

Coalition Policymaking and Opposition Legislative Review: Bill Scrutiny as an Intra-Party Signaling Device*

Lion Behrens
University of Mannheim
behrens@uni-mannheim.de

Dominic Nyhuis
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
nyhuis@unc.edu

Thomas Gschwend
University of Mannheim
gschwend@uni-mannheim.de

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Recent research on executive-legislative relations in parliamentary democracies has demonstrated that members of majority parties submit amendments to government bills to police the coalition compromise and to signal differences between themselves and their coalition partners. It is poorly understood, however, what motivates members of the opposition to engage in the resource-intensive work of proposing changes to government bills. Not only are amendment proposals by the opposition often unsuccessful (lack of policy motivation), they are largely invisible to the electorate (lack of vote motivation). We argue that amendments by the opposition are best understood by office motivations of individual legislators. Ambitious legislators draft amendments to signal skill and expertise to their party peers, which is rewarded with promotions to higher office. We confirm our argument with original data from a large German state legislature. The findings further our understanding of legislative review, individual legislative efforts and career trajectories.

Keywords: Legislative review, legislative ambition, legislative careers, government-opposition interactions, intra-party politics, Germany.

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Introduction

Conventional perspectives on law-making in parliamentary democracies assume a fairly limited function of legislatures in formulating policy. Given the fusion between government and parliamentary majority, drafting laws is largely done in government offices and the resulting proposals are expected to be rubber-stamped by members of the governing majority. Scholars have increasingly questioned this simplified account of legislating in parliamentary systems. A growing body of work has provided evidence that parliamentary actors extensively rework government proposals and that parliamentary amendments crucially shape the government policy.

Previous research has suggested two distinct motivations for the redrafting of government policy by parliaments. In their seminal work on multiparty governments in European democracies, Martin and Vanberg (2004, 2005) have described legislative institutions as guarding the coalition compromise. In this view, policy-motivated members of the majority parties amend government proposals to prevent deviations from the coalition compromise due to ministerial autonomy. More recently, Fortunato (2019) has argued that vote-motivated members of the governing majority use amendments to signal differences from their coalition partners to mitigate electoral losses due to blurred party brands as a consequence of common coalition policies.

Despite growing attention for the status of parliaments in the legislative process, the existing research has only provided an incomplete picture. The dominant perspectives on legislative review have focused on intra-coalition dynamics, while disregarding why the opposition engages with government proposals. A number of studies have shown that opposition parties propose extensive amendments to coalition policy (Russel and Gover 2017; Thompson 2015; Shephard and Cairney 2005; Loxbo and Sjölin 2017; Andeweg, De Winter and Müller 2008). Neither policy nor vote motivations can easily explain this behavior. Given their minority status, amendment proposals by the opposition are typically rejected in parliament (Thompson 2015; Loxbo and Sjölin 2017; Andeweg, De Winter and Müller 2008), thus ruling out a policy motivation. What is more, not only do opposition parties not suffer a diluted partisan profile through cooperation in a coalition government, opposition amendments are almost invisible to the public as they typically do not lead

to any visible policy changes that could be picked up by the media and they are certainly less salient to the public than coalition amendments with substantive impact. This casts doubt on the vote motivation for opposition amendment proposals. Hence, we are left to wonder why opposition parties actively draft amendment proposals to government policy at all.

This analysis aims to contribute to this question by studying the motivations for opposition engagement with government bills. We argue that an office-seeking motivation best explains why members of the opposition become active in legislative review. Amendments are assumed to follow an intra-party logic where individual legislators propose amendments to signal ambition and competence to their party peers. Ambitious legislators draft amendments to highlight their policy expertise and their legislative ability. Party leaders rely on these signals and promote active legislators to higher office. We test these assumptions using a new data set of amendment proposals to over 400 government bills from a large German state-level parliament across a thirteen-year time span. Our findings support the hypotheses that (i) ambitious members of the opposition are most active in legislative review and that (ii) opposition parties reward legislators' efforts by promoting them to higher office.

The results have important implications for our understanding of opposition efforts in legislative review as well as for how parties decide upon promotions in parliamentary democracies. On the one hand, our analysis constitutes a counterpoint to the existing research on legislative review as we explicitly focus on opposition amendments and propose an office motivation rather than a policy or vote motivation. We also speak to a literature that has analyzed individual legislative activities and their effects on political careers in general (Bailer et al. 2013; Bailer et al. 2020; Claessen, Bailer and Herzog 2020), but which has largely focused on bill (co-)sponsorships, while ignoring the role of legislative amendments (Dockendorff 2019; Yildirim, Kocapinar and Ecevit 2019). As bill initiation is a party-level activity in most parliamentary democracies, legislators cannot rely on bills to signal expertise and their ambition for higher office. We add to this research, as it is not obvious how the motivations for legislative speech or bill initiation, such as fostering a personal vote, translate to less visible legislative efforts, such as drafting amendment proposals. What is more, the links between ambition and legislative behavior and between legislative behavior and career trajectories have only been tested separately in existing research. To the best of our knowledge, we provide the first joint test of these relationships.

Legislative Review, Opposition Parties, and Legislative Careers

Parliamentary Scrutiny of Government Legislation

The legislative process in parliamentary systems is heavily government-centric. As governments can typically rely on a parliamentary majority in these systems, policy is shaped in government offices. Once a piece of legislation is introduced into parliament, members of the majority have little incentive to block the proposal and risk bringing down the government, while the minority lacks the numbers to push for relevant changes.

Given how important executives are for shaping the substance of policy, research on legislating in parliamentary systems has traditionally focused on the factors and constraints that affect policy choices before a piece of legislation is ever formally introduced. One feature of parliamentary systems that has elicited particular interest is how the nature of coalition governance impacts policy decisions. Scholars have intensely studied the problem of ministerial autonomy (Laver and Shepsle 1996) and how delegating authority to ministers comes at the price of potential agency loss.

Researchers have identified a number of strategies that coalitions commonly pursue to keep ministers from straying from the coalition compromise. For instance, appointing junior ministers can help coalition partners to police the coalition compromise (Müller and Strøm 2001; Thies 2001). Along similar lines, committee chairs can be strategically assigned to serve as watchdogs for individual ministers (Hallerberg 2000; Kim and Loewenberg 2005; Carroll and Cox 2012). In addition to such institutional roles for reducing the problems of delegation in coalition governments, research has highlighted the important role that legislatures play in keeping tabs on coalition partners. Moving beyond the somewhat stylized account of legislating in parliamentary systems, there is an increasing awareness for the amount of redrafting that happens after legislation is introduced into parliament. Amending legislation allows members of the governing majority to correct policy deviations from entrepreneurial ministers Martin and Vanberg (2004, 2005). A somewhat different perspective on amendment proposals is provided by Fortunato (2019) who suggests that amendment proposals enable coalition partners to create some level of policy differentiation as they suffer from increasingly indistinct policy profiles in a government coalition.

Despite an increasing attention for how frequently and extensively parliaments redraft legislative proposals even in parliamentary systems, there are notable gaps in the research. First and foremost,

as opposition parties are largely unsuccessful in shaping legislation, their efforts have typically been disregarded in existing research. In a rare exception, Fortunato, Martin and Vanberg (2019) show how opposition parties can improve their standing in legislative review by relying on their agenda-setting powers in opposition-chaired committees. In their empirical study of three parliamentary democracies, they find that bill proposals assigned to opposition-lead committees are subject to more changes than draft bills which are assigned to committees chaired by coalition members. This type of opposition influence does not come about through the adoption of amendment proposals by the opposition, however, but through the opposition chairs' accentuated position and both formal and informal powers in committee deliberation.

Hence, the fact that the vast majority of amendment proposals by the opposition are doomed to fail begs the question what prompts these efforts in the first place. The comparative literature on opposition activities in legislative review has sketched a somewhat puzzling picture. In a study of twelve major bills in the UK between 2005 and 2012, Russel and Gover (2017) show that, on average, 170 opposition amendments were submitted for each bill. Studying the Swedish *Riksdag*, Loxbo and Sjölin (2017) show that the share of bills for which the opposition filed amendment proposals at the committee stage increased from about 33% in 1970-73 to more than 54% in 2010-2014. In the Dutch *Tweede Kamer*, the average number of amendments went up from less than 150 before 1966 to more than 1,000 per year (Andeweg, De Winter and Müller 2008).

While opposition engagement in legislative review of government bills is thus extensive across Europe's legislatures, the high numbers of amendments stand in sharp contrast to their low success rates. In fact, amendment proposals by the opposition are almost always voted down. This pattern is naturally most pronounced in majoritarian systems where power is often concentrated in the hands of a single party. In their study of the UK, Russel and Gover (2017) observe a success rate of about 7% for opposition amendments. Thompson (2015) arrives at even smaller estimates by documenting that in the history of British law, about 0.6% of opposition amendments filed in bill committees were ultimately successful. Similar conclusions are reached by Shephard and Cairney (2005) for the Scottish parliament and in Loxbo and Sjölin (2017) study of the Swedish *Riksdag*. Notably, low success rates are even observed for the Dutch *Tweede Kamer* which is often described as the prototype of a consensual democracy where law-making cuts across conventional government-

opposition lines (Andeweg, De Winter and Müller 2008). In the Dutch case, about 93% of opposition amendments are typically rejected by the governing majority (Visscher 1994; Andeweg 2013).

It is not clear that the dominant perspectives on legislative review provide satisfactory explanations for why members of the opposition often make detailed and highly technical suggestions on how to rework government legislation. Given their dismal success rates, it is unlikely that the commonly assumed policy motivation for legislative amendments holds much water when we turn our attention to the opposition. A vote motivation is not much more plausible either. The argument that parties rely on amendment proposals to signal policy differences from competitors is closely tied to coalition dynamics (Fortunato, 2019), where the clarity of individual party profiles suffers from joint policy proposals. These incentives are absent for opposition parties whose policy profiles are not diluted due to coalition participation. What is more, across the vast majority of European legislatures, committee meetings are held behind closed doors and are not visible to the media and public. As a consequence, amendment proposals are rarely reported on, making them poor instruments for policy signaling to begin with – especially for opposition parties, whose proposals are generally rejected and are therefore unlikely to shape policy. In sum, opposition proposals have little policy impact and they generally go unnoticed.

As we will argue below, the frequent amendment proposals by members of the opposition are best explained by an office motivation. In making this argument, we highlight a second and more subtle gap in the existing literature. Whereas previous research has predominantly taken a party-level perspective on legislative amendments, little attention has been paid to the question which specific legislators spearhead these efforts, as well as investing time and resources to author them. Research on the determinants of individual legislative behavior has either focused on the electoral connection (Mayhew 1974), where legislators are incentivized to cultivate a personal vote in single-member constituencies or preference vote systems (Bräuninger, Brunner and Däubler 2012; Depauw and Martin 2009; Zittel and Nyhuis 2021; Gschwend and Zittel 2015). When such incentives are absent, individual legislative efforts are mainly explained using an intra-party perspective, such that MPs actions are not only shaped by electoral incentives but also through desires for re-nomination and promotion (Martin 2014; Shomer 2009) or norms and expectations into which the MPs are socialised (Louwerse and Otjes 2016).

We suggest that such an intra-party perspective on amendment proposals is especially fruitful for studying amendment proposals by members of the opposition – and certainly more so than for studying the behavior of members of governing parties. For the governing majority, proposing changes to government policy is a high-stakes affair that can break a government if the proposal upsets the delicate balance between coalition partners. Therefore, amendment proposals to government policy are likely tightly controlled by the majority party leadership. By contrast, amendment proposals are far less consequential for opposition parties, such that less coordination is needed – both within and clearly across party lines –, providing more opportunities for entrepreneurial legislators from the opposition ranks to introduce amendment proposals to government policy. At the same time, the policy and electoral payoffs for doing so are considerably lower, begging the question why some legislators are nonetheless motivated to invest their scarce time on amendments.

Political Ambition and Individual Legislative Efforts

As policy and vote motivations are unlikely to provide a satisfactory explanation for opposition legislators reworking government legislation, an office motivation constitutes a more plausible alternative. From this perspective, opposition legislators neither attempt to substantively impact government policy nor do they try to sell the public on their parliamentary achievements. Instead, legislators invest time and effort to draft doomed amendments as signals to their peers that they possess the technical expertise to govern. Ambitious legislators actively draft amendments to underline their aspirations for higher office and to demonstrate their skills to the party leadership, such that when the time comes to govern, they have proven to be ready and able to work on legislation in earnest as a minister or as a committee chair.

Framing parliamentary amendments as intra-party signals for skill and ambition ties into a broader research agenda on political ambitions and their effects on political behavior. Researchers have consistently found that legislators differ in their career goals and that these goals are reflected in their behavior in office. Going back to Schlesinger (1966), scholars have typically employed a threefold typology to classify political ambition, where legislators can either aim to be re-elected to their current office (static ambition), they can try to attain higher office (progressive ambition), or they can choose to retire from public office (discrete ambition) (Schlesinger 1966, 10; Kiewiet and Zeng 1993, Black 1972).

There is consistent evidence on the impact of legislators' ambition on a variety of parliamentary behaviors, such as initiating legislation and co-sponsoring bills (Chasquetti and Micozzi 2014; Herrick 2001; Herrick and Moore 1993; Micozzi 2014*a,b*; Schmitt and Brant 2019), roll-call voting (Hibbing 1986; Hoyland, Hobolt and Hix 2019; Meserve, Pemstein and Bernhard 2009) and delivering legislative speeches (Herrick 2001; Herrick and Moore 1993; Hoyland, Hobolt and Hix 2019; Victor 2011). As these studies have mostly focused on the legislator-centric political systems in the Americas, the dominant perspective on the link between political ambition and legislative behavior has been one of personal vote-seeking. An intra-party signal of political ambition as advocated here is more easily reconciled with legislative behavior than an extra-parliamentary signal to constituents in the party-centric political systems of Western Europe, where legislators' career trajectories are at the mercy of the party leadership (Kaiser and Fischer 2009).

Two arguments can help substantiate this claim. First, existing research on (progressive) political ambition and legislative behavior has focused on legislators interested in moving to higher elected office, such that personal vote-seeking is a reasonable electoral strategy. The existing research on political ambition has largely disregarded horizontal political ambition, where legislators may be interested in being promoted to a more prestigious office at the same level, such as a committee chairmanship, or a ministerial appointment. In these cases, the support of the party leadership is crucial and intra-party signals of ambition and ability are key (Dockendorff 2019). But even when legislators are interested in higher elected office, signaling their skill to the party leadership is vital under common electoral rules in parliamentary systems. Whether it is the prevalence of list systems or the absence of primary contests – if legislators cannot convince their party that they possess the skills to perform their parliamentary duties, the party leadership will likely turn a deaf ear to their bid for career advancement.

Second, while signals to the party leadership are generally more important for legislators in parliamentary democracies than in less party-centric systems, intra-party signals are particularly likely when considering comparatively low-key activities such as legislative amendments. In general, legislators can rely on a whole range of tools to signal expertise through their legislative activities such as bill initiation, parliamentary questions, delivering speeches or filing amendments. Whereas bills or speeches may constitute visible signals to the electorate (Bowler 2010, Bräuninger and Debus 2009, Bräuninger, Brunner and Däubler 2012, Däubler, Bräuninger and Brunner 2016,

Williams and Indridason 2018), amendments are fairly technical affairs that are often introduced at the committee stage and therefore mostly invisible to the electorate. More than that, no other instrument permits legislators to show their ability to draft legislation and underline aspirations for higher office as private member bills in parliamentary systems are often heavily regulated by the party leadership. Hence, legislators cannot consistently use them to signal their expertise and ambition. These characteristics make amendments more suitable for signaling to other legislators who pay closer attention to parliamentary proceedings than the general public. In sum, we expect members of the opposition to employ amendments to government legislation in order to signal skill and ambition to their party leadership, which leads us to the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: More ambitious members of opposition parties propose more amendments to government legislation.

One empirical upshot of the argument that legislators use parliamentary amendments to signal their ambition and ability to the party leadership is that proposing amendments has an effect on career trajectories. Rational and especially ambitious political actors can be expected to pay close attention to which behaviors are ultimately successful in promoting the careers of their colleagues and which strategies they should pursue to advance their own careers. If ambitious legislators notice that investing time and effort in the legislative process is not rewarded by the party leadership, they should choose to spend their precious time on more promising behaviors.

While there is ample evidence of the effect of political ambition on a wide variety of legislative behaviors, fewer studies have systematically investigated how such behaviors feed into the subsequent careers of active legislators (e.g. Padró I Miquel and Snyder 2006; Dockendorff 2019; Yildirim, Kocapinar and Ecevit 2019). To the best of our knowledge, no study has integrated both perspectives to study how political ambition shapes legislative behavior and how legislative behavior, in turn, impacts the career trajectories of ambitious legislators. In trying to fill this gap, we combine both facets of political ambition. Assuming that ambitious members of the opposition behave rationally, they should only try to signal their ambition to the party leadership through legislative amendments if parties pick up on legislators' efforts, thus increasing the odds that they are being promoted to higher office down the line, leading us to the second hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: Members of the opposition who propose more amendments are more likely to be promoted to higher office in the next legislative term.

Opposition legislative review

Case Selection

An empirical test of our argument requires an analysis of individual legislator efforts in legislative review. Most importantly, we need data from a case that allows us to easily distinguish different types of political ambition and future career aspirations. We draw on data from the *Landtag Baden-Württemberg*, one of the largest German state-level legislatures, across three legislative periods (2006-2011, 2011-2016, 2016-2021). The main advantage of focusing on a sub-national legislature is that *Landtag* members can rise to upper-level parliaments such as the German *Bundestag* or the European Parliament. The potential for *vertical* advancement across legislative assemblies makes an analysis of sub-national legislatures preferable over federal-level parliaments for our specific research question. In the time frame of the analysis, the *Landtag* also showed high fluctuations in governing coalitions, making *horizontal* promotions available to a wide range of MPs. In the three legislative terms, there were three different coalition governments between CDU and FDP (2006-2011), Greens and SPD (2011-2016), as well as between Greens and CDU (2016-2021). Except for the right-wing AfD, which entered the parliament for the first time in 2016, all parties have served in government and opposition at least once in our study frame. Therefore, in addition to vertical career trajectories across parliaments, there is considerable potential for horizontal career mobility within the legislature.

Our case shares a range of institutional features with various other European legislatures (Strøm, Müller and Smith 2010). As is typical for parliamentary systems and for European democracies in particular, policymaking in the *Landtag* is characterized by several consensual features. First, the *Landtag* is elected using proportional rules, leading to a multi-party system with usually between four to five parties. Coalition governments are routinely formed as minimal winning coalitions (Woldendorp, Keman and Budge 2000), while no minority government was formed in the post-World War II era. Second, institutional features enhance the influence of parliamentarians on government legislation and provide several formal opportunities for legislators to shape policy. The

Landtag features a strong committee system, where a substantial number of standing committees shadow ministerial jurisdictions. Committees have the right to scrutinize and rewrite draft bills once they are introduced to parliament. Across the three legislative periods in our study, between ten and twelve standing committees were created in each legislative term and virtually every piece of legislation is forwarded to one of them. The party composition of committee members is proportional to the seats the plenary, while committee chairs are roughly evenly divided between members of the coalition and opposition groups. Given that these institutional characteristics are often found in other European legislatures, the *Landtag* holds considerable comparative value.

Bill Scrutiny in the *Landtag Baden-Württemberg*

As is common in European legislatures, where parties are the central actors which exhibit high levels of group discipline, bill initiation is a government prerogative. In line with the incentive structures that we have outlined in the previous section, the review of cabinet bills is common. Amendment proposals can be submitted at two stages in the legislative process. First, committee members have the right to rewrite legislation. They can submit their amendment proposals prior to or during the first committee hearing, when the proposals are voted upon by all committee members. Second, after the revised committee version of the bill gets circulated by the committee chair, the new bill version is voted upon during the second plenary reading.¹ During the second reading, all members can propose amendments (*Rules of procedure, §54-4*). Amendment proposals are usually drafted by a small group of authors which are individually identified on the amendment proposals. With few exceptions, amendments are not initiated by more than three legislators.

Table 1 reports descriptive statistics for all proposed opposition amendments to government legislation in our study frame. The figures show that submitting amendment proposals is common for all party groups with two opposition parties having submitted over 90 (FDP/DVP, CDU) and two other groups having proposed over 180 (Green Party, SPD). Less activity is observed for the right-wing populist AfD, which is partly due to the fact that the party was only represented in parliament in the last of the three legislative terms. Table 1 further documents that amending legislation is by no means an isolated phenomenon by few legislators, such as party leaders, who

¹Budget bills and constitutional legislation are subject to different rules of procedure. They are excluded from the present analysis.

Table 1: Bill scrutiny by opposition parties in the *Landtag* Baden-Württemberg.

Opposition Party	<i>N</i> Amendments	<i>N</i> Authors (Total MPs)	Word Length				
			<i>Min</i>	<i>25%</i>	<i>Median</i>	<i>75%</i>	<i>Max</i>
Green Party	189	16 (19)	8	43	75	134	1,884
SPD	183	44 (57)	8	42	62	128	1,357
FDP/DVP	93	13 (16)	13	34	54	86	547
CDU	92	37 (64)	12	42	69	151	1,041
AfD	16	13 (23)	30	71	113	134	279

Note: 421 cabinet bills were introduced in the time frame of our analysis. The Table presents descriptive statistics on the number of amendments, the number of distinct authors out of all party group members and the distribution of amendment word length. Data is included for all party groups in opposition.

define the official party line. Rather, amendments are submitted by many legislators, with shares of distinct authors ranging between 57% (37 out of 64 MPs) for the Christian Democratic Party (CDU) and 84% (16 out of 19 MPs) for the Green party. Third, while these amendments constitute technical corrections of specific passages at times, they often formulate alternative policy stances. A significant percentage of opposition proposals take on considerable length, with the most extensive drafts covering several pages. Table 2 presents a sample amendment proposal by three members of the Social Democratic Party, which proposed to rewrite parts of the government legislation.

Notably, in the thirteen-year time frame of our study, all but one amendment proposal by the opposition failed in parliament. A number of expert interviews which we have conducted with members of all party groups illustrate how opposition groups do not expect their proposals to impact legislation.² One backbencher from the right-wing populist *Alternative für Deutschland* recalls the strategies of other party groups towards amendments by the AfD:

MP: “We are aware that none of the proposals by the *Alternative für Deutschland* will be accepted. That is what the other party groups have publicly stated we know that they will not support any amendment of ours.”

While this might represent a particularistic strategy of the established parties to counter the entry of right-wing populist forces into German legislatures, several interviews with other members reveal a

²We conducted eight expert interviews with members of the party groups to develop our theoretical expectations and the underlying mechanisms. The expert interviews comprised two party chairmen and three party managers. They were conducted between September 2018 and August 2020 in the offices of the *Landtag*.

Table 2: An example of opposition bill scrutiny to government legislation.

In article 1 number 7 paragraph § 23 b is changed as follows:

a) Section 1 number 1 is formulated as follows: “1. who is responsible according to §§ 6 and 7, and is required to avert an urgent and considerable danger to life, body or freedom of a person, an urgent danger to the existence or the security of the federal government or state or to matters of the general community, which concern the functionality of public utilities,”

b) The following sentence is added to section 7: “If this order is not approved within three days by the responsible court named in paragraph 4, it becomes inoperative.”

c) Section 10 sentence 3 is expanded as follows: After the words “The deferral is” the words “with reasons” are inserted.

d) Section 10 sentence 6 is formulated as follows: “A notification can be omitted if

1. primary interests of an affected person hold priority,
2. the person concerned is only insignificantly affected by the measure and it can be assumed that the affected person does not have an interest in being notified, or
3. if five years have elapsed since the end of the measure, if the prerequisites for notification will, with a probability bordering on certainty, also not occur in the future.”

e) The following sentences 7 and 8 are added to section 10: “If the notification according to sentence 6 is not performed, this decision must be documented with the reasons. The decision following sentence 6 requires the approval of the responsible court named in paragraph 4.”

f) Section 14 is changed as follows: The words “every two years” are replaced by the word “annually”.

g) The following section 15 is inserted after section 14: “This regulation is subject to a comprehensive evaluation two years after its entry into force.”

In article 1 number 9, § 54 is changed as follows:

a) Section 1 is formulated as follows: “Explosives may only be used against persons under the conditions of § 23 b paragraph 1 number 2, if the previous use of other weapons has been unsuccessful or obviously does not promise success.”

b) Section 3 is formulated as follows: “The use of explosives against persons must be ordered by the Minister of the Interior, Digitization and Migration or a person specially appointed by him in exceptional cases.”

Note: Amendment proposal ID 16/2915 by Andreas Stoch, Reinhold Gall, and Lars Binder (Social Democratic Party) on the ‘bill to change police legislation’ ID 16/2741. Government bill submitted on September 26, 2017. Amendment submitted on November 7, 2017 and rejected after parliamentary vote on November 15, 2017. Translation by the authors.

similar pattern. Consider the following quote from a member of the Social Democratic Party (SPD):

Interviewer: “In your experience, would you say that your party group occasionally submits amendment proposals even though it expects that there is no chance that it will be accepted?”

MP: “Our amendment proposals are *never* accepted.”

These statements underline the futility of the resource-intensive engagement with cabinet legislation by members of the opposition from a policy perspective. To provide an alternative perspective, we now turn to the analysis of intra-party signaling on legislative activity.

Empirical Strategy

Data and Dependent Variables

To construct the data set for our empirical analysis, we started by collecting all bills and their accompanying amendment proposals from the official database of the *Landtag*. Since the procedural rules for budgetary and constitutional bills differ from those for ordinary legislation, we excluded them from the data (this decision follows Martin and Vanberg 2004, 2005), resulting in 421 pieces of government legislation. Testing our hypotheses on the link between political ambition and legislative review (Hypothesis 1) and the effect of MPs’ legislative behavior on subsequent promotions (Hypothesis 2) requires constructing two individual data sets with two different units of observation.

To test Hypothesis 1, our first data set is constructed at the bill×MP level by merging bill-level data with information from the 180 opposition MPs in the three legislative periods, resulting in a data set of $n = 24,909$. We include two measures of legislative activity as dependent variable. First, for each proposal and member of parliament, we include a binary indicator reporting whether an MP has submitted an amendment proposal to a draft bill at any point of the process.³ Second, we quantify MPs’ engagement as the number of article changes an MP submitted to a bill.

Our data provide a more detailed description of legislative policy-making than is common in the study of legislative review (cf. Martin and Vanberg 2004, 2005; Pedrazzani and Zucchini 2013).

³Multi-MP amendment proposals count towards all respective bill×MP observations.

It covers all *proposed* bill changes, whereas previous studies were limited to a comparison between empirically observed bill versions, i.e. the sum of all *adopted* changes. Notably, Fortunato (2019) compiled a data set that comprises the number of submitted rather than accepted article changes. We move beyond this effort as we explicitly incorporate opposition amendments, instead of focusing on intra-coalition interactions only.

With regard to our second hypothesis, we aim to trace MPs' subsequent parliamentary careers after a legislative term has finished. This second data set is constructed at the term \times MP level. We construct a binary dependent variable which documents whether a member of parliament (i) received a leadership position in the subsequent legislative term within the same parliamentary assembly or (ii) ascended to a super-ordinate legislature. Leadership positions include standing committee chairs, parliamentary chairmen and party group manager, house speakers as well as (junior-) ministers in executive leadership positions. As superior parliaments, we include promotions to the *Bundestag* and the European parliament. Members of parliament who did not get appointed any of these positions or left the legislature altogether are coded as zero. There are $n = 136$ observations for this analysis.⁴ Tables 3 and 4 present descriptive statistics for the key variables for both data sets.

Independent Variables

To assess the causes (Hypothesis 1) and consequences (Hypothesis 2) of legislative review, we rely on two distinct sets of explanatory variables. To test Hypothesis 1, our main challenge lies in measuring the concept of political ambition. The most straightforward way to assess MPs' ambitions for higher office lies in conducting surveys with members of parliament (Herrick 2001; Hoyland, Hobolt and Hix 2019; Kernecker 2017, Sieberer and Müller 2017). For our purposes, surveys have at least two disadvantages. First, our data collection dates back well over a decade and MPs' goals are difficult to assess retrospectively. While it is relatively straightforward to measure the political ambitions of members cross-sectionally using surveys, we are interested in the causes and effects of MPs' professional ambitions over time. Using surveys to assess the career goals from over a decade ago comes with problems of re-call error, where (ex-)MPs are unable to reconstruct their past states of mind and cognitive biases, such that MPs' factual career paths influence their self-perception

⁴Since future promotions are unobserved for the most recent legislative term 2016-2021, this data set is restricted to the MPs from the first two legislative periods 2006-2011 and 2011-2016.

in the past. Additionally, elite surveys are increasingly faced with the problem of low response rates (Maestas, Neeley and Richardson 2003; Bailer 2014), meaning that one can only construct a measure of political ambition for a potentially small subset of responsive members.

Several existing works that have tried to construct encompassing measures of personal career goals have relied on somewhat coarse proxy measures to assess politicians' aspirations. For instance, Meserve, Pemstein and Bernhard (2009) use age as a proxy for ambition in the European parliament to distinguish MEPs that stay (and end) their political careers in the European parliament from those that return to higher office in their home states. We are hesitant to include such a measure as age might constitute a fair approximation of future career *opportunities*, while it is a significantly less direct operationalization of actual ambition. Other authors have relied on actual career paths as a measure of ambition, where ambitions at a certain time point t are derived from future proceeded career paths (cf. Hoyland, Hobolt and Hix 2019). This approach suffers from the obvious shortcoming that career ambition and actual career attainment are evidently two different things.

In the present study, we rely on two measures for professional career goals. First, we build on work on the U.S. Congress, where political ambition is measured through *candidacies*. In the U.S. context, scholars usually measure whether House members run for Senate or a governorship (Hibbing 1986; Herrick and Moore 1993; Victor 2011). In the sub-national case, we exploit the fact that MPs' career ambitions are often not static, where legislators may aim to win a seat in a parliamentary assemblies at an upper level such as the European Parliament or the German *Bundestag*. This multi-level setting allows us to relate MPs' candidacies to Schlesinger's (1966) classic typology of progressive, static and discrete ambition. For each legislative term, we document whether a *Landtag* member stood as a candidate for the European Parliament or the *Bundestag* (progressive ambition), whether a member only ran for re-election for her current mandate (static ambition), or if no subsequent legislative mandate was sought (discrete ambition)⁵.

Second, we propose a new measure for political ambition that exploits politicians' use of social media platforms. Political science scholarship has witnessed a surge of contributions that monitor

⁵In our operationalization, discrete ambition is assigned if an MP did not stand for re-election. A potential shortcoming of this measurement is that this could also be the result of an MP not being re-selected by the party. In this case, failure to stand for re-election would not be measuring ambition, but capture a possible relationship between inactivity in parliament and subsequent failure to be re-selected as a candidate. It has been documented however that German MPs seeking to re-run for their seats again are routinely re-selected (Reiser 2011). Hence, there is ample evidence from the German case that if a member of parliament seeks to re-candidate for her mandate in her voting district, candidacies are habitually granted by the party base.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics of Key Variables, Bill \times MP Data Set.

Variable	Min	Mean	Max	SD
<i>Dependent Variables</i>				
Amendment	0	0.02	1	-
Number of Submitted Article Changes	0	0.03	12	0.32
<i>Explanatory Variables</i>				
Progressive Ambition	0	0.03	1	-
Static Ambition	0	0.72	1	-
Discrete Ambition	0	0.25	1	-
Social Media Presence	0	0.55	1	-
<i>N</i>	24,909			

politicians' behavior and electoral campaigns on the most visible social networks such as Twitter and Facebook (Barberá 2015; Evans, Cordova and Sipole 2014; Bond and Messing 2015). Such data hold significant value for the measurement of political ambition, as we can use information from social media to distinguish between legislators that cultivate their political profile and those who prefer to stay in the background. Hence, we collected information on the professional social media accounts of all legislators in our sample and construct a binary variable, where MPs are coded as ambitious if they maintain a professional social media profile on either Twitter or Facebook and non-ambitious if no social media presence is observed.

After assessing the link between political ambition and individual activity in legislative review (Hypothesis 1), our second hypothesis regards the effect of legislative activity on political career trajectories. In this analysis, we measure legislative efforts using two indicators. First, we document the number of bills to which a legislator has submitted amendment proposals. Second, to account for the fact that some amendments are more lengthy and signal more engagement than others, we count the total number of article changes that a legislator proposed over the course of a legislative term.

Control Variables

We control for a series of factors that may impact the legislative activity of MPs and their future career prospects. These factors either relate to some bills being more likely to be amended than others and to some MPs being more likely to engage in the process of legislative review due to factors that are related but not equal to their political ambition.

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics of Key Variables, Term \times MP Data Set.

Variable	Min	Mean	Max	SD
<i>Dependent Variable</i>				
Leadership Position in Subsequent Term	0	0.32	1	-
<i>Explanatory Variables</i>				
Number of Amended Bills	0	3.07	47	5.33
Number of Article Changes	0	4.99	77	9.32
<i>N</i>	136			

Regarding bill-level controls, confounding might result as some bills are long and complex. In addition, certain policy fields may be more heavily scrutinized than others. We adjust for these possibilities by including control variables indicating bill length and the policy field of the proposal. Bill length is measured as the logged number of articles in the proposal. To classify bills into policy fields, we assigned each bill to one policy field according to the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP, Breunig and Schnatterer 2020). In addition, we include controls for party resources, which are measured as the logged number of seats that a party won in the previous *Landtag* election, as more MPs and more associated staff mean more resources for working on amendment proposals. Since an upcoming election will bind MPs' resources away from their parliamentary work and towards their campaign efforts, we further operationalize resources with the proximity to the next *Landtag* election. For each bill \times MP observation, the time to the next election is calculated as the logged number of months between the introduction of a bill and the next election.⁶ Since past research has shown that government bills are more heavily scrutinized in committees chaired by opposition parties (Fortunato, Martin and Vanberg 2019), we include a binary indicator for bills that are reviewed in opposition-led committees.

Regarding MP-level controls, we add several sociodemographic characteristics to the model that have shown to affect legislative behavior such as gender (Vega and Firestone 1995; Barnes 2016), age (Meserve, Pemstein and Bernhard 2009) and seniority (Shomer 2009). One can reasonably expect that members of the standing committee that discusses a bill will show higher levels of engagement. Therefore, we include a binary variable indicating whether an MP is part of the

⁶The duration of a legislative period is five years. No early elections were called in the time period of our analysis. We use the logged number of months as the relationship between time to the next election and available resources is likely non-linear, such that there are fewer differences in available resources between 33 months and 31 months to the next election as there are between three months and one month.

respective bill committee in our models. Moreover, MPs with leading roles in their party group are more likely to co-sponsor or draft amendment proposals to give them political weight. MPs' current leadership position will thus likely affect their level of legislative scrutiny as well as their likelihood of obtaining a leadership role in the subsequent legislative term. Therefore, we include a categorical variable indicating whether legislators currently serve as a parliamentary chairman or manager (group leadership position) or whether they act as a committee chair (parliamentary leadership position). Finally, as the political ambition of MPs might vary by the characteristics of their electoral districts, we include a binary variable differentiating rural and urban districts, as well as a quantitative measure of district size operationalized as the logged number of registered eligible voters.

Analysis

Individual Engagement in Legislative Review

We start our analysis with an investigation of Hypothesis 1 regarding the effect of political ambition on individual legislative review efforts. We model this effect using our bill \times MP data set. Since our first dependent variable is a binary indicator and distinguishes between MPs submitting or not submitting amendments, logistic regression is appropriate.⁷ Our second dependent variable has a count structure. Since we have reason to believe that the count is to be overdispersed and exceeds the variance as assumed by a classical Poisson model (for example, if amendments in the early stages of a bill's legislative life-cycle trigger even more amendments after the committee hearings), we choose negative binomial regression to predict the number of submitted article changes by opposition legislators.

Moreover, our data set has a nested structure, where observations from multiple MPs are nested in bills. The nested data structure likely violates the assumption of independence in traditional regression techniques which treat units of analysis as independent observations. As failure to account for nesting underestimates standard errors and essentially leads to levels of statistical significance

⁷The distribution of our binary indicator is skewed, with 2% of the observations falling into the submission category. We re-ran all models using methods for logistic regression in rare events data as outlined by King and Zeng (2001). Significance levels, substantive effect sizes, and simulated effects on the quantities of interest remain unchanged.

Table 5: Determinants of individual engagement in legislative review.

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>			
	Bill Amendment		Number of Article Changes	
	<i>Binary-Logistic</i>		<i>Negative Binomial</i>	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
<i>Main Independent Variables</i>				
Progressive Ambition	0.937*** (0.277)		1.018*** (0.263)	
Static Ambition	0.778*** (0.152)		0.723*** (0.145)	
Social Media Presence		0.590*** (0.127)		0.468*** (0.121)
<i>MP-Level Controls</i>				
Female	0.225 (0.142)	0.143 (0.140)	0.161 (0.135)	0.120 (0.133)
Age	-0.021** (0.007)	-0.024*** (0.007)	-0.020** (0.006)	-0.025*** (0.006)
Seniority	0.076*** (0.008)	0.066*** (0.008)	0.063*** (0.008)	0.056*** (0.008)
Committee Member	2.619*** (0.134)	2.653*** (0.135)	2.219*** (0.134)	2.256*** (0.134)
Party Group Leadership	2.025*** (0.137)	2.035*** (0.138)	1.738*** (0.136)	1.764*** (0.137)
Parliamentary Leadership	-0.531 (0.458)	-0.454 (0.455)	-0.473 (0.497)	-0.439 (0.495)
Urban	-0.077 (0.141)	-0.007 (0.142)	0.023 (0.132)	0.077 (0.133)
Log (District Magnitude)	0.513 (0.454)	1.001* (0.466)	0.164 (0.435)	0.513 (0.446)
<i>Bill-Level Controls</i>				
Log (Party Group Size)	-0.320*** (0.083)	-0.305*** (0.081)	-0.302*** (0.081)	-0.281*** (0.079)
Log (Date Distance)	0.330 (0.189)	0.264 (0.187)	0.279 (0.186)	0.220 (0.182)
Opposition Chair Committee	0.020 (0.313)	0.030 (0.311)	-0.009 (0.309)	-0.010 (0.304)
Log (Bill Length)	0.592** (0.184)	0.587** (0.184)	0.699*** (0.182)	0.688*** (0.179)
Constant	-13.338* (5.448)	-18.260** (5.618)	-8.991 (5.225)	-12.185* (5.376)
Policy Field Fixed Effects	√	√	√	√
N (Bills)	24,909 (421)	24,909 (421)	24,909 (421)	24,909 (421)
ICC	0.528	0.527	0.456	0.456
R Squared	0.231	0.230	0.358	0.332

Note:

*p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Note: The Table presents unstandardized coefficients from multilevel binary-logistic and negative binomial regression models with random intercepts at the bill level. Standard errors are reported in parentheses. *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001.

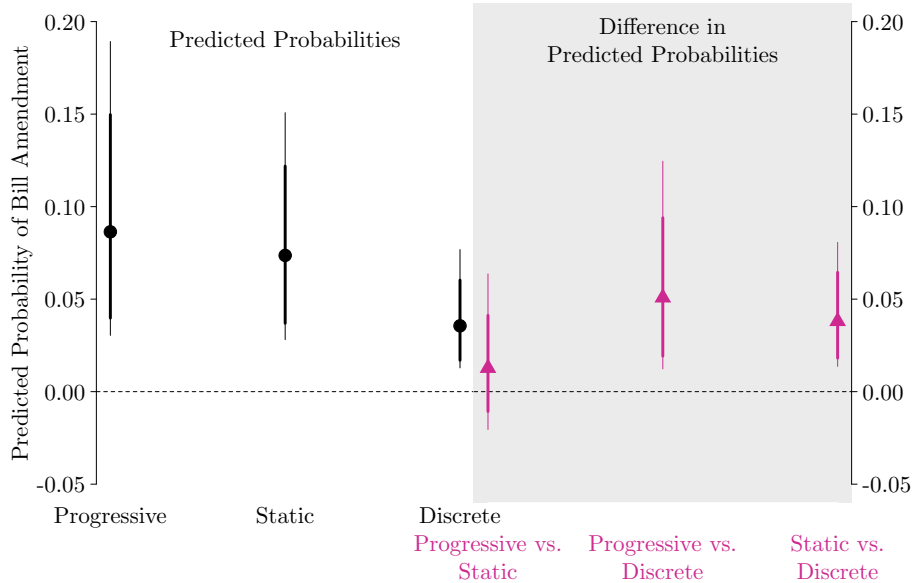


Figure 1: The effect of political ambition on activity in legislative review, based on Model 1. Dots show the mean predicted probability to engage in legislative review for members of each category of political ambition. Triangles show the mean differences in predicted probabilities between the three categories. Values are based on 10,000 draws from a multivariate normal distribution defined by the vector of parameter estimates reported in Model 1 and their covariance matrix. Thick (and thin) bars display the 8.3% and 91.6% (2.5% and 97.5%) quantiles of the simulated distributions.

that are too liberal (Hox 2010), we employ both model types in their multilevel variant and allow the intercepts to vary randomly across the 421 bills in our sample. On a substantive level, this makes sense as different bills might be scrutinized more than others due to factors that are unmeasured in our statistical models. Our multilevel approach allows us to take into account potential differences in the changes submitted to a bill that are due to such unobserved features. We begin with intercept-only regressions for both models, allowing for random intercepts at the bill level. We observe substantial intra-class correlations of 0.71 (logistic model) and 0.64 (negative binomial model) at the bill level that is only partially accounted for by the bill-specific control variables and justifies our multilevel model specification.

The full models are reported in Table 5 and show robust support for Hypothesis 1. The results from Models 1 and 3 suggest that opposition MPs with static ambition, who only seek re-election to the *Landtag*, are more active in scrutinizing government legislation than members who do not run for re-election. This effect is even more pronounced for progressively ambitious legislators who submit most amendment proposals to draft bills (Model 1) and who scrutinize legislation most extensively

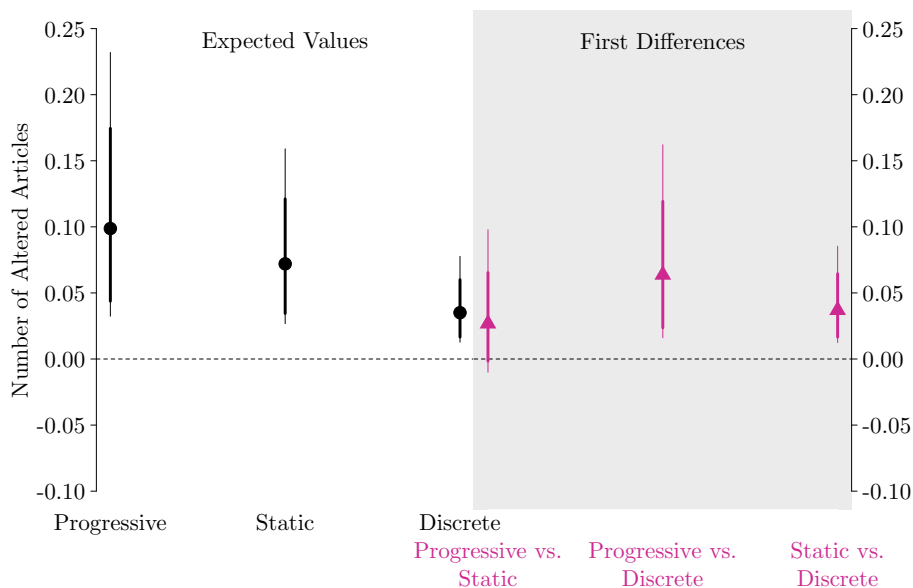


Figure 2: The effect of political ambition on activity in legislative review, based on Model 3. Dots show the mean expected number of submitted article changes for members of each category of political ambition. Triangles show the mean differences in expected article changes between the three categories. Values are based on 10,000 draws from a multivariate normal distribution defined by the vector of parameter estimates reported in Model 3 and their covariance matrix. Thick (and thin) bars display the 8.3% and 91.6% (2.5% and 97.5%) quantiles of the simulated distributions.

by submitting the greatest number of article changes (Model 3). These effects are stable for both dependent variables if we measure political ambition through our binary indicator of a professional social media presence in Models 2 and 4.

In Figures 1 and 2, we transform the regression coefficients into intuitive quantities of interest and visualize their effects.⁸ We account for the estimation uncertainty and take advantage of the framework of simulation-based inference. First, we simulate 10,000 draws from a multivariate normal distribution defined by the vector of parameter estimates as presented in Models 1 and 3 and their covariance matrices as estimated from the models (King, Tomz and Wittenberg 2000). Next, we use these draws to generate 10,000 predicted probabilities (Figure 1) and un-logged predicted counts of submitted article changes (Figure 2) for progressive, static and discrete ambition. All continuous control variables are held constant at their mean. The rest of the variables are defined such that the reported predictions are representative for female legislators that are part of a bill’s respective committee, represent an urban district and hold no leadership position in their party group.

⁸For visualization, we follow the guidelines as set out by Trautmüller (2020).

The left columns in Figures 1 and 2 present the mean raw predictions for the three ambition categories together with their 5/6 and 95% confidence intervals (defined as the quantiles of the distribution of simulated values). These allow inferences on the baseline probabilities to engage in legislative review of progressively, statically and discretely ambitious legislators. The right columns report the simulated distributions of differences in predicted values between the respective categories. From these figures, we can derive that the coefficients in Table 5 also exert substantively important effects. To start, we recall from our descriptives presented in Table 3 that in only 2% of bill \times MP observations, submitted amendment proposals are actually observed as most legislators do not submit amendments to most bills. In Figure 1, we see that the likelihood of becoming active in legislative review varies considerably between the three types of political ambition, with the mean predicted probability to submit amendments changing from 2% (discrete ambition) to almost 7% (progressive ambition). Given the low probability of observing legislative scrutiny for any particular bill \times MP observation in the first place, we interpret these changes as substantively meaningful and considerably large differences between the groups. From the right column of Figure 1, we can see that progressively and statically ambitious MPs robustly exert higher levels of engagement in legislative review than members who did not run for re-election. In Figure 2, the same substantive patterns emerge. These findings provide robust support for the hypothesis that political ambition exerts a positive effect on the likelihood that members engage in legislative review.

Predicting Leadership Positions

In a second step, we turn to an investigation of Hypothesis 2 and test whether parliamentary groups reward MPs' efforts with leadership positions in subsequent legislative terms. As our dependent variable is binary again, we use logistic regression. Our dependent variable measures whether a member of parliament at time t was appointed a leadership position or was promoted to a super-ordinate parliamentary assembly in legislative term $t+1$. Our key independent variables measure the overall number of bills or article changes that a legislator has submitted to government legislation over the course of the legislative term t . The unit of observation is the legislator in each legislative

Table 6: Determinants of legislative promotion.

	<i>Dependent Variable:</i>	
	Leadership Position in Subsequent Term	
	<i>Binary-Logistic (5)</i>	<i>Binary-Logistic (6)</i>
<i>Main Independent Variables</i>		
Number of Amended Bills	0.154** (0.055)	
Number of Article Changes		0.111** (0.042)
<i>MP-Level Controls</i>		
Female	0.134 (0.560)	0.165 (0.557)
Age	-0.063* (0.030)	-0.065* (0.031)
Seniority	0.033 (0.042)	0.035 (0.043)
Leadership Position	2.427*** (0.638)	2.439*** (0.629)
Urban District	-1.197 (0.655)	-1.438* (0.673)
District Magnitude	-6.878** (2.476)	-7.287** (2.465)
Constant	80.806** (29.088)	85.647** (29.044)
Party Fixed Effects	✓	✓
N	136	136
Akaike Inf. Crit.	146.657	143.745
R Squared	0.408	0.448

Note: Table presents unstandardized coefficients from binary-logistic regression models. Clustered standard errors are reported in parentheses. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

term. Since we have repeated observations in our data with some members appearing in the data more than once, we report cluster-corrected standard errors.⁹

Our statistical models are reported in Table 6. The results from Models 5 and 6 suggest that the extent to which opposition legislators engage with legislation has a positive impact on their likelihood of being appointed to a leadership position in the next legislative term. These effects

⁹As King and Roberts (2015) outline, robust standard errors can be perceived as a test for model mis-specification as classical and robust standard errors diverge only if model assumptions are violated. In our case, both types of standard errors are only marginally different from one another and the substantive conclusions remain unchanged regardless of the framework of inference.

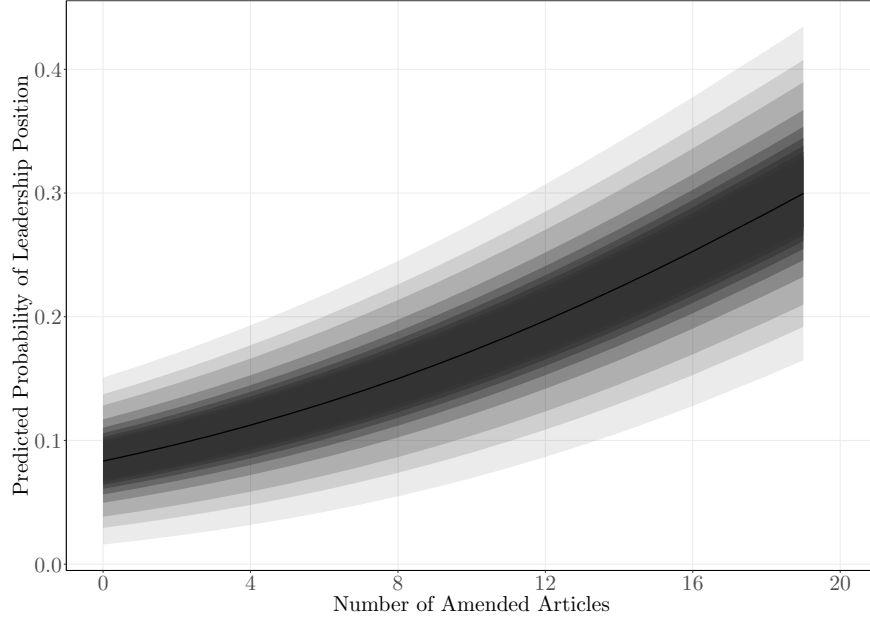


Figure 3: The effect of activity in legislative review on obtaining a leadership position in the subsequent legislative term, based on Model 6. The solid line represents the mean predicted probability across 10,000 draws from a multivariate normal distribution defined by the vector of parameter estimates and their cluster-corrected covariance matrix. Error bars indicate the variation of simulated predicted probabilities for various degrees of uncertainty up to one standard deviation.

are evident despite controlling for factors such as seniority and the current status of the MP in the party group. From our leadership position dummy, we can derive that whereas holding higher office translates into a higher likelihood for holding on to these positions in the next legislative term, MPs that do not hold a leadership position in the current term are way less likely to get appointed to such in subsequent legislative periods. However, engagement in bill scrutiny increases the likelihood of holding future higher offices. This is robust evidence in favor of a positive relation between legislative activity and legislative promotion.

Figure 3 visualizes this effect. The x-axis documents the number of article changes that a legislator has submitted in the previous legislative term. The quantity of interest on the y-axis is the predicted probability of holding a leadership position in the next legislative period. To construct predicted probabilities, we simulate 10,000 draws from a multivariate normal distribution defined by the vector of parameter estimates from Model 6 and their cluster-corrected covariance matrix. We keep all control variables at their observed values and vary the number of amended articles between 0 and 19 for all observations. The Figure suggests that the extent to which legislators engage

in legislative review clearly shapes their future career prospects as the predicted probabilities rise from 9% (for MPs that submitted zero article changes) to 13% (mean value of 5 submitted article changes) and more than 25% (19 submitted article changes). This effect suggests that parties take note of MPs' signals when deciding who is suitable for higher office.

Conclusion

Drafting and submitting amendments to proposed legislation is a resource-intensive exercise, as it requires staff and technical expertise that is in short supply for opposition parties. In addition, the vast majority of opposition amendments are rejected by the parliamentary majority and this process often takes place behind closed doors. Yet, bill scrutiny of government legislation by the opposition is surprisingly common in parliamentary democracies. In this article, we departed from this empirical puzzle and sought to shed light on the motivation of opposition parties to scrutinize government legislation.

We resorted to office-seeking explanations for opposition activity in legislative review. We argued that in a context where possibilities for individual legislative efforts such as sponsoring private member bills are restricted due to the high party group discipline in parliamentary democracies, ambitious legislators use bill scrutiny to signal their expertise and ability to produce policy to their party peers and underline aspirations for higher offices. Hence, the drafting of amendments follows an intra-party logic in which members of the opposition use legislative review as an intra-party signaling device. Party leaders, on the other hand, rely on these signals and promote legislators that have been active in legislative review to higher office. We collected empirical evidence for both of these hypotheses using original data from over 400 government bills in a large German state-level legislature.

First, our article contributes to the study of legislative review in parliamentary democracies. We move away from studying intra-coalition dynamics in legislative bargaining and provide an explanation for opposition engagement that differs from the dynamics that have been traditionally described in the intra-coalition literature (Martin and Vanberg 2004, 2005; Fortunato 2019; Pedrazzani and Zucchini 2013). Second, we speak to the literature on political ambition and legislative career trajectories in general. While the literature on political ambition and legislative careers has

predominantly relied on the study of bill initiation (Chasquetti and Micozzi 2014; Dockendorff 2019; Herrick 2001; Herrick and Moore 1993; Micozzi 2014*a,b*; Schmitt and Brant 2019; Yildirim, Kocapinar and Ecevit 2019), we highlight that in parliamentary contexts where parties are the dominant actors, party leaders rely on different types of legislative efforts to decide upon promotion.

Our contribution raises questions for the analysis of legislative review more generally. Our individual-level approach to the study of parliamentary scrutiny of government bills might be easily translated to the traditional study of intra-coalition bargaining. While coalition legislators have been described as watchdogs that police the coalition compromise against deviations due to ministerial autonomy, shifting the attention to the individual legislator raises the question who polices the coalition agreement. Are backbenchers the workhorses of bill scrutiny or is the review of coalition policy tightly controlled and predominantly exercised by the leadership of majority parties? In this sense, an individual-level perspective can provide important nuance to the study of legislative review that goes beyond the efforts in this paper.

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