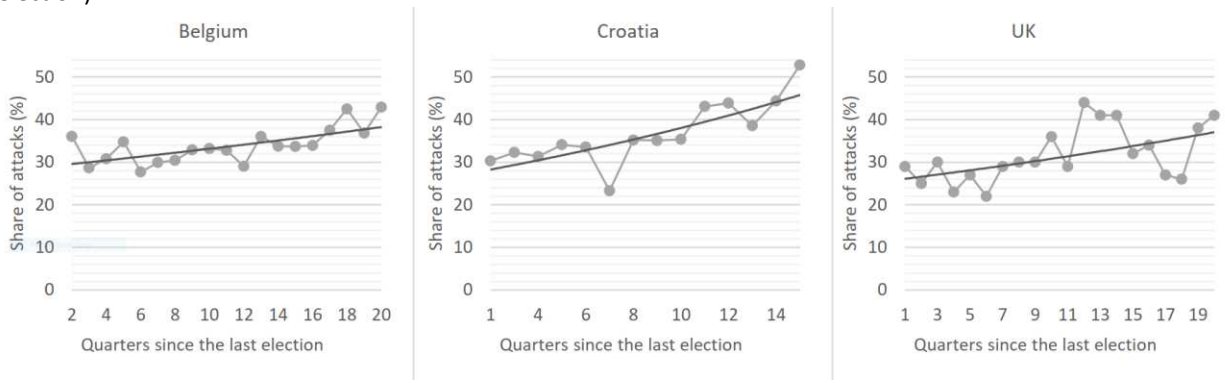


Note: Based on Figures 1 and 2 in Chung and Beretvas, 2012; Party-dyads indicate all possible attacks if the possible attacker is Party A which spoke during every QT.

Results

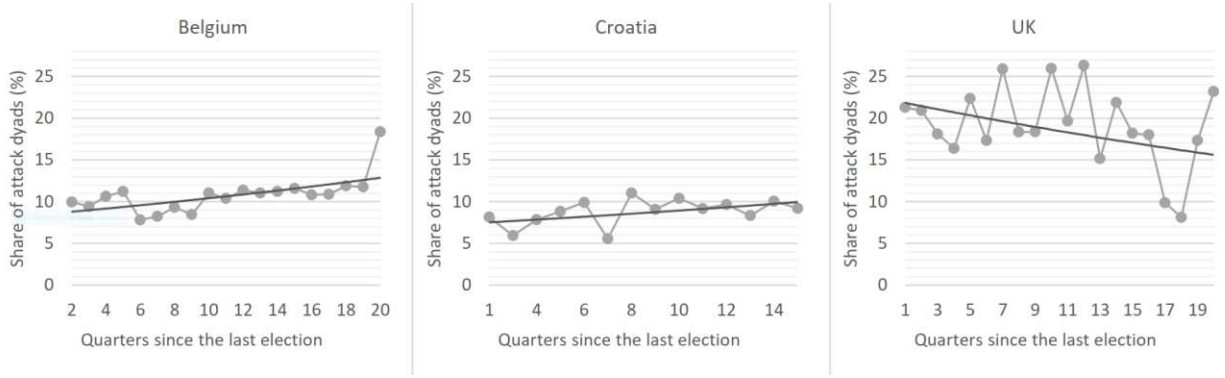
Before discussing the regression results, I first present some descriptive results. Figure 4 shows the evolution of the share of speech contributions with attacks (within the pool of all speech contributions that were made during QTs) over time (per quarters since the last election). In all three countries, 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 (Appendix A)

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

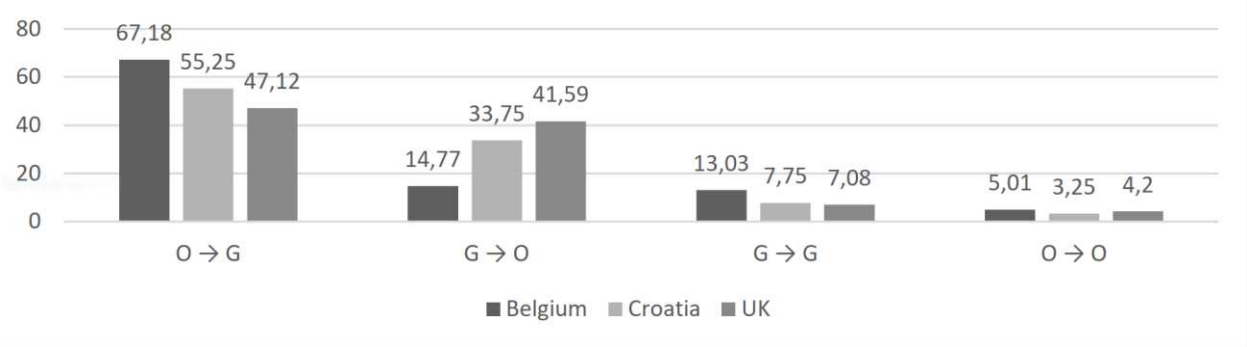


Note: These results are generated using dyadic data that indicates which party dyads contain attacks out of all possible dyads during QTs (see Appendix E). / The shares are higher for the UK because the amount of possible party dyads is smaller compared to Belgium and Croatia

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.

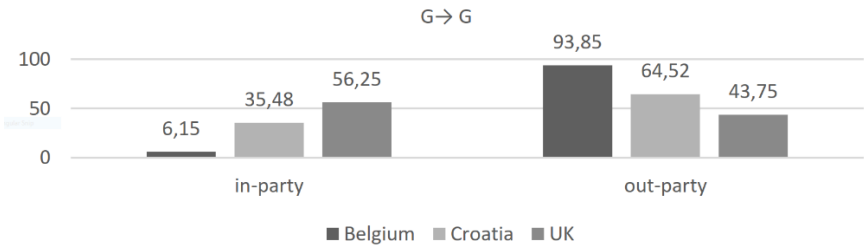
Figure 6. Attacks distributed across four potential directions per country (%)



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[12]). 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 F).

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

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

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. 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 G1), 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 G1). 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 G). 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 G5), 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 G2).

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 G6). 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 C). 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.

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