Do Members of Parliament Express More Opposition in the Plenary than in the Committee? Comparing Frontstage and Backstage Behaviour in Five National Parliaments

Christer Karlsson *, Thomas Persson , Moa Mårtensson

Department of Government, Uppsala University, Uppsala, Sweden

*Correspondence: Christer.Karlsson@statsvet.uu.se

This study attempts to break new ground by systematically comparing oppositional behaviour of Members of Parliament (MPs) in the two key arenas found in parliament: the plenary and the committee. Do MPs express more opposition frontstage in the plenary than backstage in the committee when discussing European affairs? The article sheds new light on political opposition in parliament by using a dataset of hand-coded statements made by MPs during plenary debates and European Affairs committee deliberations in five national parliaments. The results lend strong support to the main hypothesis that MPs express more opposition during plenary debates than committee deliberations.

Keywords: European Union Affairs, National Parliaments, Oppositional Behaviour, Parliamentary Opposition, Plenary Debates

1. Introduction

Political opposition is of fundamental importance to democracy because it presents voters with choice (Mair, 2007). Deprived of political choice voters will hardly see elections as meaningful and recent research confirms that greater political choice has a mobilising effect on turnout (Hobolt and Hoerner, 2020). A key source of information about the choices available to voters is the political debates in the most important arena for expressing opposition in modern democracies: the parliament. Disagreement with the government voiced in parliament is an important signal to voters that the next general election offers an opportunity to
alter the political course and have a new set of policies implemented. Public debates in the plenary are thus considered crucial for parliaments in order to ‘fulfil their communication function’ (Auel and Raunio, 2014, p. 4). However, our picture of opposition in parliament and, by extension, the existing choice in politics will be incomplete if we rely solely on information from one of the two key arenas (Lord, 2018) in parliament, the plenary, while neglecting the other, the committee. In fact, focusing exclusively on what goes on frontstage during plenary debates may lead to a distorted picture of parliamentary opposition, should it turn out that the oppositional behaviour of Members of Parliament (MPs) differs systematically between the plenary and the committee. That such a difference in behaviour may very well exist, Follows from previous studies that conclude that legislative speech in the plenary invites ‘grandstanding’, ‘credit-claiming’, ‘advertising’ (cf. Mayhew, 1974) and other strategies that MPs believe necessary to cut through the noise and receive media coverage. It has thus been suggested (Roger, 2016; Lord, 2018) that what goes on backstage in the committee may provide a more accurate picture of legislators’ true preferences, than what plays out at the frontstage during plenary debates.

The literature on legislatures acknowledges the importance of variation in institutional context for understanding outcomes in parliamentary activity (Auel and Raunio, 2014; Giannetti and Pedrazzani, 2016). This insight has often been used to examine institutional differences between political systems and past research has recorded significant variation in the concrete functioning of different parliaments (Norton, 1998; Strøm et al., 2003). However, the fact that institutional context matters, has not informed systematic comparison of parliamentary behaviour within legislatures. When it comes to parliamentary opposition we simply do not know if and how the oppositional behaviour of MPs varies between the plenary and the committee. This knowledge gap has significant implications since parliament is the most important arena for voicing disagreement with the government. First of all, this lacuna in the literature means we are missing a vital part of the puzzle for understanding how political opposition works in parliamentary democracies. In addition, it implies that we may need to question how wise it is to rely almost exclusively on plenary debates as the means by which parliaments communicate with voters. For if systematic differences in oppositional behaviour do exist between the frontstage and the backstage, and if voters rely solely on information from the plenary, then it follows they will get a distorted picture of the political choice available to them. Comparing oppositional behaviour across parliamentary arenas will thus shed new light on the communicative function of legislatures, and in extension the opportunity of voters to make informed choices.

This study seeks to contribute to the research on parliamentary opposition by examining to what extent the oppositional behaviour of MPs varies between plenary debates and committee deliberations, when discussing the same set of
Comparing Oppositional Behaviour

175

political issues, in this case, European affairs. Do MPs express more opposition frontstage than backstage? By offering a systematic comparison of oppositional behaviour in the plenary and the committee in five national parliaments, this study aims to shed new light on parliamentary opposition and, more broadly, help improve our understanding of how variation in institutional context within and between parliaments may affect legislative behaviour.

The insight that parliaments consist of two key arenas is far from new. John Stuart Mill’s defence of parliamentary democracy was founded on the argument that Parliament should be seen as a ‘Congress of Opinions’ (Mill, 1972, pp. 239–40). Mill’s argument highlights the public forum role of parliaments and considers debates in the plenary chamber as the key activity. Max Weber, on the other hand, emphasised the importance of the work taking place ‘behind the scenes at the meetings of the committees’ (1994, p. 171). So, where Mill emphasised the importance of the plenary, Weber highlighted the committee as the key arena for parliamentary work. Given that the insight that parliaments consist of two key arenas is far from new, it is surprising that so little attention has been paid to systematically investigating if and how parliamentary activity varies between the frontstage and the backstage. The research on political opposition in parliament illustrates this state of affairs. We thus find recent work that is focused on the frontstage (e.g. Hoerner, 2017; Rauh and de Wilde, 2018), or on the backstage (e.g. Loxbo and Sjölin, 2017; Karlsson and Persson, 2022), but no studies that compare parliamentary opposition between the two arenas. As a consequence, we have no idea whether and to what extent the oppositional behaviour of MPs varies between the plenary and the committee. This is the gap in the literature that this study seeks to address.

Our examination will focus on European affairs. This case selection was motivated by substantive as well as practical reasons. First of all, the choice to focus on European Union (EU) affairs greatly facilitates making comparisons across countries as there is considerable overlap between EU Member States in terms of the issues debated in parliament during a specific period in time. Moreover, the selection of EU affairs as our case in point provides us with a unique opportunity to compare MPs oppositional behaviour frontstage and backstage. While stenographic records exist for plenary debates in most parliaments, there are usually no such detailed records available for committee deliberations. This makes it close to impossible to compare the behaviour of MPs frontstage and backstage in legislatures. However, European Affairs Committees (EACs) do keep detailed records of their deliberations, in many if not all Member States, which makes EU affairs an ideal case for our purposes. The examination includes one former and four current EU Member States: Denmark, Germany, Ireland, Sweden and the UK. In total, we have analysed and hand-coded 7520 statements by MPs during
plenary debates and committee deliberations for the period 2009–2016 (for more information, see Supplementary data, Appendix A, Table A2).

The examination proceeds in five separate steps: in Section 2, we look at previous research on parliamentary opposition. We then develop our hypotheses on the basis of previous research. Next we address methodological issues, data and coding in connection to our study in Section 4. In Section 5, we compare oppositional behaviour in the plenary and the EAC, and test our theoretical expectations. In Section 6, we offer our conclusions.

2. Legislative behaviour and parliamentary opposition

The study to follow will improve our understanding of parliamentary opposition, but will also speak more broadly to the literature on legislative behaviour and parliamentary debate. Research on legislative behaviour has been dominated by studies examining how legislation is introduced and decided upon, with the spotlight usually directed at uncovering the determinants of voting behaviour (Poole and Rosenthal, 1997; Hix 2004; Carey, 2007). More recently, however, research on legislative behaviour has come to focus on speech acts and parliamentary debate as key activities, not least when it comes to MPs and parties fulfilling the task of communicating their positions to the electorate. Several scholars have argued that moving beyond voting behaviour is necessary as votes ‘offer an unrefined instrument for expressing opinions’, whereas parliamentary debates provide MPs an opportunity to express ‘a wide range of more nuanced viewpoints’ (Proksch and Slapin, 2015, p. 7). As opposition is not merely about expressing disagreement with the government, but crucially about stating the reasons for that disagreement as well as presenting alternative courses of action, legislative debate is the key source of information about parliamentary opposition.

Previous research on legislative debate has primarily focused on the frontstage while neglecting what transpires backstage in the committees. It is telling that Bächtiger (2014), when providing an overview of research on debate and deliberation in legislatures, almost exclusively cites studies focused on plenary debate, rather than committee deliberation. Of the more prominent studies of legislative debate, Proksch and Slapin start out from the premise that ‘floor speeches contain information about MPs policy positions, which, directly or indirectly through the media, are transmitted to voters’ (2015, p. 9). Likewise, Bäck et al. (2021) also focus exclusively on speeches on the floor in their comprehensive comparative study on legislative debates. While there are some studies focusing on parliamentary debate in committees (Roger, 2016; Karlsson and Persson, 2018, 2022), there are to date no systematic comparisons of legislative debate in the plenary and the committee. This is true for general studies of who speaks, when and about what in parliament, as well as for the study of oppositional
behaviour. By comparing oppositional behaviour frontstage and backstage in five legislatures, we will provide new knowledge on parliamentary opposition, while also offering insights into how legislative behaviour in the form of parliamentary debate differs between the plenary and the committee.

There is a longstanding complaint that political science has not paid political opposition the attention it deserves, given its standing as a key feature of liberal democracy (cf. Garritzmann, 2017). All is relative, of course, but the literature on parliamentary opposition is by now fairly extensive and it continues to grow. The existing work on parliamentary opposition has been concentrated around a few key themes. One important strand of research has been occupied with finding proper typologies for capturing existing variation in the institutionalisation of opposition in democratic polities. These studies follow in the footsteps of Dahl’s classical study on political opposition in western democracies (1966), but have sought to improve on the typology of opposition proposed by Dahl (e.g. Blondel, 1997; Helms, 2004).

Secondly, we find studies focused on charting how much opposition exist in parliament and whether opposition is in decline. The results from these studies partially point in different directions. Whereas Rauh and de Wilde (2018) find evidence of an ‘opposition deficit’ in national parliaments, Loxbo and Sjölin provide evidence to suggest that opposition is not on the wane, but rather that ‘partisan struggles have intensified significantly over time’ (2017, p. 2). In a similar vein, a case study from the German parliament (Albrecht et al., 2021) concludes there is more opposition found in EU politics than what has often been assumed in previous research (Mair, 2007).

A third theme in the literature deals with the factors conducive for parliamentary opposition to materialise. Kaiser (2008) and Garritzmann (2017) examine existing ‘opportunity structures’ for opposition in parliamentary democracies. The latter study finds that countries can be classified into four groups on the basis of the strength of existing opportunity structures. Tuttnauer (2018) takes things one step further by examining the determinants of oppositional behaviour in parliament and finds evidence to suggest that variation in oppositional behaviour is determined by both party-specific factors and systemic features.

Finally, there are studies that focus exclusively on the role of political parties in shaping distinct patterns of oppositional behaviour in parliament. Senninger (2017), for example, shows that the opposition expressed by Eurosceptic parties tend to emphasise polity-related aspects, whereas the opposition expressed by mainstream parties are more likely to focus on policy-related issues. In a comparison between the Danish and Swedish parliaments, Persson et al. (2019) finds that challenger parties are the main drivers of opposition in parliament, whereas Louwerse and Otjes (2019) in a study from the Dutch parliament zero in on how populist parties wage opposition.
Taken as a whole, the literature on parliamentary opposition clearly reflects the fact that activities in both the plenary and the committee are important for understanding parliamentary opposition. On the one hand, we thus find research on the voting behaviour of opposition parties in the plenary (Tuttnauer, 2018), the extent to which MPs express opposition during speeches on the floor (Proksch et al., 2019), and how oppositional behaviour varies between political parties in the plenary (Hoerner, 2017). On the other hand we find studies that examine how much opposition MPs express during committee deliberations (Karlsson and Persson, 2022), if opposition in committee work is on the wane (Loxbo and Sjölin, 2017), and whether oppositional behaviour by Eurosceptic parties is ‘contagious’ (Persson et al., 2022). These studies have improved our knowledge of oppositional behaviour in parliament, but it is striking that they have focused either on the frontstage or the backstage. The upshot of this is that past research has not provided the full picture of parliamentary opposition by comparing whether and to what extent the oppositional behaviour of MPs varies between the plenary and the committee.

3. Analytical framework and hypotheses

The analytical framework in this study is grounded in the definition of opposition as an ‘expression of disagreement with the government’ (Dahl, 1966). This definition highlights that opposition is about a certain type of behaviour whereby an actor signals disagreement with the government. This understanding of political opposition also implies that we cannot rely on indicators such as the number of statements made by representatives during plenary debates and committee deliberations. Instead, we need to examine the actual content of those statements in order to uncover whether or not they express disagreement with the government.

Besides distinguishing between the plenary and the committee our examination of oppositional behaviour will be guided by two additional analytical distinctions. First, we distinguish between two different types of opposition. The first type of disagreement is opposition in the form of voicing critique. By voicing critique representatives of opposition parties distance themselves from the government and make themselves visible to voters (Norton, 2008, p. 238). However, voicing critique is also a way of seeking to exercise control over the government by asking it to publicly justify its actions (Garritzmann, 2017, p. 2). The second type of disagreement is opposition in the form of presenting alternatives to the policies and programmes proposed by the government. This type of opposition is about introducing choice in politics, something that is equally or even more important. Presenting citizens with alternatives to the sitting government is in fact a prerequisite if elections are to function as mechanisms for policy change, but this type of opposition is also important for citizens to be able in practice to retrospectively
hold politicians accountable. For if no real alternatives exist to the current set of incumbents, replacing them will be rather meaningless. What we have then is ‘opposition within the cartel’ (Mair, 2007, p. 14).

Secondly, we distinguish between two types of legislatures: debating and working parliaments (Polsby, 1975). This familiar distinction directs our attention to the fact that different practices have evolved within the family of parliamentary democracies. The hallmark of debating parliaments is a focus on plenary debates where opposition parties criticise the government and showcase differences of opinion. Working parliaments, on the other hand, place a heavier emphasis on committee work and tend to be more consensus oriented. The House of Commons is the archetype of a debating parliament, whereas the Scandinavian countries are key examples of working parliaments (Arter, 1999).

A methodological problem when it comes to examining variation in oppositional behaviour between the plenary and the committee is that the behaviour of MPs is very likely affected by the type of parliament they work in. If, for example, we would find that MPs in the House of Commons express considerably more opposition during plenary debates than committee deliberations, how can we be sure that this is an effect that stems from the different arenas, rather than something that comes from the fact that the prevailing political culture in a debating parliament expects MPs to reserve expressions of opposition for plenary debates? The simple answer is that we cannot, unless we compare the oppositional behaviour of MPs across arenas in different parliaments along the debating-working continuum.

Our examination of oppositional behaviour in the five legislatures will thus be guided by an analytical framework that includes two arenas—the plenary and the committee—two types of opposition—expressing critique and presenting alternatives—and two types of legislatures—debating and working parliaments.

Let us now turn to formulating the study’s theoretical expectations. These will primarily be grounded in previous research on legislative behaviour and parliamentary opposition, but we will also draw on insights from political sociology and party behaviour.

The general insight that the world of politics contains of a frontstage and a backstage, and that there are different norms surrounding these arenas is well established in political sociology. Goffman (1959) argued that political actors will be more prone to perform roles and adjust their behaviour to what is expected of them according to prevailing social norms when appearing on the frontstage. Backstage, away from the public eye, they would enjoy more freedom to act without adjusting their behaviour to established social conventions. That the behaviour of political actors does tend to vary between public and non-public arenas has indeed been confirmed by previous research. In his study of constitution-making, Elster (1998) found that speaking in public had a negative effect on the
deliberative quality of the debate in constituent assemblies, whereas Bächtiger et al. have shown that non-publicity will ‘further respectful exchanges among participants’ in legislatures (2005, p. 234).

In order to understand what we may expect in terms of variation in oppositional behaviour between the frontstage and the backstage in parliament, we must acquaint ourselves with the incentives that govern the actions of MPs and parties during legislative debates. As the literature on legislative behaviour shows, parties use legislative debate to communicate with voters (Auel and Raunio, 2014; Proksch and Slapin, 2015), and when doing so, they ‘keep electoral considerations in mind’ (Proksch and Slapin, 2012, p. 521). To gain support parties may use legislative debates as an opportunity to signal responsiveness (Klüver, 2020) to the electorate by focusing on issues that voters see as important, or to differentiate their party’s position from those held by other parties (Martin and Vanberg, 2008) on salient issues. A legislative debate may also serve as ‘a prime opportunity for MPs to explain their votes’ (Slapin et al., 2018, p. 18), which may be especially important if they decide to vote against the preferences of their constituents (Giger and Klüver, 2016).

Against this backdrop, we argue that expressing opposition in parliament can be seen as a form of legislative behaviour where party representatives communicate with voters in order to further their office-seeking objectives. By criticising the government and by presenting alternative policies and programmes party representatives seek media attention in order to sell their positions to the public (Maltzman and Sigelman, 1996). If we view expressing opposition through the lens of strategic party behaviour in legislatures, then it stands to reason that MPs will have more to gain from engaging in this form of communication with the electorate the more public a forum is, and the more media attention a particular legislative debate is likely to receive. Furthermore, the fact that speaking time in the plenary is more limited than in the committee may induce MPs to focus on the critical points they want to raise, rather than to ‘waste’ valuable time by asking for additional information or making neutral statements.

Equipped with these insights—that political behaviour may differ between the frontstage and the backstage, that legislative debates is a means for party representatives to communicate with the public, and that expressing opposition is an instrument for parties to gain voter support—we are now in a position to formulate our main theoretical proposition, which we label the arena hypothesis:

H1: MPs will express more opposition frontstage during plenary debates than backstage during EAC deliberations.

Recent research has confirmed that opposition parties act strategically in the legislative arena to increase their electoral support (Whitaker and Martin, 2021). Our second hypothesis draws on the insight that expressing opposition during
Comparing Oppositional Behaviour

legislative debates is an important tool that political parties have at their disposal in order to communicate with voters. We have already hypothesised that MPs will be more likely to make use of this tool the more public a forum for legislative debate is. We now take this argument one step further by returning to the distinction between two types of opposition: delivering critique and presenting alternatives. Let us view the motivations of MPs for expressing opposition in light of the distinction between the frontstage and the backstage, and ask if we have reason to believe that the type of opposition is likely to differ between the arenas. If expressing opposition is indeed a tool used by MPs to communicate with voters in order to strengthen their party’s electoral support, surely they must ask themselves: what is the most effective way to reach out to the electorate? By expressing critique they distance themselves from the government and make themselves visible to voters. However, by also presenting alternatives they introduce choice (Mair, 2007) and present voters with a real substitute to the sitting government (cf. Norton, 2008), and this may prove crucial for increasing their chances at the polls, not least as previous research has found strong evidence of prospective voting (Nadeau and Lewis-Beck, 2001). The opposition parties may thus be expected to use ‘the parliamentary arena as a means of presenting alternative policies to the electorate’ (Loxbo and Sjölin, 2017, p. 590). Based on the previous research we thus assume that MPs will see presenting alternatives as a more successful strategy than simply expressing critique when communicating with voters. Hence, we expect to find support for the type-of-opposition hypothesis:

H2: The share of opposition statements that focus on presenting alternatives rather than delivering critique will be higher during plenary debates than EAC deliberations.

Our third hypothesis draws on the insight that different institutional settings are guided by different norms, rules and procedures that affect political behaviour. Parliamentary research has accordingly found that parliaments, while charged with roughly the same set of responsibilities, differ substantially when it comes to how they go about their daily business (Norton, 1998; Döring and Hallerberg, 2004). In EU affairs, for example, there is considerable variation among Member States when it comes to the institutional strength of their EACs, and this has proven to affect legislative behaviour (Auel et al., 2015). In this study, we direct our attention to how institutional variation between political systems is likely to affect oppositional behaviour. In doing so, we return to the distinction between debating and working parliaments.

The British House of Commons is the archetype of a debating parliament, whereas the Scandinavian parliaments are considered to be the closest thing we have got to working parliaments (Arter, 1999; Auel and Raunio, 2014). Working parliaments are characterised by arguing and bargaining in standing committees,
whereas debating parliaments are more focused on making differences between the government and opposition parties visible via grand speeches and debate in the plenary. These parliamentary models thus places different emphasis on the importance of the plenary and the committee as arenas for voicing disagreements with political opponents. We argue that this is likely to have consequences for the oppositional behaviour of MPs, and so we arrive at our third and final testable proposition: the *system hypothesis*:

\[ H3: \text{MPs in debating parliaments will express more opposition during plenary debates than during EAC deliberations, whereas MPs in working parliaments will express more opposition during EAC deliberations than during plenary debates.} \]

Having presented our theoretical expectations we now turn to design, data and methods.

4. Design, data and methods

Our examination is based on data from debates on EU affairs in the plenary and the EAC in five EU Member States: Denmark, Germany, Ireland, Sweden and the UK (which was still a Member State for the surveyed period). The selection of parliaments was guided by an ambition to be able to test whether any recorded differences in oppositional behaviour between the plenary and the EAC would hold when controlling for the distinction between debating and working parliaments. We have therefore include two countries with typical debating parliaments—Ireland and the UK—and two Scandinavian countries—Denmark and Sweden—which are regarded as prime examples of working parliaments (Arter, 1999). Germany, finally, falls in between these extremes and has been characterised as a ‘debating working parliament’ (Steffani, 1990), although it is usually considered to be closer to being a working than debating parliament.

To examine oppositional behaviour requires access to data that allow us to examine the content of parliamentary statements in great detail. This is easy enough when it comes to the plenary as most parliaments provide access to stenographic protocols of plenary speeches. When it comes to committee deliberations it is more difficult to get access to detailed data as parliaments usually provide only short summary protocols from committee deliberations. The EACs, however, are exceptions to this rule as these committees in many Member States provide access to protocols that allow for a detailed examination of the deliberations in the same way we may study plenary debates (for more information on the EACs, see *Supplementary data, Appendix A, Table A3*). One important difference between the EAC protocols in our five countries is that the protocols in Ireland, Sweden and the UK are stenographic while the Danish and German protocols come in
the form of thorough summary records. These, however, are very detailed and they allow for the same meticulous coding as the stenographic protocols do.

In order to obtain estimates of oppositional behaviour that are representative of the population of statements in EU affairs in the plenary and the EAC, we relied on random sampling. We have thus examined and coded all statements from a random sample of 30 protocols each from EAC meetings in Denmark, Germany, Sweden and the UK for one legislative period. The Irish EAC holds fewer meetings where MPs engage in a dialogue with government representatives, and we, therefore, decided to examine all such EAC meetings in Ireland for one legislative period. When it comes to plenary debates we have drawn random samples of statements from the various types of debates devoted to European affairs in the five legislatures (for more information on the sampling procedure, see Supplementary data, Appendix B). In total, our dataset contains 7520 statements for the period 2009–2016. Little more than half (3960) of all statements come from plenary sessions and the remainder (3560) are from EAC meetings. Note that our data include statements made by MPs from both government and opposition parties. Unsurprisingly, MPs representing opposition parties express more opposition than MPs from government parties. The latter, however, do on occasion express opposition. Out of all the coded statements 2950 were opposition statements made by MPs representing opposition parties, whereas the corresponding figure for MPs from government parties was 509 opposition statements (see Supplementary data, Appendix A, Table A8).

The selection of legislative periods was made in order to ensure maximum comparability between countries and across arenas. Hence, we selected legislative periods as close as possible to each other in our five countries (for an overview of examined legislative periods and sample sizes, see Supplementary data, Appendix A, Table A2 and Appendix B, Table B1).

The discussion of EU affairs in national parliaments will to some extent revolve around issues of particular concern to each country, but there is also considerable overlap between Member States in terms of which issues feature prominently in domestic EU debate. Certain policy areas, like economic coordination, foreign policy and constitutional issues are of high salience in all countries and therefore focal points of the debate in all parliaments. The fact that the content of the debates in the five EU Member States is so similar topic-wise greatly increases the cross-national comparability of the results.

Extraordinary political events or crises will also have a marked effect on the political debate in all Member States. The Eurozone crisis, which hit the EU during the time period studied here, is a good example of how strongly a crisis impacts the debate on EU affairs. Not surprisingly, economic coordination thus features as the most debated policy area in both the plenary and the EAC in four of our five countries. The exception being the UK where constitutional issues...
dominate in the plenary, while the EU budget is the most discussed issue in the EAC (see Supplementary data, Appendix A, Table A9). So while there are some differences when it comes to the topics covered in the two arenas, and while it is not always the same MPs involved in plenary debates and EAC deliberations, this variation is not likely to impact on our results in any significant way.

The observations in our data set are derived from individual statements made by MPs representing 42 national parties (see Supplementary data, Appendix A, Table A4). The statements are derived from the oral contributions by MPs in the two arenas. An overwhelming majority of contributions contain only one statement, but sometimes MPs will touch on two or more separate issues in a contribution, and in those cases, the contribution was divided into two or more separate statements that were coded separately.

The dependent variable is labelled ‘type of statement’ and is designed to measure: First, whether a statement contains opposition or rather expresses support, and secondly if an expression of opposition is of the type that delivers critique or presents alternatives. The dependent variable ‘type of statement’ is thus coded as follows: (i) ‘alternative’, (ii) ‘critique’ and (iii) ‘support’. A final category (iv) ‘other’, contains neutral statements that neither express opposition nor support, for example, open questions from MPs directed at the government representative (for more information on the coding process, see Supplementary data, Appendix B, which also reports on inter-coder reliability; for a list of variables, see Supplementary Appendix A, Table A1).

Our choice to hand-code parliamentary debates instead of using a machine-coding technique follows from our quest for a valid measurement of opposition (for a similar approach, see Louwerse et al., 2021). Although there are a number of existing techniques for analysing large text corpora (cf. Rauh and de Wilde, 2018; Proksch et al., 2019), these seem unable to record the subtle nuances that determine whether a statement contains opposition in the form of delivering critique or presenting alternatives.

5. Comparing oppositional behaviour frontstage and backstage

We will test the hypotheses in the order they were presented. Hence, we will first compare the general patterns of oppositional behaviour between the frontstage and the backstage. We then turn to a comparison between the plenary and the EAC by looking at the different types of oppositional behaviour. Finally, we examine differences in oppositional behaviour between the frontstage and the backstage through the lens of debating and working parliaments.

The arena hypothesis suggests that MPs are likely to express more opposition frontstage during plenary debates than backstage during EAC deliberations. Our results show that this hypothesis is indeed supported by our data. On average,
51.0% of all plenary statements in the five parliaments express opposition, while the corresponding figure for statements made during EAC deliberations is 40.4% (see Supplementary data, Appendix A, Table A5). The observed difference of more than 10 percentage points is statistically significant ($p < 0.01$).

While there is more opposition expressed frontstage than backstage in all five parliaments, we also find some interesting differences in the five Member States. As Figure 1 shows, the difference in the share of opposition statements between the two arenas is quite remarkable in the Anglo-Saxon countries. In Ireland, 57.5% of the statements in the plenary contain opposition compared to only 32.7% in the EAC. The corresponding figures in the UK are 53.2% opposition statements in the plenary compared to only 32.0% in the committee. The differences in proportions are statistically significant ($p < 0.01$) in both parliaments.

In the remaining three countries, the differences in oppositional behaviour between the arenas are substantially smaller. The differences in proportions between the two arenas are still statistically significant in Denmark ($p < 0.01$), but not so in Germany and Sweden.

Our data thus seem to support the arena hypothesis, but before confirming that there is a difference in oppositional behaviour between the frontstage and the backstage, we need to make sure that our results are not driven by a

![Figure 1. Proportion of opposition statements, by country and arena, with 95% confidence intervals.](https://academic.oup.com/pa/article/77/1/173/6622044)

*Note: Total n is 3960 for the plenary and 3560 for the EAC (Denmark 753 and 1081, Germany 796 and 585, Ireland 777 and 434, Sweden 858 and 885 and the UK 776 and 575).*
systematic difference in terms of which issues are up for discussion in the plenary and the EAC. If debates over more contentious policy issues are reserved for the plenary, then this could potentially explain the recorded difference in oppositional behaviour. While our data do not allow for a systematic control for the effect of policy issues on oppositional behaviour—the subsamples are simply too small to allow for reliable comparisons—we can take a closer look at economic coordination where we do have a sufficiently large pool of statements to work with. What we find when focusing exclusively on economic coordination confirm our main results. When comparing the share of opposition statements made in the plenary and the committee in discussions over economic coordination, we find that MPs in all five parliaments express more opposition frontstage than backstage (see Supplementary data, Appendix A, Table A9). This finding supports the robustness of our results.

Our second comparison of oppositional behaviour between the frontstage and the backstage is focused on the two types of opposition: expressing critique and presenting alternatives. As proposed by the type-of-opposition hypothesis, the share of opposition statements presenting alternatives rather than delivering critique is expected to be higher during plenary debates than EAC deliberations. One thing to keep in mind, as shown in the analysis above, is that the average proportion of opposition expressed in the plenary sessions is higher (51.0%) than in the committee deliberations (40.4%). As there is more opposition frontstage than backstage, it is only natural that the proportion of alternatives (22.2%) and the proportion of critique (28.8%) expressed in plenary sessions will, on average, be higher than the corresponding proportions in the committee deliberations (15.5% alternatives and 24.9% critique, respectively). A valid test of the hypothesis will thus involve a comparison of the type of opposition expressed frontstage and backstage in the subset of statements that contain opposition.

According to the type-of-opposition hypothesis we would expect statements presenting alternatives to be more common during plenary debates compared to committee deliberations. This is also what we find in the data (see Supplementary data, Appendix A, Table A6a and A6b). On average, 43.5% of all opposition statements delivered during plenary debates focus on presenting alternatives. The corresponding figure for committee deliberations is 38.4%. There is thus a statistically significant difference of 5.1 percentage points ($p < 0.01$).

On an aggregate level, the data accordingly support the type-of-opposition hypothesis. As we break down the data country by country we again find some interesting variation. In Ireland, the UK and Germany, there is a strong focus on presenting alternatives in the plenary and a corresponding focus on delivering critique in the committee (see Figure 2). The difference in the proportion of alternatives presented frontstage versus backstage in percentage points, is 28.2 in
Ireland, 24.4 in the UK and 22.0 in Germany. All differences are statistically significant ($p < 0.01$).

In Denmark, in contrast, the proportion of statements containing alternatives and critique, respectively, is almost the same in the plenary and in the EAC. The proportion of opposition statements presenting alternatives is roughly 40% in both arenas, while the proportion of statements delivering critique is about 60%. In Sweden, finally, the situation is reversed compared to that found in Ireland, the UK and Germany. Here, the proportion of opposition statements presenting alternatives is higher in the EAC than in the plenary (54.0% versus 37.3%), a difference that is statistically significant ($p < 0.01$).

Taken together, our results reveal an important difference between the Scandinavian parliaments, on the one hand, and the Anglo-Saxon countries and Germany, on the other. In the former legislatures the committee plays an important role as an arena for presenting alternatives, while the plenary is used more as an arena for delivering critique. In the latter group of countries, it is much more common to present alternatives frontstage during plenary debates, while delivering critique is the dominating type of opposition backstage in the committee. The differences between the two groups of countries seem to suggest that we may indeed find support for our final hypothesis.
So, what do the data say about the validity of the *system hypothesis*? If we return to Figure 1, we find only partial support for the notion that oppositional behaviour frontstage and backstage varies systematically between debating and working parliaments. Contrary to our theoretical expectation, we find that MPs in both debating and working parliaments express more opposition in the plenary compared to the committee. However, the differences in oppositional behaviour between the frontstage and backstage are much more pronounced in the debating parliaments, whereas only small differences are recorded in the working parliaments. In Germany, which is characterised as being closer to a working than a debating parliament, we find patterns of opposition behaviour similar to those in Denmark and Sweden as there is only slightly more opposition being expressed in the plenary than the committee.

While our data do not give full support to the system hypothesis, our results still indicate that there exist systematic differences in oppositional behaviour in the five national parliaments. First, the propensity of MPs to express more opposition in the plenary than the committee is much stronger in debating than working parliaments. Secondly, in debating parliaments it is much more common for MPs to present alternatives frontstage than backstage, while opposition during committee deliberations mainly is expressed in the form of delivering critique. In working parliaments, on the other hand, the committee is to a much higher extent an arena for presenting alternatives.

The key finding in the analysis is that our results lend strong support to the arena hypothesis: MPs do express more opposition in the plenary than in the committee. As we saw above, our results seem to hold as we control for policy issue. As a final robustness test we check if our results hold up when controlling for the distinctions between government versus opposition parties, and mainstream versus Eurosceptic parties. By and large, they do. Both MPs representing Eurosceptic and mainstream parties express more opposition frontstage than backstage (see Supplementary data, Appendix A, Table A7). MPs representing opposition parties also conform to the general pattern of expressing more opposition in the plenary than the committee, whereas there is no significant difference in oppositional behaviour between arenas for MPs representing government parties (see Supplementary data, Appendix A, Table A8).

### 6. Conclusion

Previous research has acknowledged that legislatures have two key arenas but studies of parliamentary opposition have focused on activities in either the plenary (Hoerner, 2017; Tuttnauer, 2018; Proksch et al., 2019) or the committee (Loxbo and Sjölin, 2017; Albrecht et al., 2021; Karlsson and Persson, 2022). This study has attempted to break new ground by comparing oppositional behaviour
Comparing Oppositional Behaviour

frontstage and backstage in five legislatures, thereby improving our understanding of parliamentary opposition and how legislative behaviour is affected by variation in institutional context. According to the arena hypothesis we expected MPs to express more opposition during plenary debates than deliberations in the EAC. This proposition is indeed supported by the data which show a difference of more than 10 percentage points when comparing the share of opposition statements made during plenary debates and committee deliberations. In four of the five parliaments the differences in oppositional behaviour between the arenas are large enough to be statistically significant; the exception being Sweden.

At first sight, the type-of-opposition hypothesis seems to also be supported by our data as we find that during plenary debates 43.5% of all opposition statements focus on presenting alternatives, while the corresponding figure for committee deliberations is 38.4%. However, as we break down the data by country we discover that the type-of-opposition hypothesis only finds support in Germany, Ireland and the UK, but not in the Scandinavian countries.

The system hypothesis is likewise only partly supported by data. Contrary to the hypothesis we find that MPs in all legislatures express more opposition frontstage than backstage. However, in line with the expectations of the hypothesis we find that these differences are much more pronounced in debating compared to working parliaments.

Our results shed new light on parliamentary opposition by uncovering clear variation in oppositional behaviour between the two key arenas in parliament. More generally, our study speaks to the literature on legislative behaviour by showing that differences in frontstage and backstage behaviour are conditioned on the type of parliament we find in the five countries. In other words, variation in institutional context between and within parliaments seems to interact to affect legislative behaviour. While MPs in all legislatures express more opposition in the plenary compared to the committee, this difference in oppositional behaviour is much stronger in debating than working parliaments. In the two debating parliaments we find that the difference between the share of opposition statements in the plenary and the committee is more than 20 percentage points. These differences contrast sharply with the ones found in Denmark (9.3 percentage points), Germany (5.2 percentage points) and Sweden (2.8 percentage points). When looking at differences in the type of opposition statements in the plenary and the committee we also find substantial differences between the debating and working parliaments. In Ireland and the UK, we find a strong emphasis on opposition in the form of presenting alternatives frontstage and a corresponding focus on delivering critique backstage. In the typical working parliaments in Denmark and Sweden, we instead find that the proportion of opposition statements containing alternatives and critique, respectively, are roughly the same in the plenary and the committee.
The fact that the differences in oppositional behaviour between the frontstage and the backstage in our five legislatures is conditioned by type of parliament, does give us some indication of where to seek for the mechanism that drives our results. For while it must be assumed that MPs in all five parliaments will have equally strong incentives to promote their vote-seeking goals by communicating with voters in the form of expressing opposition, the same equivalence can hardly be assumed when it comes to existing norms of appropriateness linked to being a member of parliament. Put differently, if MPs were nothing more than rational actors looking to promote their vote-seeking goals, we would expect only negligible cross-national differences in oppositional behaviour between the plenary and the committee. This, however, is not what we find. What we do find is that the differences in oppositional behaviour between the frontstage and the backstage differ greatly between debating and working parliaments. This, in turn, suggests that we need to look to established norms and parliamentary practices if we are to understand what drives parliamentary opposition, or for that matter, other forms of political behaviour in legislatures. Two possible mechanisms may be in play here. First, as working parliaments emphasise the importance of committee work and reaching agreements across party lines at the backstage, MPs in debating parliaments may be less incentivised to express opposition in the EAC compared to their counterparts in working parliaments, as there is simple less at stake for them during committee deliberations. Secondly, the strong emphasise on speeches on the floor in debating parliaments invites MPs to engage in rhetorical grandstanding, which may make them more inclined to exaggerate their public disagreements with the government, compared to their colleagues in working parliaments.

Our results have implications for the study of legislative behaviour and parliamentary debate as they clearly suggest that the speech behaviour of MPs varies between the floor and the committee. If we see parliamentary debates as a key source of information about legislators’ policy positions, the alternative courses of actions they advocate and the reasons for how they vote (Proksch and Slapin, 2015; Bäck et al., 2021), then we need to take into account what they say frontstage during plenary debates as well as backstage during committee deliberations. Relying exclusively on information from legislative debate on the floor will only tell half the story.

To what extent will it be possible to generalise our main finding, that MPs express more opposition frontstage than backstage, to other issue areas? Let us, first of all, recognise that the propensity of MPs to express more opposition frontstage than backstage is likely to be stronger the more salient and contested an issue is. The EU issue is indeed contested and politicised in many countries and therefore we need to be somewhat cautious when it comes to generalising our results beyond EU affairs. However, the fact that we find more opposition in the plenary compared to the committee even in countries where the EU issue is not very
contested (e.g. Germany and Ireland) does give us good reasons to believe that our main finding will travel to other policy areas as well.

The main takeaway of this study is that variation in institutional context within parliaments matters greatly for oppositional behaviour; MPs in all five parliaments express more opposition in the plenary compared to the committee. This means that previous studies that have relied solely on data from either the plenary (e.g. Hoerner, 2017; Rauh and de Wilde, 2018) or the committee (e.g. Loxbo and Sjölin, 2017; Karlsson and Persson, 2022) will have tended to exaggerate or underestimate how much opposition exists in parliaments. The systematic differences in oppositional behaviour between the frontstage and the backstage suggest that both arenas need to be taken into account as we study parliamentary opposition.

Is this finding important for our understanding of parliament as an arena for political opposition? We believe that it is, and to see why we need to return to the insight that opposition is of vital importance for democracy because it gives voters voice (Mair, 2007) by providing them with political choice and alternatives to the policies promoted by the current government. The big picture ramification of our results for parliamentary opposition is this: voters are likely to get a distorted picture of the choice they have in politics if they rely exclusively on information from plenary debates. Hence, if opposition is to function as intended by introducing choice in politics, then voters need to get the full picture of existing alternatives by being informed about what goes on in both the plenary and the committee. The lesson to learn for future research is that we should not side with either Mill or Weber and focus on the plenary or the committee as the key for understanding how parliaments work. We should rather recognise that parliaments consist of two key arenas and make this insight a cornerstone of future studies on parliamentary opposition.

Supplementary data

Supplementary data are available at Parliamentary Affairs Online.

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Conflict of interest statement

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