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Article

Gender and Strategic Opposition Behavior: Patterns of Parliamentary Oversight in Belgium

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Abstract
Studies on strategic parliamentary opposition often focus on broader behavioral patterns or party-level variation. This article analyzes differences at the individual level, more notably between male and female opposition members of parliament. Using rational-choice perspectives of opposition activity and theories of gendered political behavior, we hypothesize that female opposition members focus less on ideological conflicts (with or between coalition parties) and more on their party's core issues. Furthermore, we expect them to more frequently target female ministers, in part because of the nature of their respective portfolios. Our analysis of all parliamentary questions tabled by opposition members in the Belgian Federal Parliament between 2007 and 2019 (N = 48,735) suggests that female members of parliament seem more likely to focus on issues that are salient to their party and less on conflictual matters between coalition partners. These results provide new empirical insights into strategic opposition behavior and gendered differences in the legislature.

Keywords
Belgium; gender; opposition; parliamentary behavior; parliamentary questions

Issue
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1. Introduction

The right to publicly criticize and challenge the government, its actions, and policies is a fundament of democracy (Dahl, 1966). In the legislative arena, the opposition is indispensable. Its duty is to scrutinize executive agents to ensure that they meet their commitments to the public, that the country's policy needs are adequately addressed, and that voters are presented with a viable alternative and a meaningful choice during elections (Andeweg, 2013; Helms, 2008; Kreppel, 2014).

Although political opposition has long been understudied, there has been a marked increase in the number of studies on the topic in recent years (Helms, 2022). Empirical research into opposition behavior in the legislature often focuses on general patterns (e.g., conflictual versus cooperative strategies) or party-level variation, for instance between populist and mainstream parties (Louwerse & Otjes, 2019) or between parties that are permanently in opposition and those for whom the opposition status is anticipated to be temporary (De Giorgi & Ilonszki, 2018; Tuttnauer, 2018). What remains underexposed so far are individual-level differences. Building on literature that highlights gendered differences in psychological traits, social norms, and political behavior (e.g., Eagly, 1987; Taylor-Robinson, 2017), this article examines the influence of gender on the opposition behavior of members of parliament (MPs). It focuses on male and female opposition MPs' use of parliamentary questions (PQs), as one of the most prominent individual tools through which opposition members interact with members of the political executive (Green-Pedersen, 2010; Russo & Wiberg, 2010).

Several studies show how MPs—including those of the opposition—use PQs strategically, for instance by signalling policy disagreement with a minister's policies, by

trying to reveal disunity and conflicts among coalition partners, or by raising attention to one's own policy priorities (Otjes & Louwerse, 2018; Vliegenthart & Walgrave, 2011; Whitaker & Martin, 2021). However, simultaneously, substantial literature suggests that there are gendered legislative styles: Female politicians often tend to be more collaborative and consensus-seeking than their male counterparts, whereas men are more likely to have individualistic, competitive, and conflictual approaches (Barnes, 2016; Eagly, 1987; Krauss & Kroeber, 2021; Volden et al., 2013). This article argues that such nonconfrontational political styles might also come forward in female MPs' opposition behavior, and more specifically in their use of PQs. Building on insights from social psychology and previous work on gendered political behavior, we hypothesize that female opposition members will focus less on ideological conflicts (both with and between coalition parties) and more on the issues that are salient to their own party. Because MPs' issue specialization (Bäck & Debus, 2019; de Vet & Devroe, 2022) and ministers' portfolio allocations (Krook & O'Brien, 2012) often remain gendered, but also because female ministers might be more responsive to the speeches of female MPs (Blumenau, 2021), we additionally expect female MPs to more frequently target female ministers.

To test our hypotheses, we analyze data on all PQs tabled by opposition members in the Belgian Chamber of Representatives between 2007 and 2019 (N = 48,735). Governmental politics in Belgium is "extremely collective" due to its severely fragmented character and the high need for policy coordination (De Winter & Dumont, 2021). This also means that opposition strategies tend to be collective and that it is generally hard to discern a "leader of the opposition," like they are found in Westminster democracies (Dingler et al., 2023). Party group leaders—who are less powerful than extra-parliamentary party leaders in Belgium—do act as party groups' main spokesperson during important debates (e.g., on the government budget) but policy experts (i.e., MPs specializing in specific policy domains and committees) play an important role in the day-to-day scrutiny of cabinet ministers (de Vet, 2019). Furthermore, party group leadership remains a position that is still disproportionally taken up by male officeholders. Between 1995 and 2019, only 21.9% of the chambers' party group leaders were female, while women made up 30.6% of the parliament (de Vet, 2019, p. 121). For these reasons, this article examines the behavior of all women opposition members, rather than that of a single or a handful of female group leaders. The focus is thus on parliament-based opposition, by the collectivity of all female elected representatives.

We find some suggestive evidence that female MPs tend to focus more on the core issues of their party and less on intra-coalition disagreement compared to their male colleagues. We, however, do not find that female MPs focus less on ideological conflict with the responsible minister, nor that they target female ministers more intensively. Although more research into such patterns in different institutional settings is needed, these findings have important implications for our understanding of individual-level differences in opposition behavior and the gendered nature of the parliamentary activity.

2. Theory and Hypotheses

Like all parties, opposition parties can be expected to strategically use their resources and parliamentary tools, to obtain their specific policy, vote, or office goals (Müller & Strøm, 1999). Some opposition parties, like those that wish to leave the opposition benches someday, might be less confrontational in terms of their voting behavior and oversight activity, to show their potential as a responsible and cooperative coalition partner. Others, that do not desire government participation, might be tempted to adopt more conflictual behavioral strategies, by focusing more on extensive and critical scrutiny and less on legislative cooperation, to increase their visibility to the electorate and publicly distance themselves from governmental policies (Andeweg, 2013; De Giorgi & Ilonszki, 2018; Louwerse & Otjes, 2019; Mair, 2014).

However, even when only looking specifically at scrutiny activities in the legislature, opposition parties may differ with regard to how oversight instruments like PQs are strategically used. Opposition parties might use PQs to criticize ministers of parties with strongly diverging ideological views to signal strong disagreement and discontent with that ministers' policies (Otjes & Louwerse, 2018). Or they might use PQs following a "divide and conquer" strategy aimed at exposing intra-coalition conflicts by questioning issues that divide majority parties to maximize tensions and cause coalition instability (Whitaker & Martin, 2021). Alternatively, some opposition parties might be less interested in exposing ideological conflicts with and between coalition parties, and subsequently their PQs may follow less of a confrontational logic and may be used more as a means to direct the executive's attention to issues that they themselves find important (Green-Pedersen, 2010; Vliegenthart & Walgrave, 2011).

Although *collective* party strategies are important, especially in light of the strong influence of parties on MPs' activity, a lot of parliamentary tools—including PQs—may be deployed by the *individual* MP, whose work may also be guided by personal goals and preferences (Strøm, 1997). This article argues that MPs' gender might be an important but often overlooked individual-level characteristic that affects opposition behavior. Despite a growing numeric representation of women in legislatures, parliamentary procedures still often have gendered effects (de Vet & Devroe, 2022; Lowndes, 2020) and gender is known to influence various dimensions of parliamentary behavior (see Taylor-Robinson, 2017).

First of all, we expect that female and male opposition MPs may differ in the extent to which they adhere to more or less conflictual strategies. Previous research

highlights that women are more likely to display collaborative, compromise-oriented, and consensual behavior whereas men are more individualistic, aggressive, and competitive (Barnes, 2016; Eagly, 1987; Krauss & Kroeber, 2021; Volden et al., 2013). Both experimental work and qualitative research focusing on male and female political aspirants, candidates, and MPs show that women are generally more conflict-avoidant and risk-averse than men (Bauer & Darkwah, 2020; Kanthak & Woon, 2015; Preece & Stoddard, 2015). In part, such gender differences can be explained based on social role theories (Eagly & Karau, 2002) arguing that individuals adapt to societal expectations about appropriate behavior for men and women, which are shaped by the different roles they occupy in personal and family life, but also in a professional context (Eagly, 2007).

Translated to the political sphere, Krauss and Kroeber (2021) find support for the proposition that women adopt more consensual political styles, as they find that cabinets with a higher proportion of female ministers face lower risks of early cabinet termination due to internal conflicts. Moreover, research on electoral campaigns shows that women are less likely to resort to negative campaigning strategies and personal attacks than male candidates (Ennser-Jedenastik et al., 2017; however, see Walter, 2013). In the specific context of legislatures, female rhetorical styles are considered to be less aggressive, more inclusive, and more cooperative than male speech patterns (Karpowitz et al., 2012). Volden et al. (2013), furthermore, find that minority-party men often choose to obstruct policymaking and help ensure policy gridlock in congress, while minority-party women are more driven to bring about social change and likewise are more willing to make compromises to facilitate such change. When asked about gendered legislative styles, Childs (2000, p. 68) finds that women legislators point to alternate ways of operating compared to a dominant male approach, focusing less on a government-opposition confrontational logic and more on "cooperation, teamwork, inclusiveness, consultation, and a willingness to listen." Likewise, Barnes (2016) highlights that female representatives, across a variety of political settings, exhibit a higher likelihood of collaboration to maximize their policy impact and to circumvent a marginalized status within political institutions. Lastly, using longitudinal data on Belgium, Croatia, and the UK, Poljak (2022) finds that women are less likely to resort to attacks (towards individual ministers, MPs, parties, the government, etc.) or to use incivility in their parliamentary speeches compared to male MPs.

Taken together, we expect to see a translation of gendered political styles in the degree and extent to which opposition members use confrontational strategies. We expect that female opposition members focus less on ideological conflicts, both with and between coalition parties (Otjes & Louwerse, 2018; Whitaker & Martin, 2021).

> H1: Female opposition MPs target ideologically distant ministers to a lesser extent compared to male opposition MPs.

> H2: Female opposition MPs ask fewer PQs when intra-coalition disagreement is larger compared to male opposition MPs.

At the same time, it makes sense for opposition parties to not only focus on policy conflicts but also to draw attention to their policy priorities and topics on which they have a strong reputation (Petrocik, 1996). Opposition MPs, in other words, are expected to ask more PQs related to policy areas of higher salience to their own party (Green-Pedersen, 2010; Vliegenthart & Walgrave, 2011). We expect that female members of the opposition will focus less on policy conflicts with and within the governing coalition due to being more conflict-avoidant and consensus-oriented (Kanthak & Woon, 2015), but alternatively, we do expect them to focus more on their own party's core issues and strengths. This expectation is, furthermore, supported by literature stressing that women tend to show more loyalty to the party than men (Cowley & Childs, 2003; Thames & Rybalko, 2011). Female MPs are less likely to "rebel" (Cowley & Childs, 2003) which might also imply that women are more inclined to focus their work on those issues that are of paramount importance to the party.

> H3: Female opposition MPs table more PQs on issues that their own party finds important compared to male opposition MPs.

Lastly, we expect that MPs' gender will not only influence their strategies on which issues to focus on but also on whom to target their PQs. This can be linked to both studies on (the effects of) female leadership in legislative settings (Blumenau, 2021) and to the nature of portfolio allocations (Krook & O'Brien, 2012) and female MPs' issue specialization. For the former, studies on the appointment of female cabinet members in the UK highlight that female ministers behave in a systematically different manner towards female MPs than male ministers by being more responsive to female MPs' speeches, thereby promoting a debating culture that is more conducive to the participation of other female MPs. For the latter, Bäck and Debus (2019) find, in their comparative study covering seven European legislatures, that female MPs deliver significantly fewer speeches and especially when debates cover topics that can be described as "masculine," even though these effects vary considerably across countries. In Belgium, de Vet and Devroe (2022) conclude that female and male MPs emphasize different policy agendas and that this is particularly visible during plenary sessions.

These differences in issue specialization are not only rooted in the marginalization of women in politics, structural constraints, or the preferences of women for certain policy areas (Krook & O'Brien, 2012, p. 842), but

they are generally also explained by theories of political gender stereotypes and gender role incongruity (Bäck & Debus, 2019; Eagly & Karau, 2002). Female MPs would deliver fewer speeches focusing on policy areas that can be characterized as "hard" (e.g., Finance, Defense, Foreign Affairs) and that reflect men's stereotypical strengths (Escobar-Lemmon & Taylor-Robinson, 2009; Krook & O'Brien, 2012; Lawless, 2004). Although gendered patterns in the ministerial selection are changing, a similarly continued underrepresentation can also be uncovered in the distribution of minister portfolios (Escobar-Lemmon & Taylor-Robinson, 2005; Goddard, 2019; Krook & O'Brien, 2012), also in the specific context of Belgium (Dumont et al., 2008). Even though research shows how gender role incongruent behavior might negatively affect female MPs' career prospects (e.g., in terms of ministerial appointments; Baumann et al., 2019) which could lead to frustrations and more critical behavior towards male office-holders in hard domains, we hypothesize that female opposition MPs more often target female ministers compared to male MPs, due to generally persistent parallel patterns in parliamentary issue specialization and ministerial portfolio allocation, and female ministers being more responsive to the speeches of female MPs.

H4: Female opposition MPs target female ministers more often compared to male opposition MPs.

3. Data and Method

These hypotheses are tested using data on MPs' questioning behavior in the Belgian Federal Chamber of Representatives. Belgium is a typical case of a party-centered parliamentary system with fragmented multiparty coalitions and disciplined majority parties (De Winter & Dumont, 2021). Like elsewhere, opposition members in the Belgian lower house have multiple oversight tools at their disposal to control the cabinet, signal concern, and convey alternative policy views (de Vet & Devroe, 2022; Vliegenthart & Walgrave, 2011; Wauters et al., 2021). Together with the fact that Belgium has a comparatively high number of female elected officials, ranging between 35% and 40% in the research period under study (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2019), this provides us with a good case to test our hypotheses.

Our dataset encompasses detailed information (e.g., author, title, type, date, targeted minister, meeting, etc.) on all PQs tabled during the 2007–2010, 2010–2014, and 2014–2019 legislative terms. The focus is on opposition behavior, so PQs that were posed by majority MPs or that were tabled during periods of "current affairs" during which a resigning caretaker cabinet was active are omitted from the analyses. Because we rely on secondary data sources to determine ideological positions (Chapel Hill Expert Survey; Bakker et al., 2020) and issue saliency (MARPOR data; Volkens et al., 2019), we additionally exclude independent MPs and MPs from two smaller parties (Parti Populaire and Front National) from the analysis. This leaves us with data on 194 MPs (74 women and 120 men) of 21 opposition party groups during three consecutive coalition cabinets (see Table 1).

The analyses primarily focus on opposition members' use of *oral* PQs during *plenary sessions* (N = 2,140). Unlike *written PQs* (N = 27,559), which are much more prone to the effects of having diligent staff members, oral

Table 1. Opposition parties in the sample.

	Opposition parties	
Government	Name	Party family
Leterme I–II/Van Rompuy (2008–2010)	Ecolo/Groen	Greens
Christian democrats, liberals, and	sp.a	Social democrats
(francophone) social democrats	N-VA	Regionalists
	LDD	Libertarian
	Vlaams Belang	Radical right
Di Rupo I (2011–2014)	Ecolo/Groen	Greens
Christian democrats, liberals, and social	N-VA	Regionalists
democrats	FDF	Regionalists
	LDD	Libertarian
	Vlaams Belang	Radical right
Michel I (2014–2018)	Ecolo/Groen	Greens
Liberals, Flemish regionalists, and (Flemish)	CdH	Christian democrats
Christian democrats	PS/sp.a	Social democrats
	FDF	Regionalists
	PTB	Radical left
	Vlaams Belang	Radical right
	Vuye & Wouters	Regionalists

PQs require a clear personal engagement: Legislators need to be physically present to read out the question and respond to the minister's oral answer. In addition, strategic opposition considerations are expected to be most pronounced in PQs posed during weekly plenary "Question Time," due to their more mediatized character and due to the scarcity of plenary speaking time (Rasch, 2011). In the Supplementary File, however, we also report analyses of MPs' use of *oral PQs during committees* (N = 19,036) since these PQs may be more representative of MPs' day-to-day (specialized) work in parliament.

To analyze how many PQs MPs direct to which minister and why, the data are restructured into a dyadic dataset that contains each possible combination of MP-to-ministerial department as the unit of analysis (see Proksch & Slapin, 2011). Accordingly, this brings the number of observations to 4,268 (194 MPs × 22 ministerial departments). The dependent variable measures how many PQs each MP asked a specific ministerial department. Because this count variable is over-dispersed (see Figure 1), we fit negative binomial regression models. Zero-inflated models that additionally correct for the high number of zero values in the dataset (e.g., due to MPs specializing in specific policy domains) provide highly similar results and are reported in the Supplementary File (Table A3).

As for the independent variables, a measure of *ideological distance* (H1) is included using Chapel Hill Expert Survey data (Bakker et al., 2020). Based on these expert estimates of party positions, the absolute difference was calculated between the author's and the targeted minister's party on the policy dimension that closest corresponds to the respective ministerial portfolio (for the coding of ministerial portfolios, see Table A2 in the Supplementary File). Similarly, the *ideological disagreement between coalition partners* (H2) is computed by calculating the absolute difference between the two coalition parties with the highest and the lowest Chapel Hill Expert Survey value on that policy dimension. The *issue saliency* (H3) an opposition MP's party attaches to a ministerial department is coded using MARPOR data (Volkens et al., 2019). This measure indicates to what degree parties emphasize specific policy areas in their election manifestos at a given point in time. Table A2 in the Supplementary File provides more detailed information about the coding of ministerial departments. A fourth independent variable is a dummy that indicates whether a *female minister* (H4) headed the ministerial department in that term. Interaction effects between these variables and legislators' gender (1 = *female MP*) should reveal whether male and female politicians behave differently as strategic members of the opposition.

The models include several control variables. At the individual level, a dummy variable indicates whether the MP was a permanent member of the standing committee that monitors the ministerial department, to account for MPs' policy specialization. We also coded the time MPs served during that term (in years), their tenure (the number of years since the MPs first entered a regional or federal parliament), and whether (s)he holds a position as a (parliamentary) party leader. A measure for MPs' electoral vulnerability, which ranges from 0 (*safe seat*) to 1 (*insecure seat*), is computed by dividing the order in which an MP got elected on a district party list by the total number of seats his/her party won in that district in the previous election (André et al., 2015). The logic behind

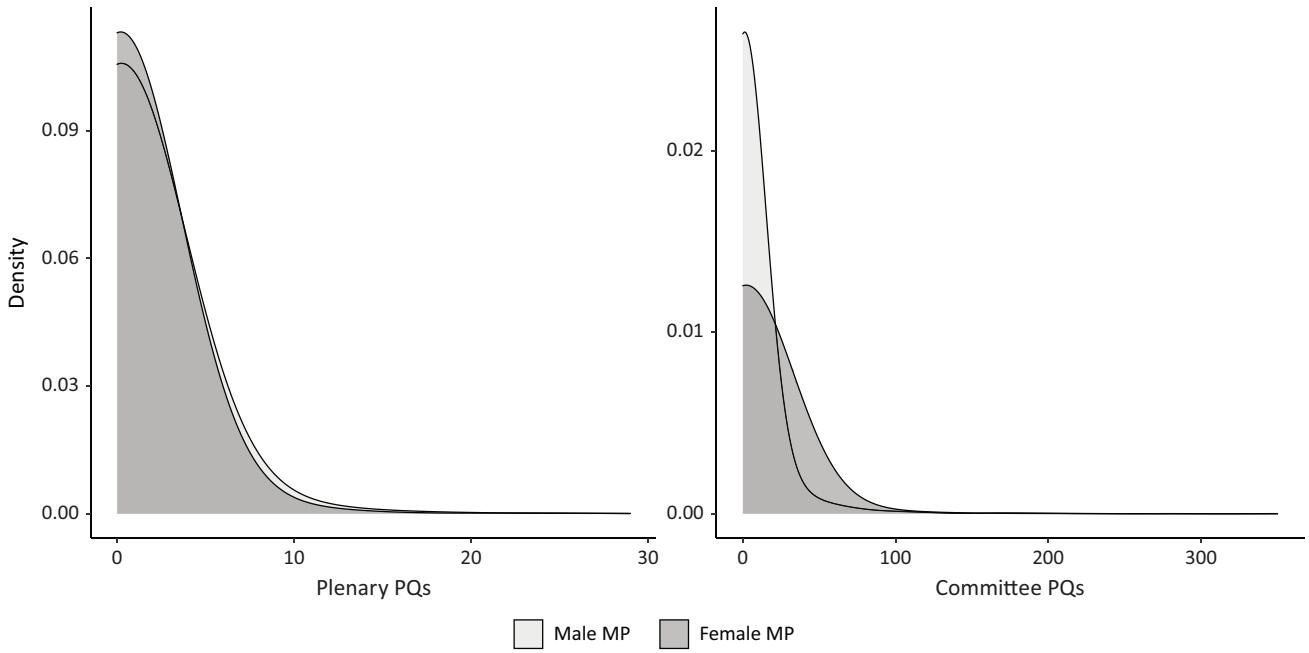

Figure 1. Distribution plots.

these controls is that inexperienced, electorally vulnerable backbenchers may more actively use low-cost instruments such as PQs compared to MPs with more experience, electoral security, or leadership functions who may use tools more selectively (Bailer & Ohmura, 2018).

At the party level, we control for party groups' seat size (in %), since each recognized party group in the Belgian Chamber is entitled to ask two oral PQs per plenary session, no matter their size. This means that MPs of smaller party groups have a higher mathematical chance of being able to ask plenary PQs (see also de Vet & Devroe, 2022).

At the level of the ministerial department, we control whether a ministerial department deals with a "hard," "soft," or "neutral" policy domain (Krook & O'Brien, 2012) since we know that women are often underrepresented during debates that deal with the former (Bäck & Debus, 2019; de Vet & Devroe, 2022). To account for the fact that some ministries are more salient than others and likewise attract more PQs (Höhmann & Sieberer, 2020), we control for the total share of PQs addressed to a particular ministry (%) during a given term.

Lastly, party group and legislative term dummies are included to further take any unaccounted variation between parties or between legislative periods into consideration. Table A1 in the Supplementary File provides the descriptive statistics. All models are estimated using robust standard errors, clustered at the level of the party group per legislative term.

4. Results

Which strategic considerations do MPs make when they direct PQs to the executive and which differences between male and female opposition members can one observe? Table 2 shows the results of the multivariate regression analyses that model the amount of oral plenary PQs that MPs direct to a particular ministerial department. The reported coefficients are incidence rate ratios: Scores above 1 indicate a positive effect and scores below 1 a negative effect.

Model 1 shows the general effects of our independent variables of interest, without the inclusion of interaction terms. First of all, it confirms earlier findings that women MPs do not ask as many PQs as men do. In part, this underrepresentation may be caused by party groups who coordinate access to the plenary floor: Party groups can only ask two PQs per plenary session which means that prior coordination is imperative. Earlier research has revealed how particularly women seem the victim of this more restricted access to the plenary floor as men MPs ask the majority of PQs during (highly mediatized and visible) plenary sessions (but for instance not during committee meetings; de Vet & Devroe, 2022). Second, of the strategic considerations that may guide opposition parties' questioning behavior, only the ministerial department's saliency to the questioner's party reaches statistical significance (p = 0.058). MPs do question the executive more intensively on issues that their party emphasizes in its electoral program (see also Vliegenthart & Walgrave, 2011). Although we also observe a positive coefficient for ideological disagreement among coalition partners this fails to reach statistical significance in the baseline model. Similarly, we find no effect for the ideological distance between the questioner's and the minister's party in that minister's policy domain. Lastly, we also do not find indications that female or male ministers are targeted more intensively.

The controls all go in the anticipated directions; particularly, the committee membership of MPs stands out as an important predictor of how many PQs they will direct to which minister. This indicates the importance of MPs' issue specialization. Legislators who served the entire term logically also ask more PQs and MPs that belong to smaller parties typically more often take the plenary floor. The rather large positive effect we find for the (general) share of PQs addressed to that ministry during the term illustrates the need to control for variation in ministries' general political importance and saliency.

More central to our research question are the interaction terms with MPs' gender included in Models 2–5 (Table 2). Since these interactions terms and their substantial effects are somewhat difficult to interpret based on regression coefficients alone, we also refer to Figure 2 which plots the effects of policy distance (Figure 2A), coalition disagreement (Figure 2B), issue saliency (Figure 2C), and ministers' gender (Figure 2D) on the predicted number of plenary PQs tabled by male and female MPs. The included interaction terms seem to provide some support for our hypotheses.

First of all, Model 3 shows a moderately negative and significant (p = 0.08) interaction effect between MPs' gender and the degree of ideological disagreement between coalition partners. Upon closer inspection, Figure 2B shows that male MPs seem to ask more PQs when intra-coalition disagreement is larger, while female MPs seem to ask fewer PQs when this is the case. Although only significant at the $p < 0.1$ level, this provides some suggestive evidence in favor of H2: Female opposition MPs seem to refrain more from conflict between coalition partners than male opposition members. The significant (p = 0.08) and positive interaction effect between MPs' gender and issue saliency similarly provides some support for H3. Although the issue saliency of a ministerial department also drives male opposition MPs' questioning behavior, particularly women seem to address more PQs to ministers on topics that their own party finds important (see Figure 2C). Whereas female opposition MPs seem less inclined to target ideologically distant ministers, especially compared to men who appear more inclined to do so (see Figure 2A), the interaction term fails to reach statistical significance (Model 4), forcing us to reject H1. Also, H4 is rejected: Although female opposition MPs (somewhat) less often seem to target male ministers compared to male opposition MPs, this effect is not statistically significant.

Table 2. Negative binomial regression models explaining the number of oral plenary PQs posed by MPs per ministerial department.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Independent variables					
Female MP	0.84 (0.08)*	0.93 (0.15)	1.21 (0.26)	0.68 (0.11)**	0.77 (0.08)**
Policy distance	1.00 (0.03)	1.00 (0.03)			
Coalition disagreement	1.03 (0.07)		1.06 (0.08)		
Issue salience	1.01 (0.01)*			1.00 (0.01)	
Female minister	0.97 (0.12)				0.90 (0.13)
Female MP * Policy distance		0.97 (0.04)			
Female MP * Coalition disagreement			0.90 (0.05)*		
Female MP * Issue saliency				1.02 (0.01)*	
Female MP * Female minister					1.26 (0.20)
Control variables					
Mandate duration	1.90 (0.13)***	1.90 (0.14)***	1.90 (0.13)***	1.89 (0.13)***	1.89 (0.14)***
Parliamentary tenure	0.99 (0.01)	0.99 (0.01)	0.99 (0.01)	0.99 (0.01)	0.99 (0.01)
Party (group) leader	1.10 (0.18)	1.11 (0.18)	1.08 (0.17)	1.10 (0.18)	1.10 (0.18)
Electoral insecurity	0.74 (0.19)	0.75 (0.19)	0.76 (0.19)	0.75 (0.20)	0.75 (0.19)
Committee member	9.64 (1.72)***	9.66 (1.73)***	9.61 (1.68)***	9.55 (1.74)***	9.61 (1.71)***
Party group size	0.88 (0.01)***	0.88 (0.01)***	0.88 (0.01)***	0.88 (0.01)***	0.88 (0.01)***
Share of PQs addressed to ministry	1.30 (0.02)***	1.31 (0.02)***	1.31 (0.02)***	1.29 (0.02)***	1.31 (0.02)***
Policy domain (ref = *neutral*)					
Hard	1.03 (0.16)	1.03 (0.18)	1.04 (0.18)	1.02 (0.18)	1.02 (0.19)
Soft	1.01 (0.20)	1.06 (0.21)	1.08 (0.21)	0.98 (0.20)	1.06 (0.24)
Party group fixed effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Legislative term fixed effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	4,268	4,268	4,268	4,268	4,268
Log likelihood	−2,737.58	−2,739.37	−2,738.43	−2,736.29	−2,738.67
Akaike Information Criterion	5,527.16	5,526.73	5,524.87	5,520.58	5,525.33

Notes: Coefficients are incidence rate ratios (cluster-robust standard errors between parenthesis); *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

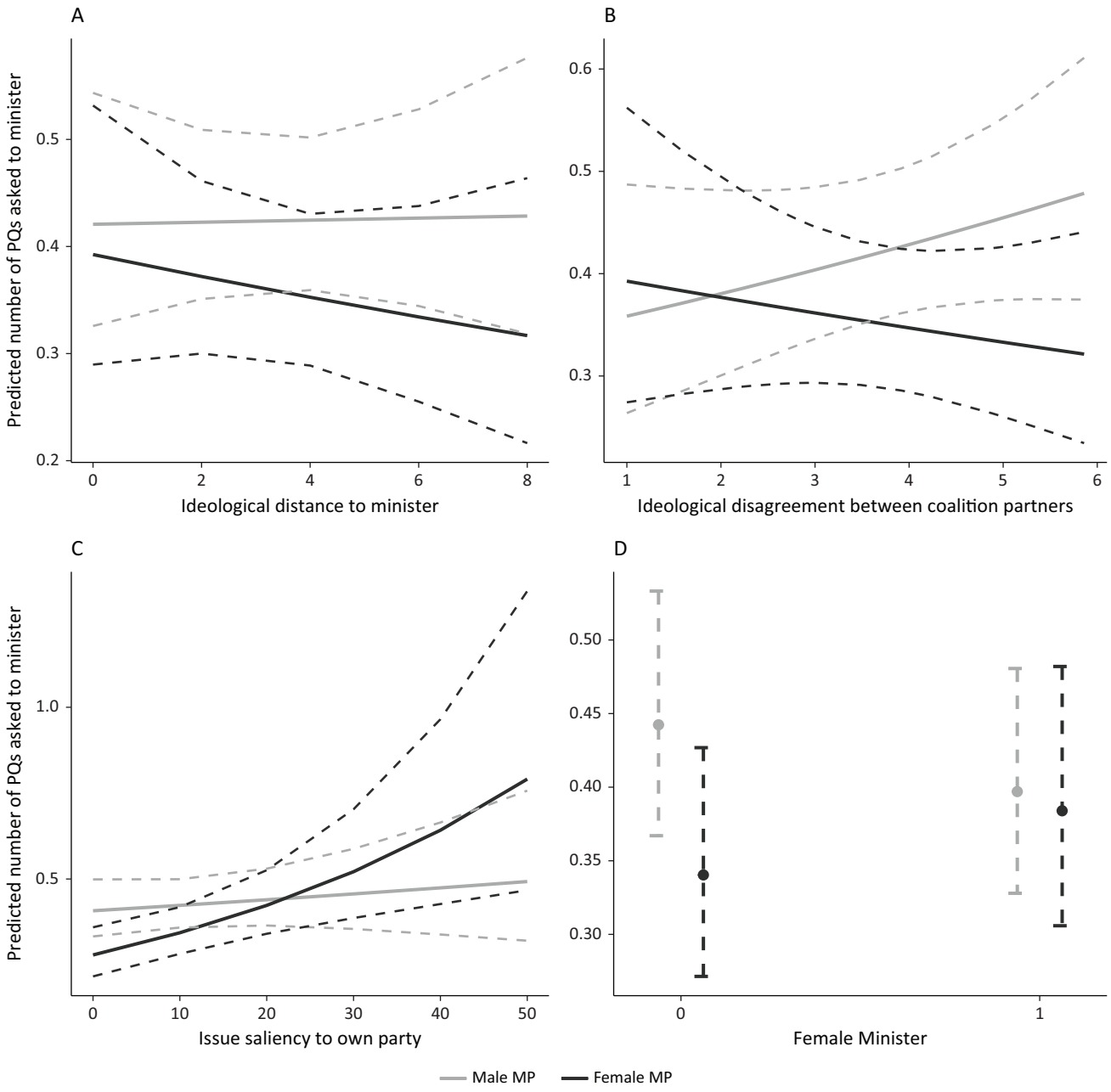

Figure 2. Effects of (A) policy distance, (B) coalition disagreement, (C) issue saliency, and (D) ministers' gender on the predicted number of plenary PQs tabled by male and female MPs. Notes: Marginal effects computed based on Models 2–5 respectively; all covariates held constant at their mean; 90% confidence intervals.

Note in Figure 2 that, in general, the predicted number of PQs posed by male and female opposition MPs is quite low, which is mostly due to the fact that MPs specialize in one or more policy domains while asking zero PQs to ministers responsible for other policy domains. Zero-inflated, negative binomial models that correct for the high number of zero values, however, indicate the robustness of our findings (Table A3 in the Supplementary File). Note also that strategic considerations and gender have less influence on PQs during committees when compared to plenary PQs (Table A3 in the Supplementary File). There, we only find a significant (positive) effect for issue saliency. Lastly, the number of additional models was estimated in which we included three-way interaction terms to further explore whether female MPs' opposition behavior changes when their party group is headed by a female instead of a male group leader. We find limited evidence for this, but this could be explored in more detail in future studies.

5. Conclusions

This study contributes to our knowledge of the behavioral strategies of opposition actors in representative

democracies. Recent research points toward an increasingly active and conflictual parliamentary opposition, as far as its oversight activity and voting behavior are concerned (De Giorgi & Ilonszki, 2018). Previous work has emphasized the relevance of party-level characteristics or the degree to which opposition parties adopt confrontational or consensual behavioral strategies (De Giorgi & Ilonszki, 2018; Louwerse & Otjes, 2019). By contrast, our article stresses the importance of individual-level variables, such as MPs' gender, as explanations for opposition behavior.

We found some suggestive evidence that female opposition MPs are somewhat less likely to expose and emphasize ideological conflicts between coalition partners, as opposed to male legislators who are more active in domains where the ideological distance between coalition partners is larger and the potential for cabinet conflict increases. Female members of the opposition, by contrast, seem more inclined than male colleagues to emphasize the core issues of their own party in their PQs directed towards executive agents.

These findings seem to provide some support for theoretical insights from social psychology stating that women are often associated with personal characteristics like being consensual, helpful, and compassionate while being more forceful, independent, and confrontational are characteristics often associated with men (Eagly, 1987). At least equally important as being true psychological traits, however, is the fact that these perceived characteristics can become social norms that are translated into (voter) expectations regarding how men and women should act as politicians (Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993). In turn, this could make contra-stereotypical behavior unlikely and potentially even (electorally) costly. Even though opposition actors probably have a lot of opportunities to expose cabinet conflicts in Belgium, due to the country's high party system fragmentation, instability, and complex coalition bargaining processes, this should not explain micro-level behavioral differences between male and female opposition members. This makes it rather likely that similar patterns can be identified in different settings too.

Beyond testing our theoretical expectations on data of more female opposition members in other institutional settings, future studies could examine the impact of gender on other forms of opposition behavior in parliament (e.g., voting behavior, co-sponsorships) even though MPs often tend to enjoy less individual autonomy here compared to PQs (Martin & Rozenberg, 2014). Moreover, studies could also examine the influence of female party (group) leaders on how (confrontational or consensual) party groups wage opposition in contemporary parliaments. In any case, this article provides some additional evidence that parliamentary activity can be gendered. Our study, focused specifically on strategic opposition behavior, shows how female opposition members might potentially shift the nature of parliamentary opposition to a less confrontational one. This calls for more studies that examine the impact of (more) individual-level factors since it can contribute to a better understanding of legislative-executive relations.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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