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Article

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Abstract
It has been well established that politicians attack their competitors to reach their political goals. As such, there is a considerable amount of literature on their attack behaviour. However, this literature almost exclusively investigates attack behaviour during campaigns, and so far, few studies have addressed the nature of attacks during more routine times in parliaments. This article aims to fill this gap by examining in-parliament attack behaviour and, more specifically, the gender characteristics of attacks. It is theorised that women are less likely to attack and be attacked than men due to the stereotypical gender roles. However, it is anticipated that this compliance to stereotypes diminishes as proximity to elections increases, resulting in women engaging in attacks as much as men. To limit the cost of their divergence, attacks employed by and toward women are expected to be more civil. Lastly, this study argues that adherence to gender stereotypes is stronger in countries with candidate-centred parliamentary systems than party-centred ones. This study finds support for the theoretical framework using longitudinal data on individual attacks in the parliaments of Belgium, Croatia, and the UK. Results confirm that politicians adhere to gender stereotypical roles in parliaments, with women attacking and being targeted less than men, and when women do attack or are targeted, less incivility is employed. Proximity to elections makes both women and men more hostile, but women lower the cost of their increasing attack behaviour by using less incivility, unlike men who increasingly opt for uncivil attacks closer to elections. Additionally, these findings strongly apply in the candidate-centred system of the UK, whereas in the party-centred system of Belgium and Croatia, hardly any support for the theory can be found.

1. Introduction

Politicians use attacks to discredit their competitors and to move toward their political goals. For example, politicians may attack, hoping to lower competitors' approval to secure re-election, entry to office, and policy implementation. As such, much has been written regarding individuals that attack during campaigns, especially through the lens of gender. By surveying politicians, studies have shown how men prioritise attacks during campaigns more compared to women (Herrnson & Lucas, 2006; Maier & Nai, 2021). On the other hand, content studies of campaign messages show that women are

known to engage in attacks equally (e.g., Auter & Fine, 2016; Banwart & Bystrom, 2022; Maier, 2015; Walter, 2013) or even more than men (e.g., Evans et al., 2014; Wagner et al., 2017). Despite this abundance of studies, we lack knowledge regarding the gender characteristics of attacks outside campaigns.

Only a handful of recent studies have tackled possible attack behaviour outside campaigns. Focusing on parliamentary speeches, these studies highlighted that men use *adversarial* (Hargrave & Langengen, 2021) and *negative* (Haselmayer et al., 2021) speeches more often than women, which is in line with stereotypical gender roles that see men as more aggressive or dominant (Eagly &

Karau, 2002). Although these studies provide a key indication of the gender characteristics of attackers in parliaments, that is, that men probably attack more compared to women, we still do not know who is at the receiving end of these attacks nor how attack behaviour evolves throughout the electoral cycle. Additionally, far too little attention has been paid to how these attacks are executed, especially when attacks diverge from expected gender roles. For example, women in the parliamentary opposition may choose to attack since it is their role to hold the government accountable (De Giorgi & Ilonszki, 2018). Lastly, we still lack a comparative perspective on this subject because previous studies focused their analyses on single-country cases. This limits our knowledge on the subject, given that gender can play a different role across different political systems.

To provide an understanding of these open questions, I follow the role congruency theory of prejudice by Eagly and Karau (2002), which argues that deviations from stereotypical gender roles may cause women to face prejudice. As society considers women as *communal* (e.g., kind) and men as *agentic* (e.g., aggressive), female politicians showing agentic behaviour may end up not reaching their political goals. This is why men are usually considered more likely to attack than women, and this notion appears to hold in parliaments looking at the forms of speeches (Hargrave & Langengen, 2021; Haselmayer et al., 2021). The first aim of this article is to extend this theoretical framework toward targets of attacks. I expect that gender stereotypes also apply to targets, with women receiving fewer attacks than men. Furthermore, I argue that this gender-conforming behaviour loses its importance as proximity to elections increases, with women and men engaging equally in attack behaviour (Maier, 2015; Walter, 2013).

The second aim of this article is to investigate the manner of attacks in cases when women do assume an *agentic* role, both as an attacker and as a target. I expect incivility, which can be present or absent in an attack, to be the key. Women avoid the cost of showing *agentic* behaviour by using less incivility when they attack compared to men. In turn, all politicians avoid the cost of targeting women, perceived as *communal*, by using less incivility. Lastly, I integrate this framework with the literature on the politics of legislative debate (Fernandes et al., 2021), arguing that adherence to stereotypical gender roles is stronger in parliaments oriented at candidates rather than parties.

These hypotheses are tested for the parliaments of Belgium (2010–2020), Croatia (2010–2021), and the UK (2010–2020). I use data on attacks and incivility employed by individual politicians during parliamentary question time sessions (QTSs). Results show that women are indeed less likely to attack or be attacked than their male colleagues. Women are also less likely to use incivility when they attack, and are less likely to be attacked in an uncivil manner when compared to men. Furthermore, both men and women engage in attacks more frequently

as elections approach, but women compensate for this by using less incivility, unlike men, who are more likely to employ incivility closer to elections. Lastly, the comparative design of this study confirms that adherence to gender stereotypes is much stronger in the UK, a country with a political system in which candidates independently run for office in single-member districts. In the party-driven systems of Belgium and Croatia, in which citizens vote for parties and not candidates, politicians are less likely to conform to gender stereotypes. As such, these results provide a valuable understanding of the role gender can play in attacks and the incivility used in parliamentary venues.

2. Attack Politics in Parliaments: Gender Perspective

To analyse the role of gender in parliamentary attacks, I rely on the role congruency theory of prejudice by Eagly and Karau (2002). This theory argues that women face prejudice based on (a) how they behave (descriptive prejudice) and (b) how they should behave (prescriptive prejudice). These prejudices are rooted in stereotypical gender roles that see women as *communal* (i.e., kind, sympathetic, friendly, gentle) and men as *agentic* (i.e., aggressive, dominant, self-confident). Therefore, for instance, if a woman diverges from *communal* behaviour toward *agentic* behaviour, this would negatively impact her reputation (Eagly & Karau, 2002, p. 576).

This broad notion was used by scholars who explored gender differences in attacks during campaigns. Through a survey method with politicians, some studies have demonstrated that female candidates are hesitant to employ attacks in their campaigning strategies (Herrnson & Lucas, 2006; Maier & Nai, 2021). However, content studies of campaigns generally show women to be equally negative as men (Bystrom, 2004). For example, a study of the recent 2020 US Senate race has shown that both female and male candidates used an equal number of attacks in TV ads (Banwart & Bystrom, 2022). At the same time, experts rated Trump's and Clinton's campaigns during the 2016 presidential elections as negative (Nai & Maier, 2018). Furthermore, a study on attack behaviour in party broadcasts in the UK, Netherlands, and Germany found no differences between the attacks made by parties with female and male leaders (Walter, 2013); a similar finding can be observed in German television debates (Maier, 2015). Some studies have even shown female politicians to be more likely to attack than men (e.g., Evans et al., 2014; Wagner et al., 2017). These non-stereotypical findings were explained by the hypothesis that women try to escape *communal* stereotypes by attacking equally (or more frequently) to show voters that they are fit for political roles that are considered *agentic* (Gordon et al., 2003).

Despite these non-stereotypical findings in campaigns, European literature on attacks outside these periods has identified more gender-conforming attack behaviour. More specifically, Hargrave and Langengen

(2021) and Haselmayer et al. (2021) recently looked at differences in speech styles between female and male members of parliament (MPs) in the national parliaments of the UK and Austria, respectively. While controlling for already established predictors, such as the difference between government and opposition, they identify that women employ less adversarial and negative speeches than men. These findings are also in line with Ketelaars (2019), who surveyed Belgian politicians (including members of the parliament) outside campaigns, finding that men prioritise attacking strategies more than women. Therefore, unlike campaigns, these studies corroborate the expectations set by the role congruence theory.

The causes of contrasting behaviour in parliaments and campaigns may be linked to the more versatile approach female politicians are expected to take to achieve their political goals. In other words, female politicians are caught in a double bind between behaving in a *communal* manner (as is expected because they are women) and an *agentic* manner (as is expected because they are politicians). Given that citizens perceive politicians as *agentic*, female politicians need to escape *communal* stereotypes during campaigns by attacking as much as men to secure re-election (Gordon et al., 2003; Maier, 2015). However, in parliaments, politicians compete over policy goals, such as pushing for a specific issue to be high on the agenda (Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2010) or trying to acquire ownership over issues (Otjes & Louwerse, 2018). As such, female politicians may evaluate that *communal* behaviour benefits achieving their policy aspirations, while *agentic* behaviour benefits their re-election aspirations.

However, this argument raises the question of why female politicians would conform to *communal* behaviour in parliaments if they already show *agentic* behaviour during campaigns. The cause of this may be due to parliamentary venues traditionally being workplaces that adhere to gender stereotypes (Erikson & Verge, 2022). Therefore, female politicians opting for *communal* behaviour in a dominantly gender-conforming venue such as parliaments provide a greater chance to profile certain policies higher on the agenda or secure their implementation. This is in contrast to campaigning venues, where expectations come from voters who see politics and politicians as *agentic*, which leads to a shift in female politicians' behaviour. Male politicians, in turn, can opt for *agentic* behaviour both in parliaments and campaign venues, as both align with their stereotypical gender roles (parliament) and expectations of them as politicians (campaigns). This is why I hypothesise that women will be less likely to attack in parliaments when compared to men (H1a). However, because of the inevitable elections and the double bind that encourages women to engage in *agentic* behaviour during campaigns, it is expected that the effect of H1a decreases as proximity to the upcoming election increases (H1b).

H1a: Female politicians are less likely to attack compared to male politicians in parliaments.

H1b: The effect of H1a decreases as proximity to elections increases.

Still, if parliaments dominantly represent venues for gender-conforming behaviour to maximise political goals, it is unclear how this translates toward targets of parliamentary attacks. This is why I extend the theoretical framework by arguing that stereotypical gender roles apply not only to the mere decision to attack (or not) but also to a decision of whom to target in an attack. Namely, if most politicians abide by gender-stereotypical behaviour in parliament, with men attacking more than women (H1a), it is also very likely that men are targeted more than women. This decision to attack men more frequently also stems from the role congruency theory, whereby female politicians, due to their association with *communal* roles, are not seen as possible targets of attacks that would otherwise place them in an *agentic* context. Therefore, if an attacker targets a woman, who is not associated with *agentic* norms like men, this may backfire, causing the attacker to be perceived with disapproval because the decision of who to target diverges from expected gender roles (for a somewhat similar claim, see Haselmayer et al., 2021, p. 6). As such, attacking women who are seen as *communal* can be costly for the attacker. This is unlike attacks that target men who are seen as *agentic*, so targeting them and placing them in an agentic framework is expected and can even be beneficial (Fridkin et al., 2009). This is why I argue that female politicians are less likely to be attacked than male politicians in parliaments (H2a). Regardless, given the expectation that behaviour tends to be more *agentic* due to the increasing proximity of the election campaign and vote-seeking goals, it may be that the boomerang effect of attacking female politicians also decreases closer to elections as more attacks are issued. Hence, I argue that the impact of H2a decreases as proximity to elections increases (H2b).

H2a: Female politicians are less likely to be targeted compared to male politicians in parliaments.

H2b: The effect of H2a decreases as proximity to elections increases.

At the same time, there are other predictors for behaviour in parliaments, such as a politician being part of the opposition or the government (Hix & Noury, 2016). We know from the parliamentary literature that the opposition is expected to hold the government accountable (De Giorgi & Ilonszki, 2018). This is because the government holds the keys to the office and has policy perks, which makes it a target of attacks (sometimes even from the majority benches; e.g., Kam, 2009; Martin & Whitaker, 2019). Therefore, depending on their role

in the political system (i.e., cabinet, majority, or opposition), politicians may feel pressured to behave contrary to the gender stereotypes in parliaments. For instance, women in the opposition may be required to be critical and employ *agentic* behaviour. Their role is hence at odds with the *communal* perception expected of them in gender-conforming parliaments, which may hurt their policy goals (H1a). Similarly, female politicians in the government, due to their position, are expected to be targets of attacks. However, because of gender stereotypes, aggressive behaviour towards female cabinet members may backfire (H2a).

This begs the following question: How do politicians balance the costs and the benefits of attacking and being targeted when they diverge from gender stereotypes in parliaments? I expect incivility, seen as a communication interaction that violates social norms (see more in Walter, 2021), to be a possible answer. To appease gender stereotypes, there will be less incivility whenever women do attack or are targeted (H3a/H4a). For example, when the government's policy fails, female politicians in the opposition will likely have to engage in attack behaviour. However, to limit the cost of diverting from the gender stereotype (which may cause prejudice and hurt their goals), female politicians will try to be as polite as possible. In turn, their male colleagues are expected to employ more incivility due to the *agentic* nature of incivility not being costly for them (Bauer et al., 2022; Goovaerts & Turkenburg, 2021). Furthermore, I also expect female targets to be less likely to receive an uncivil attack since campaigning studies show that the presence of women in political debates lowers incivility (Maier & Renner, 2018). This means that all politicians, when forced to target a woman, will restrain from uncivil language. In turn, when targets are males, incivility is more likely to be employed. Lastly, if there is pressure closer to the election to increase non-stereotypical gender behaviour (H1b/H2b), then it is also plausible to expect that the usage of incivility in attacks decreases to compensate for such divergence (H3b/H4b).

H3a: Female politicians are less likely to attack using incivility compared to male politicians in parliaments.

H3b: The effect of H3a increases as proximity to elections increases.

H4a: Female politicians are less likely to be targeted with incivility compared to male politicians in parliaments.

H4b: The effect of H4a increases as proximity to elections increases.

Lastly, while it is expected that there is gender-conforming behaviour in parliamentary venues, there may be differences across different systems (Hargrave & Langengen, 2021, p. 583). This is why I borrow the distinction from the emerging literature on the politics of legislative debate regarding candidate vs party-centred systems (Fernandes et al., 2021). If citizens elect candidates, there is more importance on individual politicians and their own reputations during parliamentary debates (Proksch & Slapin, 2012). However, if citizens elect parties, there is a stronger emphasis on the party brand that diminishes individual characteristics. For example, scholars have shown how in the candidate-driven parliament of the UK, there can be a disconnect between what politicians from the same party feature on their issue agendas (Bevan & John, 2016) with individual politicians focusing on representing their individual constituencies (Blumenau & Damiani, 2021). This is unlike the party-driven parliaments of Belgium, for example, where there is strong party discipline concerning issues that need to be addressed (Peeters et al., 2021).

Because of this, I argue that politicians in candidate-dominated systems are more prone to gender-congruent attack behaviour because there is more emphasis on them as individuals. As such, if female politicians in candidate-driven parliaments divert from stereotypical behaviour, there is much on the line. For example, they may face the consequence of not securing a policy that would be beneficial for their electoral constituency. They may also have to deal with disapproval from the party leadership that may prevent them from seeking re-election in a constituency, especially if there are no gender-related legislative quotas to secure certainty of women re-appearing on ballots. Such a context is unlike party-driven systems where parties provide a certain level of protection from individual gender-incongruent attack behaviour. For example, even if female politicians face the cost of diverting from gender stereotypes in these systems, they can still secure their policy through their party and rely on voters electing their parties, not them individually. This may further be enhanced with gender quotas which would ensure female politicians' spots on a ballot to seek re-election despite diverting from stereotypical gender roles.

H5a: Female politicians adhere more to gender-congruent attack behaviour in candidate-centred compared to party-centred parliaments.

3. Methodology

3.1. Cases

I test my expectations on parliamentary QTSs from the (federal) parliaments of Belgium (*Vragenuur*), Croatia (*Aktualno Prijepodne*), and the UK (*Prime Minister's Questions* [PMQs]). I work with these debates because they present high gain opportunities for politicians to reach their goals due to the heavy media exposure QTSs tend to receive (Osnabrügge et al., 2021; Salmond, 2014). This makes it a perfect case of parliamentary politics to explore whether there are gender differences in attack

strategies that seek to fulfil politicians' goals. This was empirically demonstrated in several studies conducted on QTSs from Belgium (Sevenans & Vliegenthart, 2016; Vliegenthart & Walgrave, 2011), Croatia (Kukec, 2022; Poljak, 2022), and the UK (Bevan & John, 2016; Seeberg, 2020) which have shown how politicians use QTSs to fulfil their policy aspiration, such as placing issues higher on the agenda and trying to pursue voters to elect them at the upcoming elections.

Furthermore, I work with Belgium, Croatia, and the UK because of vast differences in (a) how these QTSs are structured across these three countries and (b) possibilities (and incentives) for female representatives to engage in QTSs. This is important as it allows to test the theory in a robust setting across highly different cases, ensuring a certain level of generalisation while lowering possible selection bias (e.g., studying a specific context of low female representation, which can have implications for parliamentary behaviour; see Sarah & Mona, 2008). Given the importance of these differences, I will reflect on them in greater detail.

Regarding QTS differences, these are highly rooted in the electoral (party) system of each country. Namely, due to the proportional elections where citizens elect parties, the parliaments of Belgium and Croatia are an example of party-driven venues. This party-driven context is reflected in parliamentary procedures where it is parties, and not individual politicians, that are granted slots to ask questions to the cabinet during QTSs (weekly in Belgium; quarterly in Croatia). In Belgium, which can be described as a partitocracy, each major party is granted an equal number of slots during QTSs. In Croatia, which does not have such a strong and stable party system as Belgium, slots during QTSs are granted based on the share of seats. This rule favours two major competing parties in Croatia that employ strong party discipline in QTSs (see Kukec, 2022). As a result, politicians are usually expected to follow party lines during QTSs in both countries. For example, studies from Belgium (De Vet & Devroe, 2022) and Croatia (Šinko & Širinić, 2017) have highlighted how female politicians during (plenary) QTSs tend to profile soft issues, unlike men who deal with hard issues (see also Bäck & Debus, 2019). This is a likely outcome of a strong party discipline during high-profile debates, such as QTSs, where parties select politicians to raise issues that fit their profile (De Vet & Devroe, 2022). While both countries allow preferential voting, this mechanism provides little incentive for politicians to deviate from their parties, as entry to the parliament based on preferential voting is difficult to achieve in both Belgium (Van Erkel & Thijssen, 2016) and Croatia (Picula, 2020). Both countries also have gender quotas that try to ensure that the share of women and men on ballots remains fairly equal, providing a safety net for female parliamentarians already elected to (possibly) re-appear on a party's ballot.

The UK parliament, on the other hand, can best be described as candidate-driven due to the majoritarian elections where citizens elect politicians in single-member districts (Proksch & Slapin, 2012). This doesn't mean that parties are not as important as in Belgium and Croatia, as they still play a major role in getting a politician elected to the parliament (Blumenau & Damiani, 2021, p. 779), and no gender-related legislative quotas are imposed on parties when determining who will run for a party in constituencies. However, once inside the parliament, parties have an incentive to let politicians act in their own personal interest and that of the constituency they represent (Blumenau & Damiani, 2021; Proksch & Slapin, 2012). This is in line with parliamentary procedures as QTSs in the UK (specifically PMQs) are structured by individual questions asked to the prime minister (PM; or a cabinet member when the PM is absent). Only the opposition leaders are granted secure slots to question the PM, while other members who want to question the PM are decided by a random shuffle. This provides less interference from the party leadership and allows politicians to have a certain level of autonomy during QTSs.

Regarding differences in (descriptive) female representation, although all three countries had both male and female PMs, ministers, and party leaders participating in QTSs, the representation of female politicians during QTSs differs vastly (see Table 1). Belgium has a high share of females elected in the parliament, with an average of 39.2% for the last four elections. However, looking at the randomly selected sample of QTSs during the two full parliamentary terms that took place in the 2010s, female politicians were generally underrepresented by nine percentage points in QTSs compared to the share of how many were elected. In turn, Croatia has a significantly lower share of elected female representatives than Belgium (the average for the last five elections is 18%); however, they tend to be overrepresented during QTSs in the last decade. Finally, the UK is somewhere between Belgium and Croatia regarding elected female representatives, with an average of 27% of females elected for the past five elections. Furthermore, unlike in Belgium and Croatia, representation during QTSs in the UK (determined by a random shuffle) generally ensures a fairly equal representation of female MPs during QTSs. As such, with this case selection, we capture parliaments that typically provide lower (Belgium), equal (UK), or higher (Croatia) possibilities for female politicians to participate in QTSs, which makes the chance of selection bias lower than if we had worked with one specific parliamentary setting.

3.2. Speech data during QTSs

To explore attack behaviour and incivility usage longitudinally during QTSs in all three countries, I randomly sampled one QTS per month from January 2010 to December 2020 (2021 for Croatia). This resulted in a total of 261 QTSs in my sample, which covered all quarterly QTSs in Croatia (N = 43; 100%) and 1/3 of all weekly QTSs in

Table 1. The share of women elected to the parliament and the average share of women that participated in QTSs.

Country	Term	Share of elected female politicians *	Average share of female politicians per QTS **	Difference
Belgium	2007–2010	36.7	37.2	+0.5
	2010–2014	39.3	30.4	−8.9
	2014–2018	39.3	30.5	−8.8
	2018–2023	41.3	41.4	+0.1
Croatia	2007–2011	20.9	29.5	+8.6
	2011–2015	19.9	23.4	+3.5
	2015–2016	15.2	16.7	+1.5
	2016–2020	12.6	20.4	+7.8
	2020–2024	23.2	30.4	+7.2
UK	2005–2010	19.8	18.1	−1.7
	2010–2015	22.0	23.3	+1.3
	2015–2017	29.4	28.9	−0.5
	2017–2019	32.0	34.8	+2.8
	2019–2024	33.8	28.5	−5.3

Notes: * Based on: Institute for the Equality of Women and Men (2022) for Belgium (*Chamber of Representatives*); Šinko (2016) for Croatia; Allen (2020) for the UK (*House of Commons*). ** Indicates average share of females that participate per QTS in the sampled period (N = 261; see Section 3.2). More detailed descriptive results are available in Appendix C in Supplementary File 1.

Belgium (N = 103; 30.4% out of all QTSs) and the UK (N = 115; 32.7%). To generate raw data on individual politicians who attacked and were targeted within these QTSs (and whether incivility was involved), I scraped transcripts of sampled QTSs from official parliamentary websites where units of observation constitute every speech contribution during the sessions. Protocol speeches such as speakers moderating the debate (only in Croatia) or the UK's PMs listing their engagements at the start of every PMQ were not included in this data (Belgium N = 6,634; Croatia N = 5,679; UK N = 7,731).

Four coders, together with the author, performed a quantitative content analysis on these speech contributions in which the main goal was to collect information on attacks (a six-week training process with reliability scores is presented in Appendix A in Supplementary File 1). Coders had to carefully read each speech contribution during QTSs and identify (a) if an attack was present or absent. The codebook defines attacks following Geer (2006) as *all criticism directed toward political competitors* but also extends this to internal attacks as parties are prone to intra-party dissent in parliaments (Kam, 2009), and coalition partners may hold each-other accountable (Martin & Whitaker, 2019). Therefore, attacks can only be directed towards formal political actors seen as individuals (e.g., PM, Ministers), parties (e.g., Conservatives, Labour), or groups of parties (e.g., opposition, coalition, government). Attacks directed towards informal actors (e.g., the army, NGOs, foreign actors) are not coded.

If a speech unit was coded as containing an attack, coders proceeded to code (b) if there was a presence of incivility. As stated in the theory, incivility is opera-tionalised as a communicative interaction between polit-ical actors that violates social norms (Walter, 2021) and is therefore nested in attacks (i.e., attacks can either have incivility present or absent). As such, any form of name-calling, mocking, or insulting language used in attacks on politicians and their policies was coded as inci-vility. Lastly, coders also had to indicate who was on the receiving end of the attack, and in the case of multiple attacks, coders coded each attack separately. As such, in one speech unit, one actor may have attacked both Minister A and B, so coders had to indicate for both tar-gets separately whether they were attacked with inci-vility or not. In total, 6,643 speeches or 33.2% had at least one attack present (Belgium 32.7%; Croatia 36.8; UK 30.9%) and the overall number of attacks was 9,485 (Belgium N = 3,117; Croatia N = 3,339; UK N = 3,029). 1,735 or 18.3% of all attacks made were employed using incivility (Belgium 23.5%; Croatia 15.4%; UK 16.1%). Examples of civil, uncivil, and non-attacks per country are available in Appendix B in Supplementary File 1.

3.3. Final Data

Based on coded speeches, I was able to generate new data to test hypotheses. This data includes all individ-ual politicians that participated during QTSs (Belgium N = 369; Croatia N = 468; UK N = 833) which are observed per each QTS in which they made at least one speech contribution (Belgium N = 2,898; Croatia N = 2,354; UK N = 2,930). As such, on a QTS where 40 politicians spoke (e.g., by asking questions, giving answers, raising points of order), each of these 40 was treated as a unique observation for that particular QTS (see Table 2). This

allows me to explore whether these politicians decided to employ an attack (dependent variable 1 [DV1]) and/or were targeted (dependent variable 2 [DV2]) during that particular QTS. In turn, when values in these two variables are 1, it indicates that an actor employed an attack and/or was targeted; data also indicates if incivility was present in any attacks that were employed (dependent variable 3 [DV3]) or received (dependent variable 4 [DV4]). These four constitute binary dependent variables of my study, each of which corresponds to the four hypotheses, while gender (male vs. female) and proximity to elections (i.e., how many months have passed since the last parliamentary election) present the main independent variables. Speakers that moderate QTSs are omitted because they are bound to attack regularly on QTSs when rules of procedures are not followed.

Four control variables are included in the data: the politician's position (opposition, majority, or cabinet), country, ideology, and inter-annual (yearly) dummies. Ideology is generated using Chapel Hill Expert Survey

(CHES) data (Jolly et al., 2022), where the average ideological scores of each party in the studied period are attributed to their respective members. These scores are then calculated for divergence from the political centre, with 0 indicating the political centre. As such, the bigger the score, the more ideologically extreme politicians are. Descriptive statistics for variables are available in Appendix C in Supplementary File 1.

3.4. Method

I employ logistic regressions due to the binary nature of my DVs. These regressions are run through multilevel models because data is hieratical, with politicians being observed on two levels: parties (N = 39) and QTSs (N = 261). Both levels are entered as random intercepts in the model in which the level of parties is crossed in the level of QTSs in which they appear (Figure 1). This (multiple-membership) multi-level modelling strategy is important because it accounts for the fact that politicians

Table 2. Example of the final dataset.

N	Date	Election proximity	Politician	Party	Gender	Employing attack	Being targeted	Attacking with incivility	Being targeted with incivility
7,954			Theresa May	Con	1	1	1	1	1
7,955			Helen Whately	Con	1	0	0	—	—
7,956			Craig Mackinlay	Con	0	1	0	0	—
7,957			Jeremy Corbyn	Lab	0	1	1	1	0
7,958	13.2.2019	20	Vicky Foxcroft	Lab	1	0	0	—	—
7,959			Luke Pollard	Lab	0	1	0	0	—
7,960			Liz Saville Roberts	PC	1	0	1	—	0
7,961			Ian Blackford	SNP	0	1	1	1	0
7,962			Mhairi Black	SNP	1	0	0	—	—
(…)			(…)	(…)	(…)	(…)	(…)	(…)	(…)

Note: Only a fraction of data is shown for one QTS in the UK.
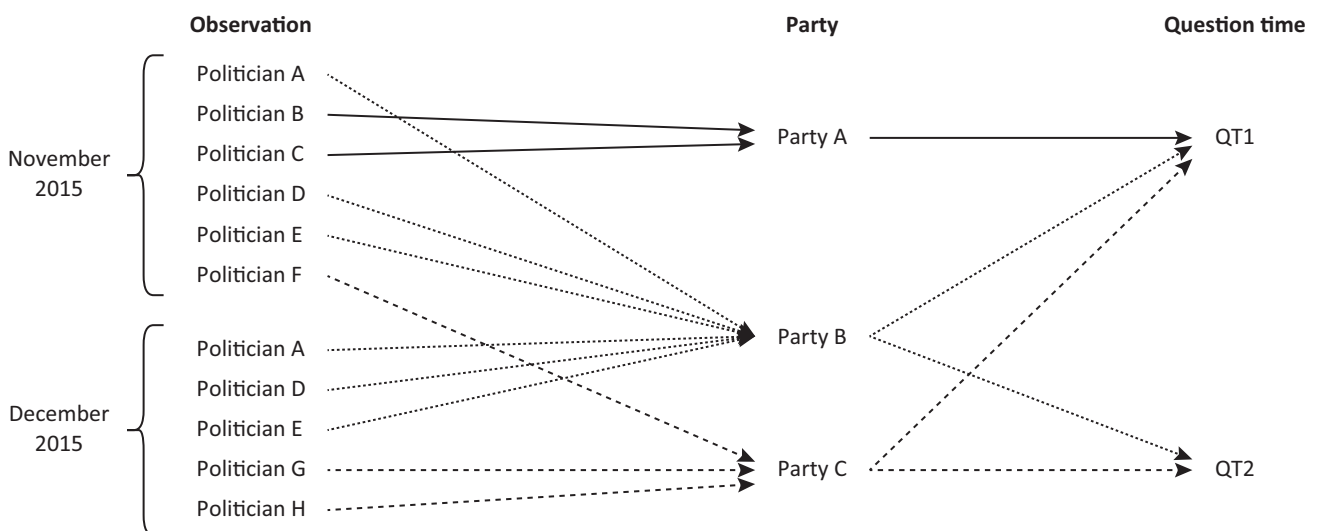

Figure 1. Multi-level model observing politicians per each party crossed in QTSs.

of each party re-appear as observations throughout my data. As such, this modelling strategy prevents biases where politicians from a certain party may skew the results of the model, while in reality, they all belong to one party that re-appears across the dataset (see Chung & Beretvas, 2012). When running these models, I drop all politicians who are independent or whose parties are not featured in the CHES dataset.

4. Results

I will first test my five main hypotheses (H1a–5a), after which I will explore trends as the proximity to parliamentary elections increases (H1b–4b). The results from my main models are reported in Table 1 and Figure 2. As can be seen, the results show support for H1a, H2a, H3a, and H4a (for descriptive analyses, see Appendix D in Supplementary File 1). Odds that female politicians will attack (H1a), be targeted (H2a), use incivility when they attack (H3a), and be targeted with incivility (H4a) during QTSs significantly decrease when compared to their male colleagues. Overall, these multivariate ana-

lyses show strong support for the main theory of this article on how women and men behave according to their stereotypical gender roles in parliamentary attacks. Furthermore, when women need to attack, such as when they are in the opposition, we can expect them to be less likely to employ incivility. Lastly, when women are at the receiving end of attacks, there is a greater chance that these attacks will be civil, unlike those that target men.

To test H5a, that there are also differences among countries, I run models that interact variables on gender and country. For H1a, H2a and H3a, there is a significant difference across countries, with women conforming to gender expectations more in the UK when compared to Belgium and Croatia (see regressions' output in Appendix F in Supplementary File 1). In addition to that, running models separately in each country further confirms this. While coefficients in almost every model go in a negative direction (with lower odds of women engaging in attacks and incivility than men), these are significant in the UK but less so in Belgium and Croatia. Specifically, in Belgium, I can reject all

Table 3. Multi-level regressions testing probabilities of engaging in attacks during QTSs.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
	DV1: Employing attack (1 = Yes)	DV2: Being targeted (1 = Yes)	DV3: Attacking with incivility (1 = Yes)	DV4: Being targeted with incivility (1 = Yes)
	Coef. (S.E.)	Coef. (S.E.)	Coef. (S.E.)	Coef. (S.E.)
Male politicians (ref.)				
Female politicians	**−.210 (.062) ****	**−.405 (.079) *****	**−.473 (.101) *****	**−.312 (.144) ***
Proximity to Elections	.013 (.002) ***	.007 (.002) **	.008 (.003) **	.008 (.005) †
Ideology	1.493 (.855) †	.358 (1.072)	3.072 (.887) **	.056 (1.072)
Opposition MPs (ref.)				
Majority MPs	−2.869 (.102) ***	−3.082 (.158) ***	−1.129 (.157) ***	−.418 (.326)
Cabinet politicians	−2.497 (.107) ***	1.112 (.103) ***	.140 (.148)	.914 (.155) ***
Belgium (ref.)				
Croatia	.382 (.221) †	.568 (.279) *	−.737 (.259) **	−.331 (.247)
UK	−1.028 (.253) ***	.203 (.338)	.126 (.277)	.365 (.279)
Constant	.908 (.291) **	−1.532 (.345) ***	−1.390 (.327) ***	−1.495 (.401) ***
Variance (QTSs)	.364 (.041)	.083 (.146)	.222 (.093)	.260 (.136)
Variance (Parties)	.429 (.096)	.617 (.106)	.430 (.097)	.307 (.129)
N (total)	7,724	7,724	3,140	1,595
N (QTSs)	261	261	261	261
N (min. politicians per QTS)	13	13	3	1
N (max. politicians per QTS)	56	56	37	23
AIC (empty model)	8.140 (9.509)	5.785 (7.707)	3.584 (3.810)	1.938 (1.984)

Notes: †p < 0.1; *p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p < 0.001; Control for yearly differences included.
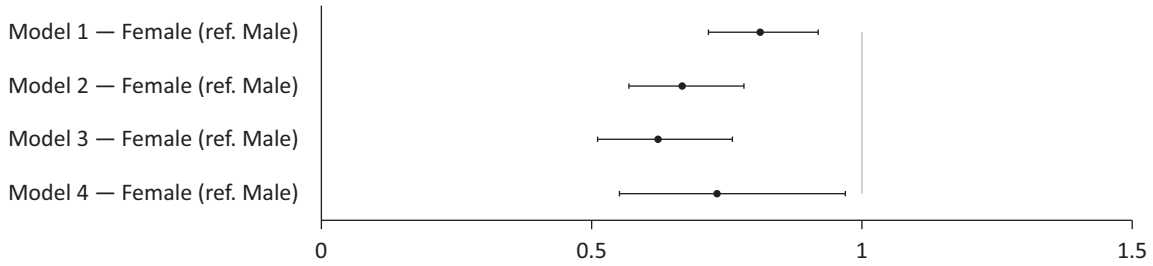
Figure 2. The odds ratio of the gender variable calculated from the models in Table 3. Notes: Ratios < 1 indicate lower odds of women appearing in an attack compared to men; Horizontal lines indicate confidence intervals (95%); Odds ratio for all variables available in Appendix E in Supplementary File 1.

hypotheses. In Croatia, I find support for H2a while H3a is relatively close to being significant (p = 0.071). In contrast to these two countries, H1a, H2a, H3a, and H4a have support in the UK. As such, there is a strong indication that H5a holds and that gender-conforming behaviour is more visible in the candidate-driven compared to the party-driven parliaments.

Finally, I test H1b-H4b, which argued that women's adherence to gender stereotypes decreases as proximity to the upcoming election increases while the protection mechanism of not using incivility increases. Given the null findings of gender-conforming attack behaviour in Belgium and Croatia, I specifically focus on the case of the UK to test these expectations. Namely, I run models that interact variables on gender and proximity to elections, after which I plot predicted probabilities of these interactions to inspect patterns of attack behaviour throughout the electoral cycle (regressions' output and tests for Belgium and Croatia are available in Appendix G in Supplementary File 1).

As is demonstrated in Figure 3, there is mixed support for H1b and H2b. Namely, gender-conforming behaviour expected from H1a and H2a exists regardless of elections, with women attacking and being targeted significantly less than men throughout the UK electoral cycle. Still, comparing increases in average probabilities throughout

the electoral cycle for men and women separately, we can descriptively confirm certain differences. For example, when comparing the first month after an election to the final month before an election, the average probability of an attack being employed increases by 33% for women (from 0.2 to 0.27) and 15.3% for men (from 0.3 to 0.34). As such, on a descriptive level, women do increase their attack behaviour closer to elections more strongly when compared to men. This is likely a result of the double-bind argument in which women have to balance both *communal* and *agentic* norms through time. This is unlike men who can opt for agentic behaviour regardless of elections, making their increase in attack behaviour less profound.

Moving to incivility usage in attacks, we see that women use incivility less often than men, regardless of the electoral cycle in the UK. However, as is visible in Figure 4, there is merit to H3b. Specifically, closer to elections, as women diverge from gender stereotypical roles by increasing attack behaviour (Figure 3), they also try to increase the protection of such divergence by lowering their usage of incivility. This is unlike men whose incivility increases closer to elections. For example, when the first month after an election is compared to the final month before an election, the average probability of incivility being used in an attack decreases by
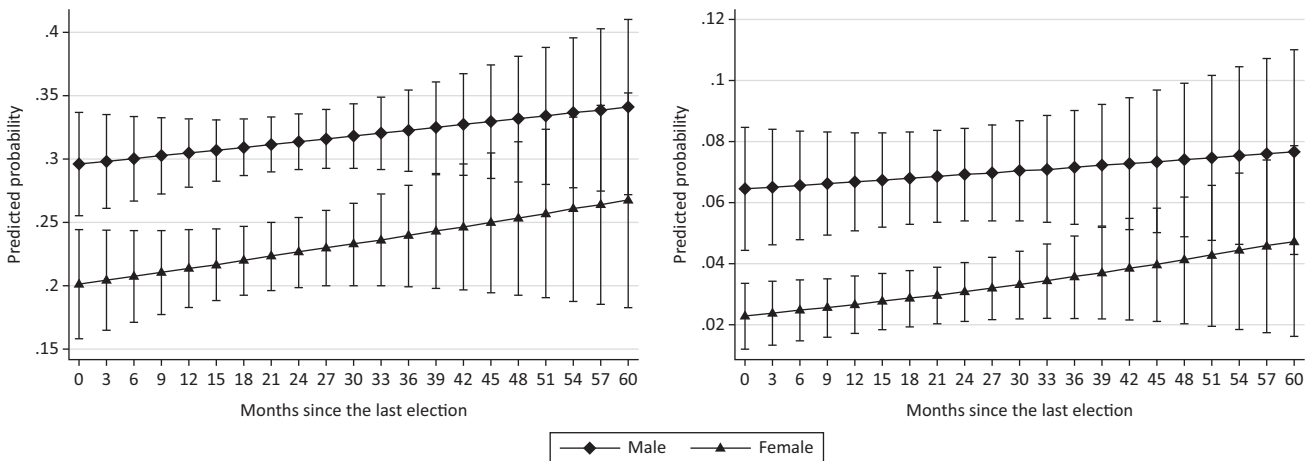

Figure 3. Predicted probabilities for employing attack (left) and being targeted (right) during QTSs in the UK. Note: Vertical lines indicate confidence intervals (90%).
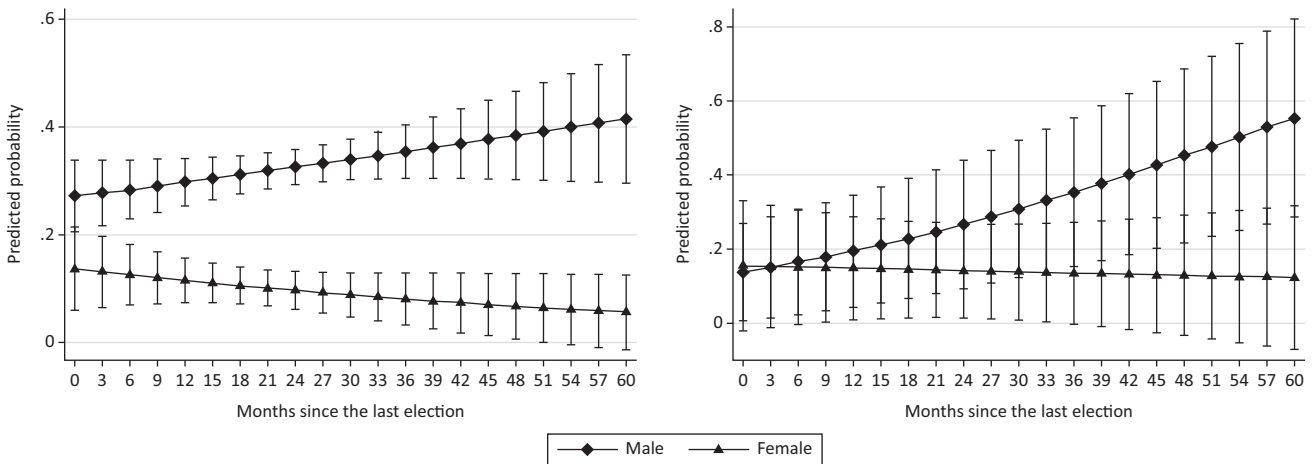
Figure 4. Predicted probabilities for employing attack with incivility (left) and being targeted with incivility (right) during QTSs in the UK. Note: Vertical lines indicate confidence intervals (90%).

57.1% for women (from 0.14 to 0.06) while it increases by 51.9% for men (from 0.27 to 0.41). In turn, regarding H4b, results show how women can be targeted with incivility equally to men, but the increase in receiving uncivil attacks closer to elections is more profound for men, which is in line with H4b. Overall, while expectations regarding H1b–H4b are not confirmed on a level of statistical significance (Appendix G in Supplementary File 1), the evolution of attack behaviour throughout the electoral cycle demonstrated in Figures 3 and 4 shows that there is some ground for the hypothesised outcomes in the UK. This is especially true regarding H3b, with women decreasing and men increasing incivility as the overall attack behaviour increases closer to elections.

4.1. Robustness Checks

To ensure the validity of the results, all binary DVs have been transformed to count DVs that indicate the total number of attacks. Negative binomial regressions are run, and the results corroborate findings from the multilevel logistic regressions (Appendix H in Supplementary File 1). In the UK, the theory shows strong support for men employing more and receiving more attacks than women. In Belgium, H1a is close to statistical significance (p = 0.053), revealing that male politicians in Belgium likely employ more attacks than women. However, for other hypotheses, no support exists, and the same applies to Croatia, where all hypotheses can be rejected using count DVs.

However, to further strengthen the findings that gender differences drive the attack behaviour of politicians in the UK parliament, I run further tests (Appendix I in Supplementary File 1). Namely, I explore the seniority of MPs (i.e., years since the first entry to the parliament) and also their position in the parliament (frontbenchers such as PMs, Cabinet Members, Opposition Leaders, Shadow Ministers, Party Leaders, and Parliamentary Group Leaders, vs. backbenchers who do not hold any

official role in a party or the parliament). Adding these controls to the main models further confirms that it is indeed female politicians who are significantly less likely to attack (H1a), and that when they do, they will be significantly less likely to use incivility (H3a). However, adding control for the position (frontbench vs. backbench) does diminish findings regarding targets (H2a/H4a); compared to backbenchers, frontbenchers receive more attacks, which are more likely to be uncivil in nature.

5. Conclusions

This study contributes to the current negativity literature by providing an overarching theoretical framework that provides us with an understanding of parliamentary attacks from a gender perspective. Namely, in candidate-driven parliaments such as the one in the UK, we can expect attacks to be conditioned on gender, with female politicians attacking less frequently. However, given that female politicians are caught in a double bind by trying to appease expectations of being a woman and a politician, their behaviour during the term is likely to change. As the time during the cycle elapses, women increase agentic behaviour by employing more attacks which may grant them re-election. In turn, while employing more attacks, women lower their usage of incivility as they are likely trying to mitigate possible costs for their divergence from stereotypical gender expectations. This behaviour is distinct from male politicians, who also increase attacks during the term, but their incivility usage increases closer to elections as they face less cost for displaying agentic behaviour. On the other hand, in party-driven parliaments such as those in Belgium and Croatia, we can expect politicians not to conform to stereotypical gender behaviour. Safe in the knowledge that they can rely on their parties to feature issues high on the agenda or acquire ownership of certain issues (which in the long run provides more possibility for re-election through parties), female parliamentarians have greater freedom to

not adhere to gender stereotypes regarding attacks and the use of incivility.

Besides contributing to the negativity literature, this study also contributes to the gender literature on female representation. Despite differences in female (descriptive) representation in the parliaments of Belgium and Croatia, in both cases, female representatives behave similarly by not conforming to gender expectations regarding attacks. In contrast, gender-conforming attack behaviour is present in the UK. As such, we can align with the scholarly work that has also found limited support for different patterns of female parliamentary behaviour if the proportion of women in parliaments changes (Sarah & Mona, 2008, p. 733). This study highlights the importance of the broader institutional setting (see Lovenduski, 2019) when it comes to studying the political behaviour of politicians based on gender. Therefore, different attack behaviour between men and women across the countries may be rooted in the electoral systems and the different possibilities of securing policy goals and re-election; in Belgium and Croatia, politicians act within and in the interest of their parties supported by gender quotas, whereas in the UK politicians act individually and in the interest of their constituencies, without the security provided by gender quotas.

However, while it is likely that the peculiar exception of the UK is an outcome of its candidate-driven parliamentary system, whereby individuals are more prominent in issue and party competition, it is important to reflect on the limitation that this finding comes from one particular case. In other words, it may be that these peculiar findings of gender-conforming attack behaviour are more likely in the context of UK politics and not necessarily in systems where individuals also seek re-election in single-member districts. As such, given this study's limitations, it is important to investigate whether the findings from the UK apply to other parliamentary systems that are candidate-oriented to ensure the generalisability of the theory. Yet, given the similarities regarding the treatment of female politicians across Westminster-style parliaments (e.g., Collier & Raney, 2018), there are reasons to suspect that findings may be applicable beyond the UK case. Furthermore, this study only focused on a specific format of parliamentary politics (QTSs), neglecting all other forms of debates such as committee sittings. Therefore, future studies should dive deeper into the mechanisms that possibly shape attack behaviour in other parliamentary debates. Lastly, future studies should also explore the content of attacks, which may uncover currently neglected patterns of attack. It may be, for example, that women attack equally to men in Croatia and Belgium, but the content of their criticism might differ vastly.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Supplementary Material

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

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