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To Oppose or Not to Oppose? Strategies of Opposition Parties' Parliamentary Support for Government Legislation

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Abstract

While opposition parties are expected to challenge the government and present alternatives, they often support government legislation. Synthesizing key theoretical explanations, this study examines how opposition parties weigh their goals of winning the next elections, joining or replacing the government and influencing policy. It is hypothesized that opposition parties are more likely to oppose bills when they see chances for boosting their electoral prospects or an early government alternation. Conversely, they support bills when they see chances for future coalition cooperation or policy influence. The analyses of parliamentary votes across four established democracies – Canada, Denmark, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom – over 75 years, show that opposition parties strategically prioritize these goals based on bill-specific factors and the institutional context. Most innovatively, office-seeking opposition parties' strategic behaviour depends on the patterns of government alternation. These findings offer crucial insights into the complex trade-offs opposition parties navigate in parliament.

Keywords: opposition; parliamentary votes; coalition; comparative politics; parliament

The existence of parliamentary opposition is widely considered 'very nearly the most distinctive characteristic of democracy itself' (Dahl 1966b: xviii). Governments experience opposition from various actors within and outside parliament (e.g. interest groups, social movements, media and the judiciary). By continually scrutinizing and criticizing government actions, these actors make it harder for the government to abuse its executive power. Consequently, all forms of political opposition strengthen checks and balances within the political system. Only parliamentary opposition parties, however, provide a second crucial democratic good: they offer voters alternative policies and an alternative government (Andeweg 2013). If voters are dissatisfied with the

incumbent government and its policies, they can vote for an alternative. Opposition parties are, therefore, not only an essential ingredient of liberal democracy but also play a crucial role in representative democracy's electoral competition.

Although a modest body of literature on the relations between the parliamentary opposition and the government has emerged in recent years (Helms 2023), the behaviour of opposition parties in parliament has remained understudied given its importance for representative democracy. Government–opposition relations are constituted by both adversarial and cooperative opposition party behaviour, although the relative importance of either opposition type may vary (King 1976). In majoritarian systems, opposition parties typically behave more adversarially than in consensus democracies. Consensus democracies provide potential veto power and 'co-governing devices' to opposition parties (Helms 2004). The institutional opportunity structures that shape government–opposition relations have been summarized in an 'opposition power index' (Garritzmann 2017) and a 'policy-making power index of opposition players' (Wegmann 2022). Opposition parties use parliamentary institutions not only to fulfil their opposition or parliamentary functions (Louwerse and Otjes 2019; Otjes and Louwerse 2021); they also use them more strategically to weaken the government (Whitaker and Martin 2022).

A prominent type of opposition behaviour is how opposition parties vote on government bills in parliament. This behaviour 'has strong symbolic power, as it clearly expresses conflict or consensus, in other words, agreement or rejection of how the government carries out its job' (De Giorgi and Ilonszki 2018a: 241). Rather than oppose, opposition parties often support the government (De Giorgi and Ilonszki 2018b). This raises the question: under which circumstances do opposition parties choose to support or oppose government legislation?

The emerging literature on the parliamentary opposition has identified several factors that shape government–opposition relations. The ideological composition of the government and the ideological positions of opposition parties affect the level of agreement between government and opposition parties in parliamentary votes (De Giorgi and Marangoni 2015; Hohendorf et al. 2020; Louwerse et al. 2017). Opposition parties may also be more willing to support government bills after receiving policy concessions from the government; opposition parties tend to be accommodated by governments when these governments lack majority support in parliament (Christiansen and Damgaard 2008; Hohendorf et al. 2020; Louwerse et al. 2017; Otjes and Louwerse 2024).

Other features also play a role in opposition behaviour. Larger opposition parties and opposition parties with prior government experience are generally more oppositional, arguably because these aspects increase opposition parties' chances of alternating with the incumbent government, as suggested by a study of 16 parliaments (Tuttnauer 2018). The longer an opposition party has been represented in parliament, the more supportive of the government it is, at least in the German Bundestag (Hohendorf et al. 2020). Independent of party characteristics, opposition behaviour differs over the electoral cycle. In Sweden, for instance, opposition parties are less likely to support minority governments at the beginning and the end of the election cycle (Müller and König 2021).

These studies have given insight into the degree of government–opposition divisions in parliamentary votes (Giuliani 2008; Hix and Noury 2016; Louwerse et al. 2017) and differences in terms of parliamentary behaviour across opposition parties (De Giorgi and Ilonszki 2018b; De Giorgi and Marangoni 2015; Hohendorf et al. 2020; Tuttnauer 2018). How the topic of the vote at hand affects the voting behaviour of opposition parties has remained relatively unexplored (Hohendorf et al. 2020; Mújica and Sánchez-Cuenca 2006; Müller 2024). Recent work also often lacks an explicit and unified theoretical framework of opposition behaviour. Consequently, we still lack systematically empirically tested explanations of opposition voting behaviour across countries, governments, parties *and* bills in established parliamentary democracies.

Aiming to understand opposition party behaviour further, this article takes a holistic approach, bringing various theoretical explanations together in a single framework, building on (implicit) arguments from previous studies. Building on the work of Kaare Strøm and Wolfgang Müller (1999), I propose that opposition parties' decisions to support or oppose government legislation are based on their strategies to leave or exploit their position in the opposition. Depending on the issue that is being voted on, opposition parties may oppose the government to build their distinctive profile or to stimulate an early government alternation; they may support the government to signal their willingness to cooperate in a future coalition government or receive policy concessions from the government in exchange.

The analyses focus not merely on structural differences between parties, but specifically on bill-specific features. To test the expectations, data are employed on parliamentary votes during the period 1945–2020 in four theoretically motivated country cases of established parliamentary democracies, including two-party systems (the United Kingdom and Canada) and multiparty systems (Denmark and the Netherlands), and countries with a tradition of minority governments (Canada and Denmark) and majority governments (the Netherlands and the United Kingdom). The findings indicate that a government bill's policy area affects opposition parties' voting decisions in parliament. These findings provide important insights into government–opposition relations that can help society monitor political representatives.

Opposition goals and government support

Various explanations of opposition behaviour can be brought together in a single theoretical framework using the classic policy/office/votes triad of party behaviour (Strøm 1990a; Strøm and Müller 1999). In this framework, opposition parties are expected to choose the course of action that they believe, under the present institutional constraints, will have the best consequences for their preferences. This framework distinguishes between three distinct preferences or goals that parties aim to achieve: maximum electoral support (votes), control of cabinet positions (office) and changing public policies (policy).

The first two goals are easily identified in the stereotypical image of government–opposition relations shaped by Prime Minister's Questions in the British House of Commons. The leader of the opposition arguing strongly with the prime minister in parliament reflects the adage of 19th-century statesman Edward Stanley, the Earl of Derby, that 'The Duty of an Opposition [is] very simple … to oppose everything,

and propose nothing!' The Westminster depiction of a parliamentary opposition is an opposition with barely any leverage against the government, besides 'good reasons, and time' (King 1976: 18). In the short term, then, the opposition prioritizes *votes* over policy and office: it is a 'government-in-waiting' that can only aim to win the next elections to replace the incumbent government and obtain control over government policies (Hix and Noury 2016; Laver 2006; Shugart 2006). Though the relationship between electoral results, government participation and policy influence is less direct in multiparty systems, even here votes matter greatly to parties for them to influence policies or to increase the likelihood of coalition participation (Downs 1957: 159).

Opposition behaviour in parliament influences electoral outcomes. Voters evaluate the performance of governing parties more negatively when government actions are criticized and opposed by opposition parties (Seeberg 2020). Whereas voters can hold governing parties accountable for their performance in office, they can hold opposition parties accountable for their behaviour in parliament. Opposition parties are generally assumed to benefit electorally from criticizing and opposing the government. Opposition parties who cooperate structurally with minority governments are more disliked by voters who are dissatisfied with the government and they generally lose votes in the next elections (Hjermitslev 2024; Thürk and Klüver 2024). Although many voters detest unconstructive and disruptive opposition (Louwerse and Zorina 2025; Stiers 2023), opposition parties that vote more frequently against the government in parliament generally do better in the next elections than opposition parties that vote more frequently with the government (Tuttnauer and Wegmann 2022; Williams 2011). Opposing the government meets people's expectations of a good opposition, and it may help opposition parties present themselves as an ideologically distinct alternative to the incumbent government. When voters see no differences between the government and the opposition, they will feel no need to replace the government with the opposition.

As long as voters do not notice parliamentary voting behaviour, opposition parties might get away with supporting the government. To explain opposition parties' behaviour, however, it matters to what degree parties *think* that their votes in parliament shape the public's perception of them. Voting on government bills is one of the most important and visible activities in parliament. Considering that parliamentary behaviour shapes media narratives about interparty conflicts (Fortunato 2021) and parties often advertise their and each other's voting decisions on social media and press releases (Tuttnauer and Wegmann 2022), it is easy to understand how opposition parties vote strategically to appeal to voters (Louwerse and Otjes 2019; Tuttnauer 2018).

Voting against the government's legislation can be particularly attractive as it is considered a 'mediatized signalling tool for opposition parties as an explicit and clearly attributable expression of party positions and their attitude toward the government' (Tuttnauer and Wegmann 2022: 1357). Here, opposition parties have a strategic advantage in deciding their position, because they 'usually do not have to commit themselves on any issue until after … the government has revealed its policy' and then they 'can select the optimum strategy to counteract it' (Downs 1957: 52). By opposing the government's position, opposition parties send signals to voters who are unsatisfied with the incumbent government (Ganghof and Bräuninger 2006; Tuttnauer 2018) (see Table 1).

Table 1. The Goals of Opposition Parties and Corresponding Behaviour in Parliament

Opposition goal	Behaviour in parliament
Winning the next elections (*votes*)	Oppose the government
Replacing the government (*office*)	Oppose the government
Joining the government (*office*)	Support the government
Exerting policy influence (*policy*)	Support the government

Next to the desire to win elections, *office aspirations* can also influence opposition parties' relations with the government. Here, seeking office means aiming to maximize a party's share of cabinet positions. Opposition parties may pursue office because of the intrinsic value of having ministerial posts – 'income, prestige, and power' (Downs 1957: 28) – or for its instrumental value: to influence public policies 'it is almost always better to be in office than not' (Strøm and Müller 1999: 6). Regardless of the reason for pursuing office, office-seeking means wanting to leave the opposition and become or join the government. Office-seeking motivations may lead opposition parties to oppose the government if that helps them to foster a government defeat in parliament or stimulate conflicts within the government, resulting in early elections or a government alternation. On the other hand, they may also lead opposition parties to support the government to signal trustworthiness and responsibility as potential partners for a future coalition government (Louwerse et al. 2017). The best strategy for opposition parties to leave the opposition depends on how credible they can make a claim to replace the incumbent government after the next elections (Tuttnauer 2018).

For opposition parties, vote-seeking and office-seeking behaviour are investments for the future – that is, the next government formation or the next elections. However, parties do not necessarily have to wait until it is their turn to govern to 'maximize [their] *impact on public policy*' in the short term (Strøm and Müller 1999: 7, emphasis added). Although policy-seeking behaviour is more associated with the government and government legislation, 'even opposition parties can enjoy some policy influence in most parliamentary democracies' and, therefore, the 'role of the opposition is not simply to criticize and present an alternative government' (Strøm 1990b: 42). Here, opposition parties can try to accomplish some policy goals, not only by introducing private members' bills but also by shaping the parliamentary agenda, cooperating with policy specialists from the government parties and introducing amendments. The policy influence differential varies across parliaments (Garritzmann 2017; Helms 2004; Powell 2000; Strøm 1990b: 42; Wegmann 2022). Still, rather than aiming to leave the opposition, the opposition in any parliament can opt to exploit its position to aim for policy gains (Ilonszki and De Giorgi 2018: 5).

Initiating most legislation, the government remains the central policymaking body in most political systems. Instead of distinguishing themselves from the government, opposition parties may opt to cooperate with the government to change public policies in a more favourable direction. During the legislative review process, they can influence policies, particularly when parliamentary committees enable them to monitor and control government policymaking (Fortunato 2019; König et al. 2023; Strøm 1990b).

Opposition parties may also negotiate policy concessions in exchange for their support (Anghel and Thürk 2021; Christiansen and Seeberg 2016; Otjes and Louwerse 2024).

Even when governments do not need the numerical support of opposition parties, the wishes of opposition parties are sometimes still accommodated by the government to 'silence' opposition criticism (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2010; Seeberg 2013, 2023; Thesen 2013). Although opposition parties may strongly attack and criticize the government to put new issues on the political agenda, opposition parties will ultimately support government bills that accommodate their wishes. Typically this adversarial rhetorical behaviour is also motivated by opposition parties' efforts to 'influence elections and voters' evaluations of the government' rather than efforts to change the government's policy, even though this behaviour 'may have policy implications because the government legislates to silence opposition agenda-setting' (Seeberg 2023: 466). Therefore, policy-seeking motivations may generally lead opposition parties to support the government, either because the government's legislation is closer to opposition parties' policy preferences than the status quo or because the government accommodates the wishes of opposition parties in exchange for support.

Opposition goals trade-offs and expectations

Even though winning elections, becoming the government and exerting policy influence are clearly interrelated objectives, it should be clear by now that also for parties in the opposition '[t]he same behaviour that maximizes one [objective] may not lead to the best possible outcome with respect to the others' (Strøm and Müller 1999: 9). Depending on their 'time horizons', parties prioritize a certain goal over others, at least in the short term. Because parties in the opposition engage in different strategic behaviours to achieve office, policy and votes (Ilonszki and De Giorgi 2018), making an analytical distinction between these three goals helps understand why opposition parties support or oppose the government.

Depending on the (institutional) context, opposition parties face different trade-offs between their goals, and they will exhibit different strategic behaviours in parliament. One important trade-off exists between policy-seeking and vote-seeking opposition behaviour (Andeweg 2013). Voters may become dissatisfied with opposition parties who continually support or work together with the government. Julian Garritzmann (2017: 8) describes the tension between opposition roles: 'political actors seeking to remain credible cannot shape policy-making and simultaneously criticize and present distinct alternatives to results that they themselves have shaped; other political actors would highlight the opposition's inconsistent behaviour.'

A crucial factor that shapes the way opposition parties weigh policy-seeking and vote-seeking behaviour against each other is their policy positions (De Giorgi and Marangoni 2015; Hohendorf et al. 2020). It is very unattractive for an opposition party to support government policies when there is a large difference between the party's and the government's policy positions. Even if an opposition party manages to receive some policy concessions from the government, it is highly unlikely that the result will leave their voters satisfied in that case (Ganghof and Bräuninger 2006). If an opposition party's position on a particular issue is close to the government's, that opposition

party may find it easier to support the government: the party may consider the government's policy an improvement over the status quo or it may be easier to compromise with the government over such an issue without giving too much away. This will leave voters more satisfied than if opposition parties should support government policies that are further away from the party's ideal point. For governing parties too, it is more attractive to seek cooperation with and accommodate ideologically close opposition parties than with ideologically distant opposition parties (Louwerse et al. 2017):

Policy distance hypothesis: *The larger the distance is between an opposition party's policy position and the government's policy position in a policy area, the less likely it is that the opposition party will support government bills in that policy area.*

The trade-off between policy-seeking and vote-seeking behaviour may also tilt further in favour of policy-seeking when the opposition possesses veto power over legislation – for example under minority governments. Substantive minority governments must build ad hoc majority support for every proposal in order to survive and implement its policies (Louwerse et al. 2017; Strøm, 1990). Opposition parties may allow the survival of minority governments in order to obtain substantial policy gains (Artés and Bustos 2008). This only holds for 'genuine' minority governments, though. There are important differences between minority governments working on an issue-by-issue basis with different opposition parties (substantial minority governments) and those with long-term partnerships with formal support parties (Strøm 1990b; Thürk and Klüver 2024). The latter case differs only a little from the situation of a majority government. These formal minority governments have secured majority support for their main policies and confidence votes and are 'majority governments in disguise' (Strøm 1990b: 61), evidenced by similar levels of legislative performance and survival rates to majority governments (Krauss and Thürk 2022; Thürk 2022).

Under *substantive* minority governments, opposition parties are in a stronger position to change policies or prevent undesirable changes. These minority governments will try to accommodate opposition parties to safeguard majority support in parliament for their legislation. They negotiate support from opposition parties before or during the legislative review process (Christiansen and Damgaard 2008; Christiansen and Pedersen 2014). This means there are more incentives for opposition parties to opt for policy-seeking behaviour when making a trade-off between policy and votes. Consequently, opposition parties will be more likely to vote in favour of those government bills.

Additionally, the role of opposition parties' policy preferences may be stronger under a substantive minority government than under a majority government. Under majority governments, opposition parties have stronger incentives to oppose the government even if they prefer government legislation over the status quo (Dewan and Spirling 2011). Under substantive minority governments, opposition parties can tilt the support for a government bill to a majority. Thus, under minority governments, support for the government will be affected more by parties' 'policy positions rather than by government–opposition splits' (Hix and Noury 2016: 254; Klüver and Zubek 2018).

Minority government hypothesis: *Under substantive minority governments, opposition parties are more likely to support government bills than under majority governments or formal minority governments.*

Minority government–policy distance hypothesis: *Under substantive minority governments, the effect of policy distance on opposition parties' support for government bills is stronger than under majority governments or formal minority governments.*

Opposing the government to win votes at the next election can come with a trade-off of forgoing any possible policy influence while being in opposition and at a lower chance of joining a future coalition government with one of the incumbent governing parties. Opposition parties are expected to prioritize vote-seeking behaviour in situations where that behaviour will be most effective: when opposition parties feel more strongly monitored by voters, they will feel incentivized to do things that will benefit them electorally. When opposition parties 'do their work away from the centers of public attention' they are more inclined to cooperate with the government as 'opportunities are more available and compromises less embarrassing' (Strøm 1990b: 43).

Opposition parties should be expected to be monitored most closely by the electorate on their core issues. Their behaviour in their most important policy areas is more important for preserving a party profile distinct from the government (Budge 2015). On salient issues on which they have very different preferences from the government, opposition parties should be particularly oppositional. Opposing the government is probably not equally beneficial electorally for all parties in all contexts. When opposition parties are close to the government on issues that are important to them, they may be more willing to support the government. It is harder for opposition parties to credibly oppose government legislation that is congruent with (or very close to) their policy preferences. This is especially true in multiparty systems in which opposition parties have to position themselves vis-à-vis other parties in the opposition in addition to the government (Hohendorf et al. 2020). Opposing the government in that situation is not only less credible, but gaining policy influence may be more likely and less costly because it is easier for parties to justify their support for the government and be rewarded for it by their voters (Müller 2024; Thesen et al. 2017).

Issue saliency–policy distance hypothesis: *The more salient a policy area is to an opposition party, the stronger the effect of policy distance on its support for government bills in that policy area.*

Office-seeking motivations may lead opposition parties to oppose the government if that helps them advance an early government alternation. The threat of a parliamentary defeat may unite the governing party or parties in their support of the government and incentivize the opposition to vote collectively against the government (Hix and Noury 2016: 252). Although most governments terminate early rather than serving their full term, they rarely terminate because of a defeat in parliament by the opposition. For coalition governments, the most frequent reason for early termination is a policy conflict between the coalition partners (Damgaard 2008).

Bridging diverging policy preferences through compromise can be very painful for coalition parties. The constitutional doctrine of collective cabinet responsibility can be a risk for coalition parties. According to this doctrine, all members of the government should support all government actions. As a consequence, coalition parties in parliament generally vote in the same way on government legislation, even if they have very diverging policy preferences (Laver 2006: 137). They will not allow their partners to vote against the government compromise. Coalition unity may hurt them electorally because voters may feel that their party is giving too much away (Hjermitslev 2020; Klüver and Spoon 2020). For coalition parties, collective cabinet responsibility is 'an electoral straitjacket, effectively eliminating a cabinet member's potential to defend themselves' (Fortunato 2021: 94).

Opposition parties that want to leave the opposition or prefer a different government can exploit coalition parties' electoral vulnerability by increasing intra-coalition tensions. An effective way to do this is to expose and highlight disagreements or 'policy wedges' between the governing parties (Van de Wardt et al. 2014). Exposing policy differences and compromises among coalition parties can destabilize a coalition government (Laver 2006: 130). It embarrasses coalition parties and communicates to voters that coalition parties have given away too much to their partners (Fortunato 2021). This will hurt coalition parties electorally at the next elections, and it may result in increasing tensions among coalition parties and in the early termination of the government (So 2024).

One way to 'divide to conquer' the government is by asking parliamentary questions on policy issues on which the governing parties' policy preferences diverge (Whitaker and Martin 2022). Another way of publicizing these policy wedges is voting against government bills that concern policy domains on which coalition parties diverge ideologically. A situation in which a governing party tilts the vote to a majority for unpopular policies may be especially painful for it. This strategy may not only hurt the stability and prospects of government duration but also hurt the governing parties' reputations and electoral prospects at the next election.

Coalition issue divisiveness hypothesis: *The more governing parties' policy positions in a policy area diverge, the less likely it is that opposition parties support a government bill in that policy area.*

The prospects of a party that uses an adversarial opposition style entering the next government depends on the governing potential of opposition parties and the government alternation patterns in a political system. Governmental potential refers to opposition parties' aspirations for office and the likelihood of getting involved in government formation and is often operationalized as whether that party has had prior government experience (Sartori 1976; Schumacher et al. 2015; Tuttnauer 2018). Opposition parties with none or only little governing potential will probably put a stronger weight on policy-seeking or vote-seeking motivations than on office-seeking motivations. The strategy for potential governing parties to win office depends on the structure of party competition (Mair 1996; Otjes 2020).

In systems of wholesale alternation, two parties or two blocs of parties alternate in government. The route to government for office-seeking opposition parties in these

systems is to win a majority (or plurality) of seats (or for their bloc) at the next election. In these systems, early elections and being distinct from the government are the most rational routes to becoming the government in the long term. Attacking the government, then, is a requirement to offer a credible alternative government to the electorate (Tuttnauer 2018).[1] For these opposition parties, 'the basic conviction … prevails, "that it is better to give the government enough rope to hang itself with" than demonstrating its fitness for office and trying to win the voters' trust by helping the government to govern' (Helms 2008: 15). For opposition parties without governing potential, campaigning against the government is not a self-evident strategy. As they are unlikely to gain government participation through winning votes, their only way to influence policies is by exploiting the parliamentary opportunities to influence public policies. To do that, they need to act more cooperatively towards the government (Tuttnauer 2018).

Contrarily, in systems of partial alternation, parties that are separated into government and opposition camps at one time may form a coalition government together at another time. Elections in these systems – however important – are less deterministic for government formation. Here, office-seeking opposition parties risk being excluded from future coalitions when they act too antagonistically towards the government (Ganghof and Bräuninger 2006; Louwerse et al. 2017; Tavits 2008). Therefore, they will moderate their attitude towards the government or even actively seek cooperation, signalling trust and gaining a reputation as future coalition partners (Bale and Bergman 2006). Cooperative behaviour may affect parties' reputation positively as reliable partners in future coalition governments. Compared to permanent opposition parties, engaging in 'divide to conquer' strategies could hurt opposition parties with governing potential in systems of partial alternation because this 'could risk imperilling relationships with past and prospective coalition partners' (Van de Wardt et al. 2014: 987).

Governing potential hypothesis: *In systems of wholesale alternation (Canada, Denmark, the United Kingdom), the more governing potential an opposition party has, the less likely it is to support government bills. In systems of partial alternation (the Netherlands), the more governing potential an opposition party has, the more likely it is to support government bills.*

Governing potential–coalition issue divisiveness hypothesis: *In systems of wholesale alternation (Denmark), the more governing potential an opposition party has, the stronger the effect of coalition issue divisiveness is on support for government bills. In systems of partial alternation (the Netherlands), the more governing potential an opposition party has, the weaker the effect of coalition issue divisiveness is on support for government bills.*

Methods and data

The analyses include parliamentary votes in four established parliamentary democracies: Canada, Denmark, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. These countries were selected to maximize institutional variation and increase the findings' generalizability. To inform the country case selection, two institutional features known to affect

government–opposition distinctiveness were considered. First, the difference between two-party systems (the United Kingdom and Canada) and multiparty systems (the Netherlands and Denmark) represents differences in the competition between political parties (Lijphart 2012). The second feature that informed the country case selection is the occurrence of minority governments. Denmark has the largest share of minority governments of all established parliamentary democracies: roughly 90% of Danish governments since 1945 had a minority status. Compared to Denmark, Canada has had far fewer minority governments, but for a majoritarian democracy, a third of the governments having had a minority status is still quite substantial. In the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, majority governments have been the norm. This diverse set of country cases contributes to the generalizability of the findings.

Additionally, the selected countries differ in their patterns of government alternation (Otjes 2020). In the United Kingdom, the Conservative Party and the Labour Party have alternated in mostly single-party government. In Canada, the Liberal Party and the Conservative Party have competed over single-party governments. Despite the Danish parliament's high levels of fragmentation, the party system can be divided into a left bloc (Social Democrats and Social Liberals) and a right bloc (Liberals and the Conservative People's Party) that usually alternate in single-party or coalition government. Deviating from these patterns of wholesale alternation, the Dutch fragmented party systems have led to the formation of coalition governments including at least one party that had previously been in government. In the Netherlands, there has never been an instance of wholesale alternation and, until the formation of the 2024 government, every government had included at least two of the three traditional parties: the Christian Democrats (or its predecessors), the Liberals and the Labour Party.

This study focuses on the decision of opposition parties to support or oppose government legislation. Whereas earlier research focused on the differences in government support between opposition parties (De Giorgi and Marangoni 2015; Tuttnauer 2018) or on differences in the government–opposition distinction between parliamentary votes (Giuliani 2008; Louwerse et al. 2017), this analysis focused on the individual voting decisions of opposition parties, enabling the estimation of the impact of party- *and* bill-specific features on opposition behaviour (cf. Müller 2024).

The unit of analysis is an opposition party's voting decision on a government bill (in favour or against). Data on the voting behaviour in parliament of opposition parties were taken from Tom Louwerse and Rick van Well (2023), who assembled parliamentary voting data from various country-specific sources. This dataset spans an extensive period, from approximately 1945 to 2020 in all four parliaments. From this dataset, all voting decisions of opposition parties on government bills from non-caretaker governments were selected. Abstentions and parliamentary votes in which governing parties voted against the bill were excluded. The data on votes in the British House of Commons did not allow a distinction between government and private members' bills and therefore all bills that the government party voted in favour of were included. Most of these will be government bills as it is rare for votes to take place on private members' bills. Finally, votes on bills with missing information on bill topics or party were excluded ultimately resulting in 76,243 voting decisions on 14,148 government bills made by 351 opposition parties in 83 cabinet terms in 4 countries (see Table 2).

Table 2. Overview of Empirical Observations

Country	Observational period	Number of cabinets	Number of bills	Number of voting decisions
Canada	1958–2010	17	896	2569
Denmark	1953–2013	31	9289	50447
The Netherlands	1981–2021	12	2955	21507
United Kingdom	1945–2016	23	1008	1720
Total		83	14148	76243

The dependent variable in this study is the *opposition parties' support for government bills*. Opposition parties' support for government legislation was captured in a simple dichotomous measure: whether the majority of a party voted in support of (1) or in opposition to (0) the government bill. It must be noted that the meaning of an opposition party's voting decision may differ slightly across parliaments, depending on the voting procedure. In the Danish Folketing, all government bills get a vote, whereas in the British House of Commons probably only the most politically salient bills get to a vote because of the cumbersome voting procedure ('division') (Hug 2013). Since the number of bills is quite different across parliaments, the degree of government–opposition distinctiveness cannot be truly compared between countries. Many of the bills voted on in the Netherlands and Denmark may be less controversial than the typical bill voted on in the United Kingdom or Canada. For the analyses conducted here, the limitations of this operationalization are not too problematic, though, as they focus mainly on explaining within-country variation. Furthermore, a study of voting in the German parliament found that 'opposition behavior does not differ systematically between recorded and nonrecorded votes suggesting that parties act consistently across all votes' (Hohendorf et al. 2024). The sample of bills that were voted on in parliament is therefore likely to be a valid measure for studying opposition behaviour in parliament.

For the operationalization of policy distance, issue saliency and coalition issue divisiveness, information on the topic of the bill was required. This information was largely retrieved from the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP). This project classifies various policy activities, including bills, into a single, universal and consistent coding scheme (Baumgartner et al. 2019). The coding scheme includes 21 major topics and over 200 subtopics used to hand-code policy activities. The bill topics for Denmark (1953–2017), Canada (1960–2010) and the Netherlands (1980–2009) provided by these data resources were matched to the parliamentary voting data.[2] The Dutch data were extended to 2021 by a coder using the Dutch master codebook. Because the British voting data and CAP data did not share a similar unique identifier and the number of votes on British government bills was limited, these were also hand-coded using the British master codebook.

The policy preferences of political parties were measured using data from the Manifesto Research on Political Representation (MARPOR) dataset (previously known as the Comparative Manifestos Project (CMP)). MARPOR has collected and hand-coded election manifestos since 1945 in over 50 countries, including the four country

cases in this study (Volkens et al. 2020). Sentences in parties' election manifestos were sorted into one of 56 categories, resulting in percentages of each manifesto falling into each category. Rather than relying on the general left–right party positions that can be derived from these data, a more fine-grained measurement of party positions on specific policy dimensions was used; seven policy areas were constructed for which MARPOR categories were matched to CAP policy areas (see Appendix A in the Supplementary Material). For the estimation of issue-specific party, Will Lowe et al.'s (2011) scaling method was used, taking the logged ratio of positive and negative statements in each category.

To estimate the *policy distance* between opposition parties and the government, the government's position on each policy issue was calculated first. For single-party governments, the manifesto measures of the governing party were assumed to represent the government's positions. The policy positions of coalition governments were operationalized as the seat-weighted average of the policy positions of the coalition parties, whereby formal support parties to minority governments were treated as coalition parties. The policy distances between parties and the government were calculated by taking the absolute distance between a party's position and the government's position. *Coalition issue divisiveness* was operationalized as the range – that is, the difference between the highest and lowest value – of coalition parties' policy positions. For the estimation of *issue saliency*, Lowe et al.'s (2011) method was used, taking the logged proportion of statements, whether positive or negative, in each category.

Information about cabinet type was derived from ParlGov (Döring and Manow 2021). Formal support parties of minority governments were identified using Torbjörn Bergman et al.'s study (2021). Minority governments that received majority support together with their formal support parties were classified as formal minority governments and other minority governments as substantive minority governments. Dummies for *substantive minority government*, as well as *formal minority government* and *surplus majority government*, were included in the analyses. As a proxy for *governing potential*, a continuous measure of government experience was used by dividing the number of days an opposition party had been in government by the total number of days this party had existed since 1918 (Schumacher et al. 2015; Tuttnauer 2018). As control variables, seat share (based on ParlGov), a formal support party dummy and policy area were included. See Appendix B in the Supplementary Material for descriptive statistics.

Findings

The data were structured in party–bill dyadics: voting decisions were nested into both opposition parties and bills, but parties and bills did not have a hierarchical structure. As the data were clustered within cabinet terms and bills they were analysed with multilevel logistic regression models, including random intercepts for cabinet and bill. Party-fixed effects (and effectively country-fixed effects) were also added to the model. The results of the pooled models are presented in Table 3.

The analyses offer empirical support for the policy distance hypothesis. The larger the differences between the positions of an opposition party and the government on a certain policy area, the lower the probability that the opposition party votes in

Table 3. Multilevel Logistic Regression Analysis of Opposition Support for Government Bills

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
(Intercept)	2.13***	2.18***	2.13***	2.05***	2.06***
	(0.27)	(0.27)	(0.28)	(0.27)	(0.28)
Policy distance	−0.10***	−0.12***	−0.10***	−0.10***	−0.11***
	(0.01)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.01)	(0.03)
Issue saliency	0.03	0.03	0.03	0.03	0.02
	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)
Government experience	−2.21***	−2.19***	−2.21***	−1.78***	−1.74***
	(0.26)	(0.26)	(0.26)	(0.27)	(0.28)
Party seat share	−2.30***	−2.35***	−2.30***	−2.22***	−2.17***
	(0.35)	(0.36)	(0.35)	(0.35)	(0.55)
Support party	3.14***	3.13***	3.14***	3.15***	3.14***
	(0.13)	(0.13)	(0.13)	(0.13)	(0.13)
Substantive minority	0.58*	0.52 †	0.58*	0.59*	0.53*
	(0.26)	(0.27)	(0.26)	(0.26)	(0.27)
Formal minority	−0.26	−0.24	−0.26	−0.24	−0.24
	(0.38)	(0.38)	(0.38)	(0.38)	(0.38)
Surplus majority	−0.01	0.00	−0.01	−0.01	0.00
	(0.52)	(0.53)	(0.52)	(0.52)	(0.53)
Government policy range	−0.01	−0.01	−0.01	0.02	0.03
	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)
Substantive minority cabinet x Policy distance		0.03			0.03
		(0.02)			(0.02)
Formal minority cabinet x Policy distance		−0.01			−0.00
		(0.04)			(0.04)
Surplus majority cabinet x Policy distance		−0.01			−0.00
		(0.06)			(0.06)
Policy distance x Issue saliency			−0.00		0.01
			(0.01)		(0.01)
Gov experience x Gov policy range				−0.21***	−0.21***
				(0.04)	(0.04)
Gov experience x Seat share					−0.33
					(1.44)
Akaike information criterion	62608.54	62610.54	62610.71	62586.86	62593.23
Log likelihood	−31232.27	−31232.27	−31230.36	−31220.43	−31218.62
SD (Bill intercept)	2.60	2.60	2.60	2.60	2.60
SD (Cabinet intercept)	0.37	0.37	0.37	0.37	0.37

Notes: In all models, the number of observations is 76,243, the number of bills are 76,243, and the number of cabinets is 83. The reference category for cabinet type is minimal winning. *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$; † $p < 0.1$

favour of government bills in that area. This pattern of opposition behaviour was found across political systems and was statistically significant in all parliaments except for the Canadian House of Commons (see Appendix C, Table C1, in the Supplementary Material). On average, the probability of voting for a government bill decreases by 1.3 percentage points, with each standard deviation increase on the policy distance measure. This finding aligns with a 'non-strategic' spatial model of parliamentary voting behaviour in which opposition parties decide to support or oppose government bills based purely on the substantive content of the policies proposed (Hohendorf et al. 2020).

It also fits, however, the expectation that opposition parties make a trade-off between policy gains through government support and winning votes through opposing the government. When the positions of an opposition party and the government are too far apart, it is harder to credibly support the government. Supporting the government on policy issues on which an opposition party's initial position is closer makes it easier to find compromises that are not too painful for opposition parties. Still, the size of the policy distance effect is modest, confirming again that spatial models of legislative behaviour are not sufficient to understand opposition behaviour in parliament adequately. To provide evidence for the main argument in this article that opposition parties act strategically, balancing their opposition goals, I now turn to the other findings.

Opposition support for the government was expected to increase under substantive minority governments. Substantive minority governments should be more willing to accommodate opposition parties in exchange for their much-needed support in parliament. For opposition parties in turn this should increase the benefits of policy-seeking behaviour and tilt the policy–vote trade-off further in favour of policy-seeking behaviour – that is, support of government bills. The probability of voting for government bills among opposition parties to substantive minority governments is 5.3 percentage points greater, on average, than the probability of voting for government bills among opposition parties to minimal winning governments. The differences between opposition behaviour under formal minority governments and minimal winning governments were not statistically significant, providing further evidence for the argument that formal minority governments are 'majority governments in disguise'.

The role of policy distances to the government in opposition parties' decision to support or oppose the government was also expected to increase under a substantive minority government. The results of the moderation analyses, however, show that the effect of policy distance only differs significantly between substantive minority governments and majority governments in Canada (Model 2). Here, policy distance only has a negative and significant effect under substantive minority governments in Canada but not under majority governments (see Appendix C, Table C2). In the other country models and the pooled model, however, there was no statistically significant moderation effect of cabinet type.

The trade-offs between the opposition objectives were expected to tilt further into vote-seeking behaviour when opposition parties feel more observed by voters. Under those circumstances, opposition parties' voting behaviour should be informed more strongly by their policy positions, because the signal that their position in parliament sends to voters is more effective. When a party is positioned further away from

the government, voting against the government comes with greater electoral benefits as it enables opposition parties to distinguish themselves from the government on their core issues. When positioned close to the government it is harder to oppose credibly and easier to justify support. The empirical analyses provide no support for these expectations (Model 3). Neither in the pooled model nor in the country models was the moderation effect of issue saliency and policy distance statistically significant. The main effect of issue saliency differs between countries. Only in the Dutch Tweede Kamer does issue saliency lead to a lower probability of voting in support of government bills (see Appendix C, Table C1). Contrarily, in Denmark and the United Kingdom, high issue saliency was associated with *higher* levels of support for government legislation.

Opposition parties should care not only about winning the next elections and exerting policy influence but also about replacing or joining the incumbent government. Increasing internal tensions within coalition governments could be a fruitful way to stimulate an early government alternation. Therefore, opposition parties were expected to oppose government bills on policy areas on which coalition parties were divided, in order to highlight the painful compromises coalition parties make and embarrass them. The analyses reveal support for this hypothesis only in the Dutch case. Here, for each standard deviation increase in the policy range within the government, the probability of voting in favour of government bills decreases by 1.4 percentage points. In Denmark, however, the coalition policy range did not have a significant effect (see Appendix C, Table C1).

The strategy of driving a wedge between coalition parties was hypothesized to be used to a different degree depending on the specific institutional context and the position of opposition parties within that context. First of all, office-seeking behaviour should be more attractive for those opposition parties that are likely to enter future governments than for parties that are or seem to be in opposition permanently. For those latter parties, policy and vote objectives should usually prevail. Second, the patterns of government alternation within a political system should determine the strategy employed by opposition parties with office aspirations. In systems of wholesale alternation, such as Canada, Denmark and the United Kingdom, attacking the incumbent government is the best way to stimulate government instability and a sooner replacement of the government. In systems of partial alternation, opposition parties should moderate their attitude towards the government to signal trust and responsibility towards future coalition partners who are currently in government. The analyses reveal that the more credible the position of the alternative government is for an opposition party, operationalized as the degree of government experience, the more the opposition parties will vote against government bills. This effect is only substantial and statistically significant in the systems of wholesale alternation and not in the country of partial alternation (the Netherlands).

Furthermore, moderation analyses of the Danish and Dutch cases show that Danish opposition parties aspiring for office use the wedge-driving strategy more, whereas their Dutch counterparts use the wedge-driving strategy less (see Table 4). This supports the expectation that the context of government alternation patterns affects the behaviour of opposition parties who aim to enter the government. In Denmark, the more government experience opposition parties have, the *stronger* the negative effect of

Table 4. Multilevel Logistic Regression Analyses of Opposition Support for Government Bills (With Government Experience and Government Policy Range Interaction)

	Canada	Denmark	Netherlands	United Kingdom	Pooled
(Intercept)	0.06	3.37***	2.90***	3.09	2.05***
	(0.47)	(0.29)	(0.18)	(1.97)	(0.27)
Policy distance	−0.01	−0.09***	−0.15***	−0.23***	−0.10***
	(0.06)	(0.01)	(0.02)	(0.07)	(0.01)
Issue saliency	0.11	0.05 **	−0.13*	0.46 *	0.03
	(0.06)	(0.02)	(0.06)	(0.21)	(0.02)
Government experience	−32.35***	−1.83***	−0.71	−15.46***	−1.78***
	(6.93)	(0.32)	(0.55)	(4.28)	(0.27)
Party seat share	−5.42***	−1.75***	−3.88***	1.12	−2.22***
	(1.30)	(0.47)	(0.70)	(2.18)	(0.35)
Support party		3.25***	2.61***		3.15***
		(0.14)	(0.31)		(0.13)
Substantive minority	1.65**	−0.81**		3.72*	0.59*
	(0.53)	(0.28)		(1.86)	(0.26)
Formal minority		−1.66***	−0.19		−0.24
		(0.37)	(0.20)		(0.38)
Surplus majority			0.26		−0.01
			(0.16)		(0.52)
Government policy range		0.02	−0.26***	1.82*	0.02
		(0.02)	(0.07)	(0.84)	(0.02)
Gov experience x Gov policy range		−0.29***	0.38**		−0.21***
		(0.05)	(0.12)		(0.04)
Akaike information criterion	2798.11	41233.44	16573.49	1561.20	62586.86
Log likelihood	−1377.06	−20582.72	−8246.74	−760.60	−31220.43
Number of observations	2569	50447	21507	1720	76243
Number of bills	896	9289	2955	1008	14148
Number of cabinets	17	31	12	23	83
SD (Bill intercept)	0.49	2.46	3.63	2.34	2.60
SD (Cabinet intercept)	0.93	0.17	0.00	0.12	0.37

Notes: The reference category for cabinet type is minimal winning. ***$p < 0.001$, **$p < 0.01$, *$p < 0.05$, $^{\dagger}p < 0.1$.

coalition issue divisiveness is on support for government bills. In the Netherlands, the more government experience opposition parties have, the *weaker* the negative effect of coalition issue divisiveness is on support for government bills.

Conclusion

For political parties, being in the opposition is hard. Opposition parties continually face difficult decisions about how they form their relationship with the government.

They must position themselves strategically to offer voters coherent and contrasting sets of alternatives to choose from in the next elections. They must act strategically to stimulate an early government alternation while also increasing their chances of entering a future government. And they must leverage the power they have in parliament, though usually smaller than governing parties, to exert influence on public policies. This study has provided empirical evidence for the notion that opposition parties make trade-offs between these opposition goals depending on the issue at hand. Focusing especially on bill-specific features, it has systematically examined theoretically derived expectations centring on the dilemmas that opposition parties face daily between their objectives. The analyses leveraged extensive within-country variation in four theoretically motivated cases of established parliamentary democracies. The results largely provide empirical support for the idea that opposition parties' decisions to support or oppose the government are motivated by policy-seeking, office-seeking and vote-seeking objectives and that opposition parties prioritize some of these motivations over others, depending on the government proposal at hand.

Whenever the circumstances allow for policy influence, opposition parties are inclined to support the government since they can exchange support for policy concessions from the government. This is the case when the policy preferences of opposition parties are close to the government's and most effectively when the government is a 'genuine' minority government in dire need of opposition support. Legislation from minority governments that can rely on stable majority support because of formal agreements with one or more support parties is not as much supported by (genuine) opposition parties because formal minority governments have fewer incentives to accommodate the wishes of opposition parties. Contrary to expectations, the role of policy distances did not increase under substantive minority governments.

Even more fascinatingly, the present study has provided clear empirical evidence for the important role of the specific institutional context in which opposition parties compete for office. The employed cross-country data allowed for a comparative perspective on opposition behaviour across parliaments, making possible an estimation of the effect of governing potential and government issue divisiveness in different institutional contexts. As theoretically expected, the more government experience or office aspiration opposition parties have, the more their support for government bills is affected by a strategy to leave the opposition and enter the next government. This strategy depends on the prospects of the next government composition.

When opposition parties foresee replacing the incumbent government wholesale, as is the case in Denmark, Canada and the United Kingdom, office-seeking opposition parties are inclined to vote against the government – especially on bills in areas where the governing parties are divided – to stimulate tensions within the government and an early government alternation. On the other hand, when opposition parties foresee that they might cooperate with at least one of the incumbent governing parties in the next government, as is the case in the Netherlands, office-seeking opposition parties act more moderately to signal trust to future coalition partners. In these contexts, opposition parties with less experience and prospects of government participation are more inclined to vote against bills in areas where governing parties are divided.

As parliament is also a platform for national debate, it was theorized that opposition parties should vote more frequently against government legislation when that

opposition could benefit them electorally. Although opposition parties are more likely to vote against government bills in areas where their policy preference diverge further from the government's, opposition parties' tendency to differentiate themselves from the government is not significantly higher in areas that are particularly salient to them. Possibly, opposition parties feel the need to act more responsibly on these issues. Cooperating with the government and exerting some policy influence on salient issues may actually help them present themselves as parties who can get things done. Alternatively, vote-seeking motivations may be less relevant for opposition parties in the parliamentary arena, at least in voting on government bills. Opposition parties may exploit different parliamentary tools to distinguish themselves from the government – for example in parliamentary debates or other parliamentary instruments – or they may use platforms outside of parliament to advertise their distinctive position, for example in the media. These are all leads for future studies.

Considering the contributions of this study, there still remains a wealth of questions about the relationship between government and opposition to be addressed. Whereas the present study focused on the impact of political and institutional circumstances on the trade-offs that opposition parties make between their goals, future work could aim to measure and explain the value that opposition parties attribute to each of their goals in general. Do opposition parties differ in the degree to which they intrinsically value the goal of winning votes, entering the government and exerting policy influence? There is also still much research to do on what the exact electoral and policy implications of opposition behaviour are. When do voters reward cooperative opposition behaviour, and does this differ across parties? Also, future research could take a government perspective on government–opposition relations: why do governments or governing parties support or oppose opposition proposals? Finally, a qualitative approach to government–opposition cooperation could investigate the drivers and causal mechanism of government–opposition distinctiveness more closely and tap more directly into what motivates the behaviour of opposition members of parliament.

For now, this study has emphasized that opposition parties face dilemmas on a daily basis, because they operate in both an electoral arena and a parliamentary arena. In the electoral arena, they experience incentives for competition, but in the parliamentary arena they often experience incentives for cooperation. There is some disagreement about the ideal relationship between the government and the opposition, but many scholars have warned against too much cooperation between government and opposition parties, as it risks the principles of concentrated responsibility and alternative government (Andeweg 2013; Dahl 1966a: 34; Kirchheimer 1957: 136, 142). The question of how opposition parties deal with these tensions should continue to give rise to new advances in the study of the crucial relationship between government and opposition parties.

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Notes

1 Too adversarial an opposition style may hurt parties when they become the ones to be held accountable after government alternation: 'an opposition party which knows that it may be called to "respond", i.e. which is oriented towards governing and has a reasonable chance to govern or to have access to governmental responsibility, is likely to behave responsibly, in a restrained and realistic fashion. On the other hand, a "permanent opposition" which … knows it will not be called on to respond, Is likely to take the path of "irresponsible opposition"' (Sartori 1966: 35, 152). This restraint, however, seems more relevant for the policy positions of opposition parties and opposition rhetoric than for votes on government bills.

2 The data in the Canadian Agendas Project have been collected by Stuart Soroka and Kelly Blidook (1968–2004) and Christine Rothmayr (1960–1968, 2004–2010). The data in the Danish Policy Agenda Project have been collected by Christoffer Green-Pedersen and Peter B. Mortensen with support from the Danish Social Science Research Council and the Research Foundation at Aarhus University. The data in the Netherlands Agendas Project have been collected by Arco Timmermans and Gerard Breeman with support from the Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations at Leiden University.

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