

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The good, the loyal or the active? MPs' parliamentary performance and the achievement of static and progressive career ambitions in parliament

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## Abstract

Although often theorized, empirical research on the relationship between MPs' parliamentary behaviour and their chances to realize career ambitions is relatively scarce. This article holistically analyses the effect of MPs' (1) party loyalty, (2) activity level and (3) the quality of their parliamentary work on MPs' prospects for re-election and their promotion to higher parliamentary office. Based on a unique combination of behavioural and peer assessment data on 325 federal and regional MPs in Belgium (2014–2019), we find that particularly MPs' loyalty and activity level improve their career prospects in the subsequent term, in contrast to more qualitative aspects of their parliamentary work. These findings provide important new insights into how and to what degree legislators are rewarded for their parliamentary performance.

**Keywords:** career advancement; parliamentary activity; parliamentary performance; party loyalty; re-election

## Introduction

Political ambition is often seen as a powerful driver of political behaviour. Politicians are goal-seeking actors who strategically adapt their behaviour to maximize their chances of realizing whatever goal they wish to achieve (Strøm, 1997). Although such goals may also be policy-related, a crucial part of politicians' motivations is career-related (e.g. Mayhew, 1974; Fenno, 1978; Searing, 1994; Strøm, 1997). Politicians' career goals can be *static*, when they primordially want to maintain their current position in the near future, or *progressive*, when they aspire to attain an office higher or more prestigious than the one (s)he is currently holding (Schlesinger, 1966).<sup>1</sup> In any case, to achieve such ambitions, politicians must adhere to the desires of those who may act as career gatekeepers, which in party-centred, European systems typically to a large extent are political parties and their leaders.

Although often theoretically assumed, empirical research on the link between political behaviour and the fulfilment of static and progressive career ambitions is relatively limited. Many studies have examined the consequences of legislators' behaviour for their re-(s)election in one way or another (Bowler, 2010; Martin, 2010; Bräuninger *et al.*, 2012; François and Navarro, 2019; Yildirim *et al.*, 2019; Louwerse and Van Vonno, 2021). But studies on the consequences for promotion to higher office – let alone studies that examine both the achievement of static and progressive ambitions – are more scarce (see however: Martin, 2014; Dockendorff, 2019; Treib and Schlipphak, 2019). Such research is crucial, first, because it provides insights into the accountability of political representatives: are legislators rewarded for their efforts? Second, while parliaments'

<sup>1</sup>Schlesinger also describes 'discrete ambitions', which we disregard here as they denote incumbents' desire to only maintain their political office for the remainder of the term.

institutional strength may be weakened due to high levels of legislative turnover (Gouglas *et al.*, 2018), a further outflow of qualified personnel can be reduced when re-election chances depend on incumbents' past performance (Ferejohn, 1986) or when leadership positions are allocated on a meritocratic basis (Shepsle, 1988).

This paper empirically investigates the link between MPs' past performance in parliament and the short-term fulfilment of their parliamentary career ambitions. It makes two contributions to the existing literature: first, it combines an analysis of both MPs' achievement of static and progressive career ambitions. This allows us to investigate whether the re-election and promotion of MPs – the former being a formal prerequisite to the latter – are conditional upon different aspects of parliamentary behaviour. Second, while most studies focus on the effect of either party loyalty, quantitative parliamentary activity or – to a lesser extent – the quality of MPs' work, our research design takes into account all of these aspects of incumbents' past behaviour.

Using a unique combination of behavioural and MP peer assessment data on 325 members of three Belgian parliaments (the federal Chamber of Representatives and the regional parliaments of Flanders and Wallonia) between 2014 and 2019 and their career advancements in the subsequent term (2019–2024), our multivariate analyses reveal that particularly incumbents' party loyalty and activity level matter for their future careers – but not the quality of their parliamentary work. As such, this study provides important new insights into how legislators may get rewarded (or not) for their parliamentary performance and which factors increase MPs' chances for re-election and promotion to higher political office.

### Parliamentary behaviour and the achievement of career ambitions

Influential rational-choice perspectives on legislative behaviour dictate that in order to understand the actions of politicians, one must understand their individual goals and ambitions. Although legislators may be driven by a strong desire to shape public policies or exert legislative influence (Cox and McCubbins, 1993; Searing, 1994), it is widely acknowledged that their individual career goals matter. In his seminal work, Mayhew (1974) drew attention to incumbents' particular desire to renew their current position: legislators are '*single-minded seekers of re-election*' (p. 5) and their behaviour should primarily be understood in that sense. Although re-election is generally a strict necessity before being able to pursue any other office in the legislature, others have argued that also progressive career ambitions should be taken into account (e.g. Schlesinger, 1966; Hibbing, 1986; Herrick and Moore, 1993). Strøm (1997) distinguishes between four hierarchically-ordered career goals. (1) *Reselection* and (2) *re-election* refer to legislators' static ambitions and can be highly intertwined in party-centred, closed-list PR electoral systems where parties decide on list positions and thus also on incumbents' electoral chances. (3) *Party office* and (4) *legislative office* relate to MPs' progressive career goals. The former are positions that are entirely under the control of the party itself such as who is to be the parliamentary group leader or whip. The latter are positions such as the Speaker or the committee chair that typically require the consent of a broader coalition of parties.<sup>2</sup> Such leadership positions or 'mega seats' are particularly attractive to legislators because they typically come with prestige, political influence, higher remuneration and other spoils (e.g. extra staff or office space) (Carroll *et al.*, 2006; Martin, 2014).

Legislators will try to align their behaviour in parliament with the specific career ambitions they pursue. Strategic parliamentary behaviour takes shape in legislators' instrumental employment of the scarce resources they possess, such as their voting power, time, staff, and parliamentary prerogatives (e.g. the right to initiate, sponsor or amend bills, plenary speaking time), in order to raise

<sup>2</sup>Sometimes this distinction between party and legislative office may be somewhat artificial, e.g. in pure two-party systems where the majority party controls all important legislative offices or when a parliament-wide vote is a mere formality and parties get a fixed number of positions based on a proportionality principle, for which they may autonomously appoint one of their group members.

the attention and benevolence of those principals who control access to the positions they desire most (Strøm, 1997; Müller, 2000). For the static ambition of re-election, these principals are voters and parties, albeit with varying degrees of influence due to candidate selection and electoral rules. For the progressive ambition of acquiring higher office, these typically are political parties (Strøm, 1997; Müller, 2000; Saalfeld and Strøm, 2014).

Empirical research on the link between legislators' behaviour and the fulfilment of their career ambitions has so far focused on the effect of three aspects of parliamentary performance: MPs' (1) party loyalty, (2) their (quantitative) parliamentary effort and less often also (3) the quality of their parliamentary work. In what follows, we present a combined empirical test of the theoretical arguments that underpin these operationalizations and their hypothesized effects on the attainment of MPs' static (i.e. re-election) and progressive ambitions (i.e. higher parliamentary office).

### **Party loyalty and career ambitions**

First, MPs' political fortunes may be affected by their loyalty to the party. Party unity is an important asset that political parties use to enhance their policy-making influence, increase decisional efficiency and send out a clear collective message to the electorate (Cox and McCubbins, 1993; Laver and Shepsle, 1999; Müller, 2000). It has, therefore, traditionally been argued that parties use their career gatekeeping powers as an *ex-ante* control instrument through which they make sure that their office-holders' policy positions align with that of the party, and as an *ex-post* disciplining tool through which they ensure that MPs contribute to the common party goals (Carey, 2007; Bailer, 2017). Particularly for the fulfilment of MPs' static ambitions, the electoral system is crucial because it vests in career gatekeeping powers either in the hands of voters or in those of the party and its leadership (Strøm, 1997). Thus far, an abundant literature has shown how some systems, most notably closed-list systems with centralized candidate selection processes, tend to induce more party loyalty, while others, such as open-list systems where voters' preference votes may alter parties' ordering of candidates on the ballot, generate incentives to 'cultivate a personal vote' (e.g. Carey and Shugart, 1995). Indeed, although parties are incentivized to reward loyal MPs, we know that voters may electorally reward 'mavericks' who dissent from the party with preference votes (Vivyan and Wagner, 2012; Crisp *et al.*, 2013) and that MPs with a strong personal electoral reputation may be less inclined to toe the party line (Tavits, 2009; Sieberer, 2010).

Still, even in open or flexible list PR systems, parties typically severely weigh on (centralized) candidate selection processes. They consequently may reward loyal MPs by giving them a visible (and thus advantageous) position on the electoral ballot. Hence, we expect that incumbents' party loyalty is positively correlated with their chances of re-election (H1a).

Whereas voters may co-impact the fulfilment of static ambitions to some extent, parties typically possess a monopoly over the allocation of positions that may satisfy MPs' progressive ambitions. We may hence expect to find a positive effect of MPs' loyalty on their advancement to higher positions (H1b) that is perhaps even more substantial than the effect on MPs' re-election prospects, where also voters' judgements matter and parties may be incentivized to take advantage of the personal reputations of electorally-strong candidates (Crisp *et al.*, 2013; André *et al.*, 2017). At least in theory, party leaders may use office spoils (beyond re-selection) as discipline-inducing 'carrots and sticks' (Bailer, 2017). Empirical research indeed suggests not only that dissenting MPs more often desire to take up a position that is external to the legislature in which they currently serve (Meserve *et al.*, 2009) but also that those who occupy a parliamentary leadership position are less likely to defect (Becher and Sieberer, 2008) and that party loyalty may be rewarded with leadership positions in parliament, such as, whip or committee chair positions in more candidate-centred electoral systems (Martin, 2014). In sum, we expect that:

**H1a:** Loyal MPs are more likely to satisfy their static ambitions by gaining re-election.

**H1b:** Loyal MPs are more likely to satisfy their progressive ambitions by acquiring a higher parliamentary office.

### **Parliamentary effort and career ambitions**

Loyalty is, however, probably not all that matters. MPs' level of activity, sometimes labelled as their parliamentary effort, is generally regarded as an indirect but observable proxy of their political ambition (Hermansen, 2016; Høyland *et al.*, 2019; Treib and Schlipphak, 2019). We know that MPs' parliamentary activity is correlated with contextual factors at the party-level, such as parties' government status, party family or size. Particularly MPs from opposition parties and smaller party groups are generally expected to more actively make use of the wide variety of parliamentary tools they have at their disposal (e.g. Jenny and Müller, 2012). Parties, in other words, 'constrain MPs' actions, but also offer the context in which their behaviour will be evaluated' (Louwse and Otjes, 2016: 791). By productively engaging in many parliamentary activities instead of portraying 'slacking behaviour' (Frech *et al.*, 2020), legislators show to party leaders their eagerness and willingness to contribute to the party's policy goals by actively developing and defending detailed bill proposals and scrutinizing governmental policies within their designated area of issue specialization (Louwse and Van Vonno, 2021). Furthermore, parliamentary tools may not only serve policy-seeking goals but can also be used following a personal vote-seeking strategy by legislators who wish to increase their visibility and name recognition among the public (Bräuninger *et al.*, 2012; Däubler *et al.*, 2016). Activity might directly result in increased voter support according to this logic (see e.g. Bowler, 2010; François and Navarro, 2019), but since parties may reward politicians with a strong personal electoral reputation, party leaders might also valorise efforts by individual MPs to gain public prominence through their activity by satisfying their career ambitions (Yildirim *et al.*, 2019). Empirical research has indeed established links between MPs' parliamentary efforts and their re-selection chances (Däubler *et al.*, 2018; Papp, 2019; Yıldirim *et al.*, 2019; Louwse and Van Vonno, 2021). Evidence from Chili (Dockendorff, 2019) and the European Parliament (Treib and Schlipphak, 2019) furthermore shows that increased activity might also lead to promotion to higher parliamentary office. We hence expect that MPs who are more active in parliament are more likely to satisfy their static (H2a) and progressive ambitions (H2b).

**H2a:** MPs who are more active in parliament are more likely to satisfy their static ambitions by gaining re-election.

**H2b:** MPs who are more active are more likely to satisfy their progressive ambitions by attaining higher parliamentary office.

### **Parliamentary quality and career ambitions**

Lastly, a disadvantage of a narrow focus on observable parliamentary behaviour is that one potentially misses out on crucial information about the quality of legislators' work or about their activities behind the scenes. Some legislators might not necessarily stand out because of their high levels of parliamentary activity but do strike as legislators that may selectively, but very effectively, use parliamentary tools to influence policy-making because of their higher expertise, experience and larger personal networks (Miquel and Snyder Jr, 2006; Volden and Wiseman, 2009). Although qualitative aspects of parliamentary work may not always be publicly visible, the media or opinion leaders may play an important role in fostering additional voter support for incumbents (Bouteca *et al.*, 2019). Also, party selectors may reward qualitative parliamentary work since inductive research suggests that 'quality [of parliamentary work] may trump quantity for representatives

that want to make a name for themselves inside the party' (Borghetto and Lisi, 2018: 16; see also: Mondak, 1995; Stone *et al.*, 2004). Empirical research about the link between the quality of MPs' parliamentary work and their career prospects is, however, very scarce. Nevertheless, findings from the relation between legislative effectiveness and the allocation of parliamentary leadership positions among members of the North Carolina Congress indicate that incumbents' previous qualitative parliamentary performance is an important predictor for career advancement (Miquel and Snyder Jr, 2006). Also we hypothesize – besides a positive effect of the quantity of MPs' parliamentary work and their party loyalty – that MPs who pay more attention to qualitative aspects of their parliamentary work (as assessed by their peers, see below) are more likely to fulfil both their static (re-election) and progressive career ambitions (higher office).

**H3a:** MPs whose work is assessed as more qualitative are more likely to satisfy their static ambitions by gaining re-election.

**H3b:** MPs whose work is assessed as more qualitative are more likely to satisfy their progressive ambitions by attaining higher parliamentary office.

## Research design

### Case selection

We test our hypotheses using data on 325 members<sup>3</sup> of three Belgian parliaments between 2014 and 2019: the federal Chamber of Representatives, the Flemish Parliament and the Parliament of Wallonia.<sup>4</sup> Belgium is a suitable case to study the potential impact of parliamentary performance on incumbents' parliamentary careers for a number of reasons. Like in many systems, Belgian MPs face diverging incentives from different principals, due to the country's flexible list PR electoral system. On the one hand, MPs – both from the federal and regional parliaments – are directly accountable to voters who may cast a preference vote on their preferred candidate(s). On the other hand, parties have a strong impact on incumbents' political careers, not only through their monopoly on the allocation of leadership positions but also due to the relative importance of candidates' list positions (which are assigned by party selectorates) compared to the more limited impact of preference votes on parliamentary seat allocation (De Winter, 2005). Many voters cast list votes and when they do cast a preference vote, it is often for a top-list candidate who would have been elected (based on the redistribution of list votes) anyway (Wauters *et al.*, 2016). Although party selectors do take candidates' personal electoral reputations into account (André *et al.*, 2017), these may be less important for the attribution of realistic list positions (Put *et al.*, 2021). The fact that legislators in Belgium – like in many other countries – display high levels of party loyalty (Depauw and Martin, 2008), has often been an argument to disregard MPs' voting behaviour in those contexts. However, it could also mean that (rare) defections have particularly severe consequences (see below). Furthermore, although there may be little variation in party loyalty, MPs can still differentiate themselves from their colleagues by diligently and effectively using the wide array of parliamentary tools they have at their disposal to introduce bills, resolutions or ask parliamentary questions (Bräuninger *et al.*, 2012). Consequently, we regard Belgium as a rather typical case for party-centred, list PR electoral systems as often found in Western Europe. Especially for the allocation of leadership positions in parliament, parties decide

<sup>3</sup>We have full data for 325 of the 349 MPs that were in office approximately six months before the end of the parliamentary term (136/150 MPs from the Federal Parliament, 120/124 from the Flemish Parliament, 69/75 from the Parliament of Wallonia).

<sup>4</sup>The latter two are the parliaments of the two largest Belgian regions. While there also exists the Brussels region, we do not include those MPs in our analysis due to the limited size and special status of the Brussels capital region as well as its more complex institutional setting.

quite autonomously and are not bound by many formal rules or informal constraints. Unlike for electoral candidates,<sup>5</sup> formal gender quota do not apply and unlike for highly visible positions such as cabinet ministers (Dumont *et al.*, 2008) an equal territorial representation of all electoral districts is less important.

### Dependent variables

We measure the achievement of static and progressive career ambitions by respectively focusing on whether incumbent MPs (i.e. those who served in the 2014–2019 term) got re-elected and obtained a parliamentary leadership position in the subsequent legislative term (2019–2024). For the former, we coded MPs' re-election as 'one' if they renewed their mandate as an MP in either of the three parliaments within 12 months after the 2019 general elections (during which both the federal and regional parliaments were elected) or 'zero' otherwise. With this approach, we take into account those MPs who were able to directly secure their seat as well as those who would soon enter parliament as a successor of another MP (e.g. someone who took an oath as a minister) within a reasonable amount of time.<sup>6</sup>

Our second dependent variable indicates whether an incumbent MP obtained a leadership position in the subsequent term. We only consider positions that were acquired during the first year of the 2019–2024 term to exclude any confounding effect of MPs' behaviour within the new term. Following Strøm (1997), we take into account both (parliamentary) party offices and legislative offices acquired in one of the three parliaments under study. Legislative offices include those of Speaker, Vice-Speaker, member of the parliamentary bureau,<sup>7</sup> or committee chair. Parliamentary party leaders, who both act as managers and spearheads of their parliamentary parties (de Vet, 2019) are counted as holding a party office.<sup>8</sup> Our binary dependent variable *parliamentary leadership position* is coded as one if incumbent MPs acquired any party or legislative office, and zero if they did not. It is important to note that MPs' achievement of acquiring a leadership position can only be observed for those that got re-elected. Consequently, our total sample of 325 Belgian MPs is reduced to 158 re-elected MPs for the analysis of this dependent variable. Our statistical models explicitly take this potential selection bias into account (see below).

### Independent variables

Our independent variables measure three aspects of the parliamentary performance of MPs in the 2014–2019 legislative term using a unique combination of behavioural and elite survey data.

First, MPs' *party loyalty* is measured based on their plenary voting record (see e.g. Crisp *et al.*, 2013). Even though Belgian parties are characterized by high levels of party unity (Depauw and Martin, 2008) and we may thus expect little variation, this does also imply that even a low amount of voting defections from the parliamentary party may be highly consequential. We expect diminishing (negative) returns of voting against the party line: negative consequences will decrease for an increasing amount of voting defections. Each MPs' party loyalty is therefore measured with a

<sup>5</sup>Since 2003, on each electoral list (for federal and regional), there has to be an equal amount of male and female candidates and the first two candidates (of both the effective and successor list) cannot be of the same sex.

<sup>6</sup>Eight MPs in our sample who got re-elected in another parliament (e.g. the Senate, the European Parliament, the Parliament of Brussels) were coded as not re-elected for methodological reasons (see below). Robustness checks show that this does not affect our results.

<sup>7</sup>The bureau is the governing body of the parliament composed of the Speaker, Vice-Speakers and Secretaries, all of which are remunerated positions.

<sup>8</sup>We do not consider any extra-parliamentary party positions such as ministers or functions within central party organizations. Because a parliamentary mandate is not a prerequisite here, we expect MPs' parliamentary performance to be less relevant for those positions.

negatively loading indicator of his/her *voting defection* by taking the natural logarithm of the percent of votes an MP did not vote with the majority of his/her parliamentary party.

Second, we measure the parliamentary activity (quantitative parliamentary performance) of incumbent MPs based on their use of various parliamentary tools. We take into account plenary speech frequency, plenary speech length, the number of oral parliamentary questions (both in plenary and committee sessions), written parliamentary questions, private members' bills and resolutions. Rather than determining arbitrary weights to aggregate the indicators, the data is summarized based on its empirically underlying structure with the help of exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses (for more details see Schobess, 2021). This approach reveals three primary dimensions: *representation activity*, *legislative activity*, and *control/oversight activity* that cluster around the overarching concept of MPs' overall *parliamentary activity*.

Third, in order to take into account more *qualitative* (and less publicly visible) aspects of MPs' parliamentary work, we innovatively make use of (rater bias corrected) peer assessment scores. Using a unique survey design, MPs were asked to evaluate six qualitative aspects of the parliamentary work for 12 randomly sampled peers that are active in the same parliamentary committees or parliamentary party group. These six aspects are the perceived 'quality' and 'effectiveness' of MPs' three main parliamentary functions: representation, legislation and oversight (for the theoretical argumentation see: Schobess, 2021). The peer assessment survey had a response rate of 28.3 percent and resulted in a total of 6576 evaluations covering 93.1 percent of our population of Belgian MPs. The raw peer assessment scores have been controlled for various forms of individual rater bias with a Bayesian ordered probit varying-intercepts, varying-slopes model. Exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses revealed that the indicators of MPs' qualitative parliamentary performance cluster around two dimensions that compose the latent variable of MPs' *quality of parliamentary work*, the *content of MPs' parliamentary work*, and their *policy-making effectiveness* (for more details see Schobess, 2021). While 'policy-making effectiveness' is primarily related to individual MPs' capability to influence public policy outcomes, 'content of parliamentary work' mainly captures MPs' loyalty towards voters, and the focus on important topics during parliamentary questions.

### **Control variables**

Since the achievement of career ambitions is unlikely to solely depend on parliamentary performance, we need to control for other factors as well. Because MPs' chances to get re-elected and to rise to higher office might be partially shaped by similar factors and we need to control for a potential selection bias (see below), a number of control variables are included in our analyses of both dependent variables. Obviously, MPs who already held a leadership position before the elections may have good reason to re-claim their position. Moreover, already holding a visible leadership position can signal expertise for the future exercise of a (higher) parliamentary function. We therefore include lagged control variables for incumbent committee chairs, (vice-) Speakers, Bureau members and parliamentary party group leaders. Because similar arguments also hold for MPs' general political experience, we also control whether an MP has previously been a *minister* at the Belgian national or regional levels and account for MPs' (logged) parliamentary *seniority*.<sup>9</sup> MPs' *gender* is also included in the models, as social psychological studies indicate that the behaviour of female politicians might be judged more critically than that of men (e.g. Cucchi and Cavazza, 2021). Finally, we include two party characteristics that might potentially affect incumbents' chances to ascend to higher office: whether or not MPs' parties belonged to the majority or *opposition* as well as the raw seat change of MPs' parliamentary parties (*PPG size change*) after the election as parliamentary positions are distributed proportionally.

<sup>9</sup>We counted all parliamentary terms where an MP has been in office as MP or minister at a Belgian national or regional parliament as well as the European Parliament.

In order to estimate the potential selection bias for MPs' appointments to higher office we include a number of additional controls for the analyses of incumbents' re-election chances. We include two variables that relate to incumbents' previous electoral performance: their *electoral vulnerability*<sup>10</sup> in the previous election and whether (s)he ran on the main electoral list or got the mandate as a *substitute* replacing another MP. Secondly, we control for three additional factors that are likely to be associated with both our independent variables and incumbents' chances to get re-elected: MPs' *media coverage* during the electoral campaign,<sup>11</sup> their increased public visibility as a *mayor*, and the relative share of the previous term (s)he actually exercised the mandate (*incumbency time*). Finally, we also include dummy variables to control for potential differences between the parliaments.

**Statistical model**

Since our analysis of incumbents' rise to higher parliamentary office is per definition limited to those MPs who effectively got re-elected, we make use of an integrated empirical approach that controls for a potential selection bias (see e.g. Heckman, 1974; Heckman, 1979; Timpone, 1998). This approach allows us to relax the implicit assumption that re-elected MPs do not differ from those who did not get re-elected with regard to their previous parliamentary performance. Due to the nature of both dependent variables, we employ a sample selection model for binary outcome variables (see Dubin and Rivers, 1989). More precisely, our statistical model has the following specification:

$$s_i = \begin{cases} 1 & \text{if } s_i^* > 0 \\ 0 & \text{otherwise} \end{cases}$$

$$y_i = \begin{cases} 1 & \text{if } y_i^* > 0 \ \& \ s_i^* > 0 \\ 0 & \text{if } y_i^* \leq 0 \ \& \ s_i^* > 0 \\ \text{missing} & \text{if } s_i^* \leq 0 \end{cases}$$

$$\begin{pmatrix} s_i^* \\ y_i^* \end{pmatrix} \sim MVN\left(\begin{pmatrix} \mu_{is} \\ \mu_{iy} \end{pmatrix}, \Sigma\right)$$

$$\mu_{is} = Z_i\gamma$$

$$\mu_{iy} = X_i\beta$$

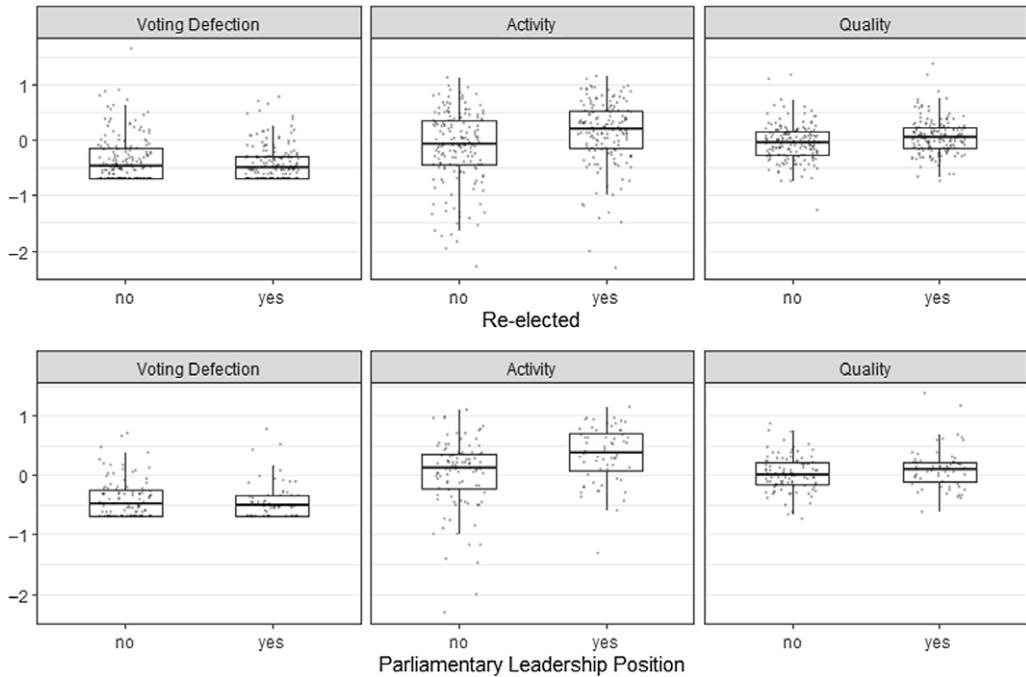
$$\Sigma = \begin{pmatrix} 1 & \rho \\ \rho & 1 \end{pmatrix}$$

where  $s_i$  represents a dichotomous variable specifying whether an incumbent MP got re-elected or not and  $y_i$  the achievement of a parliamentary leadership position (only observed for re-elected MPs). The two dependent variables are assumed to have an underlying latent variable  $s_i^*$  and  $y_i^*$  respectively indicating the propensity to get re-elected and nominated to a higher parliamentary position that both stem from a multivariate normal distribution with mean  $\mu_{is}$ ,  $\mu_{iy}$  and a (co-) variance structure  $\Sigma$ . We estimate  $\mu_{is}$  and  $\mu_{iy}$  with two vectors of linear predictors  $\gamma$  and  $\beta$  (including a constant term) for two sets of explanatory variables  $Z_i$  and  $X_i$  respectively and follow the

<sup>10</sup>This was calculated by dividing the rank of MPs' effective election from the list by the total number of seats of his/her party-in-a-district.

<sup>11</sup>We counted all print media articles where an MP was named during the last three months before the election. We screened the six most prominent Dutch-speaking newspapers (De Standaard, De Morgen, De Tijd, Het Nieuwsblad, Het Laatste Nieuws, Metro NL) and French-speaking newspapers (Le Soir, l'Avenir, l'Echo, la Dernière Heure, la Libre Belgique, Metro FR). Finally, the variable has been log-transformed and standardized by language group respectively to take potential differences between both linguistic groups into account.





**Figure 1.** Bivariate relations between voting defection, parliamentary activity, and quality of parliamentary work with MPs' re-election and promotion to higher parliamentary office.

convention to set the standard deviation of the residuals to one (to allow model identification). Finally,  $\rho$  indicates the estimated covariance of the residuals for both regressions where a value of zero indicates the absence of any sample selection bias, whereas estimates closer to +1 (−1) indicate a positive (negative) correlation between both equations, that is the strength of a potential selection bias. Inferences are obtained in a Bayesian framework with Markov Chain Monte Carlo (MCMC) simulation choosing  $N(0, 1000)$  as prior distribution for all  $\gamma$  and  $\beta$  as well as  $Uniform(-1, 1)$  for  $\rho$ . We ran three Markov chains of 80.000 iterations each thinned by a factor of 80 after 8.000 burn-in in JAGS (Plummer, 2003).<sup>12</sup>

## Results

### **Descriptive results**

The descriptive results in Figure 1 already provide some tentative support for our theoretical expectations. The distributions of the independent variables across the different groups of MPs show that incumbent MPs who defect more often from the party get slightly less often re-elected or selected for higher parliamentary office. In contrast, MPs with higher levels of parliamentary activity got re-elected and promoted more often than less active MPs. Similarly, MPs that got re-elected or obtained a higher parliamentary office tend to be characterized by a more qualitative parliamentary performance. Independent t-tests, however, show that the distributional differences between these groups of MPs are rather small and only significant for parliamentary activity (both dependent variables,  $P < 0.001$ ) and for the relation between the quality of parliamentary work and re-election ( $P < 0.01$ ).

<sup>12</sup>Summary statistics for convergence diagnostics can be found in the online Appendix.

**Table 1** Parliamentary performance and re-election/promotion to higher parliamentary office (Bayesian sample selection model with binary outcome variable)

	Re-election			Parl. Leadership Position		
	5%	Median	95%	5%	Median	95%
Constant	0.249	1.462	2.829	-3.37	-2.253	-1.157
Voting Defection (log)	-0.824	-0.445	-0.061	-2.708	-1.622	-0.59
Parliamentary Activity	0.266	0.523	0.793	0.494	1.078	1.682
Quality of Parl. Work	-0.059	0.405	0.86	-0.512	0.459	1.463
Committee Chair 2014	0.03	0.34	0.678	0.816	1.472	2.13
PPG Leader 2014	-0.206	0.395	1.008	0.48	1.452	2.449
Bureau Member 2014	-0.087	0.449	0.981	0.392	1.404	2.444
Minister	-0.287	0.223	0.708	-1.151	-0.148	0.829
Female	-0.087	0.172	0.447	-0.823	-0.271	0.278
Seniority (log)	-0.622	-0.393	-0.159	-0.176	0.346	0.864
Opposition	-0.436	-0.119	0.202	-0.531	0.199	0.948
PPG Size Change	0.015	0.046	0.077	-0.032	0.027	0.086
Media Coverage (log)	0.213	0.604	1.004			
Mayor	0.447	0.806	1.164			
Incumbency Time	-2.281	-1.21	-0.193			
Substitute 2014	-1.058	-0.518	-0.009			
Electoral Vulnerability	-1.274	-0.696	-0.148			
Parliament of Wallonia	-0.464	-0.115	0.228			
Flemish Parliament	0.048	0.357	0.662			
Rho	-0.603	0.324	0.922	-0.603	0.324	0.922
N	325	325	325	158	158	158

Note: Posterior medians and credible intervals shown. Identical signs of all three values of a coefficient indicate a 95 percent probability that the coefficient is either positive or negative.

### Multivariate results

Before discussing the multivariate results, it should be noted that our empirical approach fits the data rather well. Our statistical model enables us to increase the amount of correctly predicted electoral outcomes from 51.4 percent based on chance (taking only the distribution of the dependent variable into account) to 68.9 percent. Similarly, the model can correctly predict whether incumbent MPs obtain a higher parliamentary office for 90.5 percent of our population compared to 62 percent based on chance.<sup>13</sup> Secondly, the median estimate of the sample selection bias  $\rho = 0.32$  indicates a weak positive correlation between MPs' propensity to get re-elected and their probability to rise to higher parliamentary office (see Table 1).<sup>14</sup> Although the large credible interval does not allow us to conclude that our sample is characterized by a selection bias, the potential existence of a positive correlation between both equations stresses the importance to control for a potential selection bias when analysing incumbent MPs' subsequent career trajectories.<sup>15</sup>

### Static career prospects

Turning to the multivariate analysis of MPs' chances to get re-elected, we first examine the sign of the Bayesian model coefficients and the respective probability that the coefficient is positive/negative (as expected by our hypotheses). The left part of Table 1 shows that the coefficients of all

<sup>13</sup>A baseline model only including our encompassing set of control variables (see online Appendix) can correctly predict MPs' re-election for 68.6 percent of the population and MPs' achievement of receiving a parliamentary leadership position for 87.3 percent, indicating the strong pertinence of our control variables (further increasing the difficulty to find significant results for our independent variables).

<sup>14</sup>Since we employ a Bayesian framework, we report the posterior medians of our coefficients (comparable to point estimates) and their credible intervals (indicating a 95 percent probability that a coefficient is either positive or negative when all three values within a row have the same sign).

<sup>15</sup>Results for simpler models assuming the absence of any selection bias and other robustness checks are discussed below.

three independent variables point in the theoretically expected direction. While parliamentary activity and quality of parliamentary work are most likely to be positively related with re-election (posterior median  $>0$ ), MPs' voting defection is negatively associated with the chances to get re-elected. In fact, our model estimates that the relation between MPs' voting defection and their re-election has a 97.3 percent (posterior) probability of being negative, providing strong evidence in support of **H1a**. Similarly, parliamentary activity has a probability above 99.9 percent to be positively related with re-election according to our model. This provides very strong support for our theoretical expectation that more active MPs are more likely to get re-elected (**H2a**). Since the credible interval for the coefficient of quality of parliamentary work (slightly) overlaps zero, hypothesis **H3a** is rejected.<sup>16</sup>

To get a better picture of the substantial effects, we calculate the predicted probability of an MP to get re-elected for 1000 values of our three independent variables (covering their empirical range) while holding all other explanatory factors constant at their median (see Figure 2). The results reveal that an average MP that votes 99.5 percent of the times with his/her parliamentary party can improve his/her chances to get re-elected from around 24 percent to 34 percent by consistently voting all the time with the majority of his/her parliamentary party. Although some would consider a 34 percent probability to get re-elected as low, the analysis shows that even a few defections from one's party can come at a substantial cost. The effect of party loyalty is even more astonishing given the limited variance in our independent variable (generally very high levels of voting unity). Small behavioural changes may have big electoral consequences.

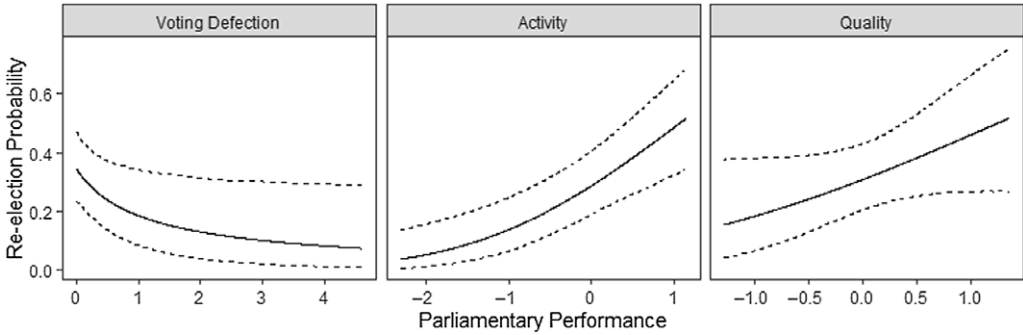
Additionally, a typical MP with a median level of parliamentary activity can improve his/her average chances to get re-elected from around 29 percent to more than 51 percent by becoming one of the most active MPs in parliament. Finally, while the quality of MPs' parliamentary work could also go along with better chances to secure one's re-election, Figure 2 suggests a higher uncertainty about the relation, due to both a smaller effect size and larger credible intervals of the coefficient as compared to MPs' parliamentary activity.

### *Progressive career prospects*

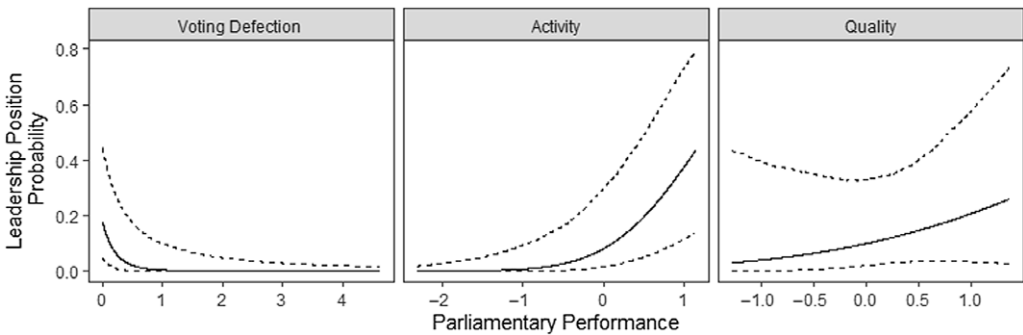
Next, we turn to MPs' chances to obtain a parliamentary leadership position. In line with our theoretical expectations, Table 1 (right part) demonstrates that MPs' voting defection is negatively related with their chances for parliamentary promotion, while their previous activity and quality of parliamentary work are positively associated with the probability to get selected for a higher parliamentary office. However, the level of uncertainty for these relations differs for the three coefficients. A posterior probability each above 99.9 percent provides very strong support for hypotheses **H1b** and **H2b**, suggesting that MPs that were less loyal or less active are less likely to get selected for a parliamentary leadership position. The empirical results, however, force us to reject **H3b** since the probability for a positive relation between MPs' quality of parliamentary work and incumbents' promotion to higher office is below conventional standards. Apparently, qualitative aspects of MPs' previous parliamentary performance matter little for incumbent MPs' chances to get selected for higher parliamentary office.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup>Tables A1 and A2 in the appendix below report the results for simple probit regression models.

<sup>17</sup>Note again that our operationalization of quantitative and qualitative aspects of MPs' parliamentary performance are not only based on different evaluation criteria of MPs' parliamentary work (quantity vs. quality and effectiveness) and the public visibility of activities (including less formal activities in party group meetings etc. or not) but also on the measurement approach (count of formal activities vs. peer assessment among MPs). We can therefore not exclude that the measurement approach has also an impact on our findings. However, we also included an alternative measure of qualitative parliamentary performance as a robustness check (see below).



**Figure 2.** Predicted probabilities for MPs’ chances to get re-elected due to changes in (1) voting defection (original scale), (2) parliamentary activity (factor score with mean = 0 and SD = 0.6) and (3) quality of parliamentary work (factor score with mean = 0 and SD = 0.3).



**Figure 3.** Predicted probabilities for MPs’ chances to obtain a parliamentary leadership position due to changes in (1) voting defection (original scale), (2) parliamentary activity (factor score with mean = 0 and SD = 0.6) and quality of parliamentary work (factor score with mean = 0 and SD = 0.3).

Figure 3 again provides more insights about the practical relevance of these findings based on the calculation of the predicted probabilities. It shows that the impact of MPs’ previous voting defection and their activity level can be very substantial. A typical MP that is loyal to his/her party 99.5 percent of the time has an average probability below 2 percent to obtain a parliamentary leadership position, while that would be approximately 17 percent if (s)he had never defected from his/her parliamentary party.

In a similar vein, a typical MP with a median parliamentary activity can be expected to increase his/her average probability to rise to higher parliamentary office from around 8 percent to above 42 percent. Even though high levels of parliamentary activity and low levels of voting defection are not sufficient conditions for average MPs to receive a higher parliamentary office, it is important to keep in mind that a typical MP can multiply his/her average probability to obtain a parliamentary leadership position by a factor of more than 5 (parliamentary activity) or even 9 (voting defection) in the previously described scenarios.

Finally, the steeper curve for the expected impact of MPs’ previous voting defection on their probability to receive a parliamentary leadership position (left pane, Figure 3) as compared to their chances to get re-elected (left pane, Figure 2) seems to suggest that party loyalty is more important for higher parliamentary office than for incumbents’ re-election.

The robustness of these findings was assessed in several ways. First we employed separate models assuming the absence of any sample selection bias. Second, we controlled for additional explanatory factors regarding Belgium's party system, linguistic divide, and MPs' previous committee experience. Third, we also ran analyses without those MPs who got elected in another parliament or became ministers (alternative career goals). Fourth, we tested for potential differences between parliaments by also running the analysis for members of the Belgian federal Chamber of Representatives only (despite the limited sample size). All robustness checks lead to very similar results (see online Appendix).

However, two further robustness checks result in more unexpected findings at first sight. On the one hand, less loyal MPs might be more likely to get re-elected in another, arguably less competitive parliament such as the Belgian Senate, the European Parliament or within the linguistic communities (see online Appendix). This finding may point to the more complex relation between MPs and their political party in a context where many parliaments allow for 'level-hopping' of MPs. That means party leaders could more easily 'degrade' less loyal (but eventually electorally valuable) incumbents to an electoral list for a parliament that offers fewer career opportunities in the future. Alternatively, the multi-level setting could allow less loyal MPs to 'save' their political career by deliberately choosing to stand for re-election in a less competitive parliament (e.g. at the end of the parliamentary career). Since this only concerns eight MPs in our sample, the eventually valuable underlying mechanisms should be analysed in more detail by future studies that analyse a larger sample of MPs trying to get elected in potential second-order parliaments. On the other hand, we also employed two alternative operationalizations of MPs' qualitative parliamentary performance to get a deeper understanding of the underlying mechanisms. While a measure based on qualitative evaluations of Dutch-speaking MPs' parliamentary work by journalists confirms our null-findings with regard to incumbents' re-election, they point to a positive relation with MPs' rise to higher parliamentary office (see online Appendix). Additionally we further separated our measure of MPs' quality of parliamentary work into its underlying dimensions (see above). The analysis indicates that the null-findings for qualitative parliamentary performance are due to conflicting relations between its constitutive dimensions (policy-making effectiveness and content of parliamentary work). In fact, it appears that only MPs' policy-making effectiveness (but not its content) is positively related with both re-election and higher parliamentary office (see online Appendix). These findings may point to the importance of the prior accessibility of qualitative evaluations and the prevalence of evaluation criteria focussing on MPs' effectiveness. We believe that both findings (i.e. level-hopping and the study of the underlying dimensions of qualitative parliamentary performance) provide particularly promising avenues for future research on the relation between MPs' parliamentary performance and their subsequent re-election/achievement of higher office.

## Conclusion

Although the behaviour of politicians is usually expected to be driven by personal career objectives, empirical research on the relationship between MPs' behaviour and their chances to realize static *and* progressive career ambitions is scarce. This article investigated this relationship by employing a holistic approach. First of all, we examined both MPs' re-election and parliamentary promotion prospects, which allowed us to take a potential selection bias into account. Second, we compared the influence of three aspects of MPs' previous parliamentary performance that have typically been examined separately, being MPs' loyalty to the party, their (quantitative) parliamentary activity and the quality of their parliamentary work.

Overall, our results support the general expectation that incumbent MPs' previous parliamentary performance matters for their subsequent career trajectories. However, this is only the case for those aspects of parliamentary performance that are most publicly visible to voters and political party leaders. On the one hand, we find that parliamentary activity and party loyalty are both substantial predictors for MPs' chances to get re-elected and promoted to higher parliamentary office. On the other hand, however, our analyses do not provide sufficient empirical evidence for a positive relation between MPs' qualitative parliamentary performance (largely behind the scenes) and their achievement of static or progressive career ambitions. Note that hard-working MPs may also choose to progress to professions outside of politics (e.g. in private companies) which are not accounted for in this study.

The finding that representative institutions in Belgium recruit their members at least partially on a meritocratic basis is particularly relevant since it has been argued that the outflow of qualified personnel can be reduced when MPs' career prospects depend on their past performance (Ferejohn, 1986; Shepsle, 1988). A few side notes are, however, in place here. First, while Belgian parliaments may be particularly likely to reward those MPs who have been highly active, this is less true for MPs who focus more on qualitative aspects of their parliamentary work. In other words: MPs who aspire to maintain their position or climb the parliamentary career ladder seem to benefit most from being highly active and loyal, and not from investing a lot of time and resources (often behind the screens) in parliamentary work that is effective or qualitative. Note also, that these findings contrast with earlier findings about voters' rewards for MPs' quality of parliamentary work (see Bouteca *et al.*, 2019) suggesting that voters' preferences for the parliamentary work of individual MPs may be insufficiently taken into account with regard to MPs' parliamentary career prospects. This in itself offers a rather bleak picture of the role of elected representatives in democratic policy-making and the degree to which MPs are rewarded for making meaningful contributions. Moreover, the fact that turnover rates and parliamentary career stagnation are likely to be higher among MPs that are less loyal to the party (while overall party loyalty is very high) may result in further reinforcing the power of political parties in an already heavily party-dominated environment (De Winter and Dumont, 2006). Taken together, career-related incentives could shift the balance towards visible but more symbolic activities (instead of quality and effectiveness) and even further reinforce parliamentary party unity during plenary votes. Although we should refrain from making claims about evolutions throughout time, these findings in themselves are relevant for debates on an alleged 'decline of parliaments' (see Martin *et al.* (2014)).

Our study has a number of implications for future research. Since our analysis shows that parliamentary activity and party loyalty are relevant predictors for their career prospects, research should avoid an exclusive focus on only one of these aspects of MPs' behaviour. The findings for the Belgian case furthermore indicate that voting defection may be relevant for MPs' parliamentary careers even when levels of party unity are very high. We argued that Belgium is a rather typical example of a party-centred list PR system and that we would expect our findings quite likely to hold in many other (similar) European contexts. Still, however, further research is needed to allow generalizations over different contexts and other periods of time. This may also include alternative measures of qualitative aspects of MPs' parliamentary performance that pay particular attention to potential differences between the impact of their underlying dimensions such as the content of MPs' parliamentary work as compared to their legislative effectiveness.

**Supplementary material.** To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755773922000340>.

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## Appendix A

**Table A1** Parliamentary performance and incumbents' re-election. Probit model coefficients with standard errors in parentheses

	Dependent variable:
	Re-election
Activity	0.515*** (0.162)
Quality	0.363 (0.272)
Voting Defection (log)	−0.412 <sup>†</sup> (0.230)
Committee Chair 2014	0.332 (0.203)
PPG Leader 2014	0.391 (0.379)
Bureau Member 2014	0.407 (0.323)
Minister	0.204 (0.302)
Female	0.163 (0.162)
Seniority	−0.385*** (0.145)
Opposition	−0.121 (0.196)
PPG Size Change	0.045** (0.018)
Media Coverage (log)	0.560** (0.238)
Mayor	0.779*** (0.212)
Incumbency Time	−1.270** (0.615)
Substitute 2014	−0.560 <sup>†</sup> (0.294)
Electoral Vulnerability	−0.719** (0.341)
Parliament of Wallonia	−0.125 (0.221)
Flemish Parliament	0.335 <sup>†</sup> (0.182)
Constant	1.586** (0.750)
Observations	325
Log Likelihood	−183.245
Akaike Inf. Crit.	404.490

Note: <sup>†</sup> $P < 0.1$ .

\*\* $P < 0.05$ .

\*\*\* $P < 0.01$ .

**Table A2.** Parliamentary performance and incumbents' rise to higher parliamentary office. Probit model coefficients with standard errors in parentheses

<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
Parl. Leadership Position	
Activity	0.671*** (0.248)
Quality	0.252 (0.393)
Voting Defection (log)	-0.989** (0.440)
Committee Chair 2014	0.979*** (0.272)
PPG Leader 2014	0.930** (0.413)
Bureau Member 2014	0.867** (0.403)
Minister	-0.176 (0.402)
Female	-0.181 (0.237)
Seniority	0.269 (0.215)
Opposition	0.163 (0.306)
PPG Size Change	0.015 (0.023)
Constant	-1.362*** (0.379)
Observations	158
Log Likelihood	-82.854
Akaike Inf. Crit.	189.708

Note: \* $P < 0.1$ .

\*\* $P < 0.05$ .

\*\*\* $P < 0.01$ .

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