PARLIAMENTARY OPPOSITION IN WESTERN EUROPEAN DEMOCRACIES TODAY: SYSTEMIC OR ISSUE-ORIENTED?
A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF TWO PARLIAMENTARY SYSTEMS.
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Introduction.

This research work aims to analyze an important political-institutional aspect of democratic systems, that is, parliamentary opposition. As Robert Dahl highlighted in 1966, among “the three great milestones in the development of democratic institutions – the right to participate in governmental decisions by casting a vote, the right to be represented, and the right of an organized opposition to appeal for votes against the government in elections and in parliament – the last is, in a highly developed form, so wholly modern that there are people now living who were born before it had appeared in most of Western Europe”¹. Political systems with organized political parties protected by law were considered, indeed, in the 1960s, a modern achievement. Consequently, also a guaranteed parliamentary opposition was seen and studied as a recent, but fundamental feature of democracy. In brief, the existence of an organized opposition was thought to be essential for the stability of the newly formed Western democracies. Today, after forty years from the first work of Robert Dahl on this topic, I wonder whether we need to go on, following that path breaking work and trying to establish what is today the role of opposition in Western democracies and how it has developed and transformed itself, for all these years. The answer is certainly affirmative. The perspective of study has definitely changed, since the 1960s: the opposition is no longer just a guarantee for the stability of democracy; today it is an essential landmark for its functioning and effectiveness. For this reason, I believe, it should be re-examined in depth.

Although opposition is such a fundamental aspect of democratic systems, it has not been explored to any great extent in literature. In the 1960s the publication of numerous books (Dahl, 1966; Ionescu and Madariaga, 1968; Barker, 1971) and the founding of the journal Government and Opposition (1965) transformed the study of opposition into a proper subject of political science. Nevertheless, opposition has often been studied within a larger framework: as a co-subject, usually included in the study of power, government, parliaments, parties, social movements (Ionescu and De Madariaga, 1968). This lack of attention on the phenomenon has certainly various reasons, but for the moment I do not aim to enter into any dispute about which could be the main ones. Since the 1960s, the existing literature has sought to elaborate different typologies of opposition, by mainly taking into account structural and systemic factors, thought to affect its main characteristics and behaviour in Parliament (Duverger, 1951; Sartori, 1966; Oberreuter, 1975; ¹ Dahl, R. A., 1966, Political Opposition in Western Democracies, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, p. xiii.
Pulzer, 1987; Flanagan, 2001). I consider all these works still very functional in the understanding of the phenomenon; nevertheless, the aim of the present work is to go further and to try to give a new contribution to the existing typologies. In order to do that, I will consider the systemic variables taken into account by the existing literature as a starting point in the definition of different types of opposition and I will introduce a new variable, to better understand variations in the behaviour of opposition in the legislative process: the issue-area.

Central to my analysis will be the strategy adopted by opposition in parliamentary systems, in particular, in the legislative process. I will investigate the behaviour of parliamentary opposition at two different levels: the first one, concerning the organisational cohesion of opposition and the relationship among its own members; and the second one, regarding the relationship between opposition and executive. The empirical cases that I will examine in this paper are Belgium and the United Kingdom: respectively, one multiparty system, with coalition governments and one two-party system, with single-party governments. A great part of the existing literature, indeed, asserts that different patterns of opposition correspond to different types of party system. My major research hypothesis is slightly different: I guess this is true as regards the first (internal) level of analysis mentioned above, but not as regards the second (external) level of analysis. In the latter case, I believe that parliamentary opposition behaves in rather similar way in all the systems taken into consideration. Its behaviour varies according to the variation of another fundamental variable, that is, the issue on agenda: but this dynamic is common to all the systems. To conclude this brief introduction, once tested my research hypotheses, at the end of this analysis, my aim is to elaborate a new typology of opposition, as an evolution of the previous ones.

This paper represents a work in progress and it is thought to give the reader a general scheme of my research project and to illustrate some empirical findings, related to the two cases that I have investigated until now. It is consequently divided into two different sections: the first one explaining what is the object of my analysis, which are the main hypotheses that I want to test and what methods I am employing in order to do that; the second one showing some of the results obtained thanks to the study of Belgium and the United Kingdom.
1. Research design.

1.1 Dependent variable and research questions. Distinguishing roles and patterns of opposition in Western European parliamentary democracies.

Parliamentary opposition has been frequently classified according to its nature, composition and behaviour. It has been defined as either responsible or irresponsible; either cohesive or fragmented; either alternative or permanent (Duverger, 1951; Sartori, 1966; Oberreuter, 1975; Pulzer, 1987; Flanagan, 2001). Such a great variety of oppositions has appeared in democratic systems that one single prevailing pattern has never been determined. To scientifically study parliamentary opposition is a complex task. An analytic definition of parliamentary opposition cannot either exclude to refer to the case of its most advanced institutionalisation (the British one), or ignore that several institutional, political and social variations have extended and complicated the general concept of opposition, consequently creating a huge variety of classifications and typologies (Massari, 2004). Nevertheless, there is a definition from which I would like to begin: “Suppose that A determines the conduct of some aspects of the government of a particular political system during some interval. […] Suppose that during this interval B cannot determine the conduct of the government; and that B is opposed to the conduct of government by A. Then B is what we mean by ‘an opposition.’ Note that during some different interval, B might determine the conduct of the government, and A might be ‘in opposition’”.2 This will be the object of my investigation. In particular, I will focus my analysis on the strategy adopted by A or B, when they cannot determine the conduct of the government and so they are in opposition. I will examine their behaviour in the legislative process, to test their organisational cohesion and their relationship with the government.

The term “cohesion” usually refers to unified voting by MPs by political party affiliation. The concept is a legislative (or parliamentary) term and the act is the vote in parliament, especially in plenary session. The object is usually the parliamentary party group as a single entity (Olson, 2003); in my case, the object will be the whole opposition as a single entity, if this is the case, or the absence of an opposition as a single entity, if it is not. Furthermore, what I am going to investigate is the behaviour of opposition towards the government: in particular, I will test the

conduct of opposition in the legislative process, to verify whether it uses to keep a consensual or adversary profile and whether this decision is influenced by any systemic or non-systemic factor.

Several questions arise from Dahl’s definition of opposition: first of all, one question related to the conceptual level. If the role of opposition is ‘to oppose’ the government, what does opposing mean in terms of strategy? And after that, another two questions related to the empirical level arise. Is this role carried out in the same way in all Western European parliamentary democracies or is it possible to distinguish between different types of opposition? And what are the major factors which can explain this possible distinction?

Robert Dahl, in his *Political Opposition in Western Democracies* (1966), suggested a sort of simplification, providing a helpful list of criteria and suggesting to classify different patterns of opposition according to them: the organisational cohesion of the opponents; the competitiveness of the opposition; the site for the encounter between the opposition and government; the distinctiveness of the opposition; the goals and strategies of opposition. In my opinion, all these criteria are still relevant in order to investigate parliamentary opposition and to answer to some of the questions raised above. As I will explain in the next paragraph, in my empirical research, I will follow two different levels of analysis: some of the criteria mentioned above belong to the first level, concerning the internal relationships of opposition (in Dahl’s terms, the organisational cohesion of the opponents), some others belong to the second level, concerning the external relationships between opposition and executive (and so the competitiveness, distinctiveness, goals and strategies of opposition). In relation to these criteria, some other questions arise: again some questions more focused on the empirical level of study. What kind of factors does affect the organisational cohesion of opposition? Is it possible to distinguish different patterns of opposition, among different countries, in relation to the level of organisational cohesion? And what kind of factors does affect the strategy adopted by opposition in respect to the executive? Should we consider these factors as systemic and, therefore, related to the specific characteristics of each political system or should we move on looking for some other intervening variables affecting the behaviour of opposition, which can be common to all the systems?

1.2 In search of a new model: a two-dimension analysis of parliamentary opposition.

In the present paragraph, I will define the model that I will employ to carry out my empirical research of parliamentary opposition. According to Robert Dahl, analysing
parliamentary opposition falls into two different sets: *patterns within countries* and *comparisons among countries* (1966). These two sets consist of different kinds of questions: the first one is more focused on the principal characteristics of parliamentary opposition, its goals and strategies, developed in each country; the second one seeks to understand whether we can distinguish any pattern of parliamentary opposition, what are the main patterns and what factors seem to account for variations among countries. The aim of this research project is to cover both sets of analysis: firstly, trying to understand how does the opposition behave in each parliamentary system under investigation, what are its main characteristics and which kind of strategy does it adopt in Parliament, especially in the legislative process; secondly, trying to understand whether it is possible to speak of any prevailing pattern of opposition and what factors can explain the distinction between these possible patterns.

In both cases, it is necessary, in my opinion, to distinguish at least two different levels of investigation. As I said above, the strategy and behaviour of opposition should be examined, indeed, by separating one internal context from one external context (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1 A two-dimension analysis of Parliamentary Opposition

This two-dimension analysis should focus, on the one hand, on the organisational cohesion of opposition and consequently on the relationship among its own members and, on the other hand, on the external relationship between opposition and the executive. Figure 1 shows the general framework in which I will conduct my analysis. I will examine the behaviour of opposition, in particular, in the legislative process, in order to measure the level of internal cohesion of opposition in voting and amending legislation and to assess the strategy adopted in its confrontation with the government, in particular, in the legislative process. The reason why I have decided to focus my attention mainly on the legislative process is that laws are a unique
resource of government (only government has the power to enact laws determining what people can do), but at the same time they are a unique resource of opposition too. The opposition, not the government, is the one with the great interest in the confrontation with the government about legislation. A government’s legislative record gives evidence of the extent to which its actions are adversary or consensual, because every government bill presented to the House gives the opposition the opportunity to support or oppose what the government proposes. Opposition has to decide which strategy to adopt among at least two major alternatives: being adversarial and emphasizing divisions or being consensual (that nevertheless does not mean cooperative, as we will see later). This is the reason why I decided to investigate, in particular, the behaviour of opposition in voting and amending legislation.

1.3 Independent variables. Different political system, different way of opposing?

The existing literature has highlighted the influence of some important factors on the main characteristics of opposition in Parliament, elaborating different typologies of opposition, by mainly taking into account structural and systemic variables. In the present paragraph, I will examine some of them and, in particular, the ones that I will consider as fundamental independent variables in my analysis too.

The electoral system is certainly one crucial aspect affecting the characteristics and behaviour of opposition within the Parliament. Electoral systems, which define how votes are cast and seats are allocated, remarkably differ from one country to another and they are commonly assumed to affect the chances of success of competing parties. Selecting an electoral system is not just a technical decision, it may have huge consequences for the functioning of the political system: to such an extent that applying two different formulas to the same distribution of votes might produce quite different outcomes in terms of members elected for each party (Blais and Massicotte, 1996; Baldini, Pappalardo, 2004; Bowler, Carter, Farrell, 2006). This raises the question of whether electoral systems matter and of what concrete effect they have on the main characteristics, goals and strategies of parliamentary opposition. As we know, it is possible to distinguish two types of political consequences of electoral systems: psychological consequences, which take place before the vote and mechanical consequences, which occur after the vote (Duverger, 1951; Baldini, Pappalardo, 2004). The former affect the vote, while the latter affect the outcome of the election, given the vote. What I am particularly interested in here is the second kind of effects of electoral systems, concerning the relationship between the number of
votes that one party obtains and the number of seats that it gets in Parliament: the number of parties that get represented in the legislature, the number of seats provided to majority and opposition and the composition of the executive power are all fundamental aspects affecting the actual performance of opposition in Parliament, as regards both its organisational cohesion and its main goals and strategies in respect to the government. As we will see in the next paragraphs and also in the study of the empirical cases, many differences derive from an official opposition composed by one single party and an opposition composed by numerous parties, especially in terms of internal organization. Furthermore, the concentration of the executive power in a strong single-party majority cabinet (as in the British case) gives the opposition very different political opportunities of action in relation to the government, compared with those given by the concentration of the executive in either a minority government (as in the case of the Scandinavian or some Spanish governments) or a multiparty coalition government (as in the Belgian or Italian cases). In the first case, parliamentary opposition has neither space nor interest for intervention or negotiation with the government in office, which is already supported by a strong and disciplined single-party majority; nevertheless, this situation obliges the official parliamentary opposition to propose itself as constructive and alternative, in order to compete for power at the following election. In the second case, the life of parliamentary opposition seems to be more advantageous, in particular, for smaller parties, which represent the crucial allies of the government, in order to get the majority in Parliament, when divisions on legislation occur. In the third case, in which competition takes place between two more or less stable coalitions of parties, many variations can happen: the main one concerns the degree to which the coalitions are identified before the election. Indeed, when alliances are unpredictable before the elections, most of the time, we can no longer speak of alternative coalitions, but of single parties competing for government, which strategically ally with each other, only after the elections (as in Belgium or Italy before 1993). In this case, the cohesion of opposition is very low and we cannot speak of opposition as one single actor, but we should speak of plural oppositions or minority parties.

There is another variable strictly related to the ones mentioned above that is fundamental in the study of the main characteristics, goals and strategies of opposition and it is the party system. The first scholar who began to consider the nature of parties and the structure of party system as a determining variable for the concrete performance of rights and rules of opposition was Maurice Duverger, who treated the subject in a special paragraph at the end of his most famous work, *Political Parties*. Duverger highlighted the huge influence of the party system on distinguishing between different ways of opposing: two-party systems and multiparty systems
produced extremely different patterns of opposition. “Multi-partism and bipartism give rise to quite different structures. The two-party system tends to make the opposition into a real institution. To the division of functions between government and opposition there corresponds an equally definite distinction in the organisational sphere between majority party and minority party […] In a multi-party system this institutional form is eschewed because the line of demarcation between opposition and government is not clear”3. According to Maurice Duverger, not only the number of parties affected the nature and form of the opposition: also alliances, party strength and internal organisation played a role. A major party, which grouped many diverse and often contradictory interests, exercised the role of opposition in a very different way compared with a minor party, which grouped just a few individuals or a few interests, but particularly well defined. Finally, according to the author of Political Parties, the nature of opposition was strictly related to the general context of the party conflict and three different types could be distinguished: “a conflict without principles, a conflict over subsidiary principles and a conflict over basic principles”4. At that time, the first type was the rule in the United States; UK and Northern European countries came in the second category and Italy in the third. This distinction is very significant: conflict without principle or over subsidiary principles does not mean the absence of competition among parties, of course. In the US as well as in the UK, the two main parties compete for government and frequently alternate in office. On the other hand, in Italy, until the early 1990s, the conflict over basic principles, which characterised the competition between the two major political parties (DC and PCI), did not permit a real alternation in government, with relevant consequences on the main goals and strategies of opposition.

To better understand these dynamics we should think to another fundamental contribution to the study of this topic: Giovanni Sartori, indeed, improved Duverger’s first typology by distinguishing between three different patterns of opposition. Opposition could be responsible and constitutional; irresponsible and constitutional; irresponsible and not constitutional. In brief, according to Giovanni Sartori, opposition was supposed to oppose, but not to obstruct; it was supposed to be constructive, but not disruptive; and it presupposed “consent on fundamentals, that is, consent at the community and regime level”. Indeed, what the opposition had to oppose was “a government, not the political system as such”5. The notion of constitutional opposition

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4 Ibid., p. 418.
needed also to be identified with reference to the principle of alternation in power and the type of party system within which it worked. Real alternative governments, according to Sartori, only occurred in two-party systems, while in systems with more than two parties, something different usually took place, depending on how many parties precisely existed. However, the most relevant distinction formulated by Giovanni Sartori was perhaps the one between responsible and irresponsible opposition. “An opposition which knows that it may be called to ‘respond’, i.e. which is oriented towards governing and has a reasonable chance to govern […] is likely to behave responsibly, in a restrained and realistic fashion. On the other hand, a ‘permanent opposition’ which […] knows it will not be called on to respond, is likely to take the path of ‘irresponsible opposition”⁶. Speaking of this distinction, Giovanni Sartori, who was writing in the mid-1960s, had certainly in mind the Italian case and its polarised multiparty system (1976), characterised by the presence of a far right (MSI) and a strong extreme left (PCI). Of course, many social and political changes have occurred, since that time. The relevance of ideological and social cleavages seems to be declining: economic growth and the spread of democracy have reduced the differences between social classes. Therefore, while conservative parties have adapted to the Welfare state, the socialist and communist parties have adapted to democracy and its rules. Nevertheless, the distinction between responsible and irresponsible opposition is still working in some European party systems and it will be very functional in my analysis, in particular, in the study of Belgium, where the extreme right (Vlaams Belang and Front National) still represents a typical example of permanent and irresponsible opposition vs. both a responsible government and a responsible opposition (composed by all the other political parties not in office).

1.4 Research hypotheses. Parliamentary opposition today: systemic or issue-oriented?

As I said at the beginning of this paper, the aim of the present work is to try to give a new contribution to the existing typologies of opposition: in order to do that, I will consider the systemic variables mentioned above as a starting point in the definition of different types of opposition and I will introduce a new variable, the issue-area, to better understand variations in the behaviour of opposition in the legislative process. Furthermore, another relevant difference between my research model and the one employed by the existing literature on this topic is that I will investigate the impact of the selected independent variables in two distinctive dimensions.

Indeed, I certainly agree that different patterns of opposition correspond to different types of electoral and party system, but I guess this is true regarding the first level of my analysis, that is, the internal cohesion of parliamentary opposition, but not regarding the second level of analysis, that is, the relationship between opposition and executive. In this case, I believe that parliamentary opposition behaves in rather similar way in all the systems taken into consideration and that its behaviour is rather influenced by a fundamental intervening variable, that is, the issue on agenda.

This idea is confirmed also by some evidence from the existing literature, which suggests that a favourable behaviour of the opposition members regarding the legislation promoted by the government was quite widespread, already in the 1960s and in the 1970s (Rose, 1984; Di Palma, 1977) in both two-party systems, with single-party governments and polarised multiparty systems, with more or less stable coalition governments. One of the most interesting findings of Richard Rose’s analysis (1984) was that, while the conventional model of the British government used to assume that parties were adversaries and meant to oppose each other in parliamentary debates as well as at general elections, reality was slightly different. Evidence from the legislative records of two legislatures (1970-74 and 1974-79) led by alternative majorities (respectively Conservative and Labour) revealed that consensus was much more spread than what was expected. As I said above, the presence or absence of divisions on legislation give the clearest and most consistent evidence of which model of behaviour the opposition parties in parliament follow and this behaviour was mainly consensual even in the British case (the opposition divided the House only 22% of time, from 1970 to 1979). Furthermore, the analysis of the party composition of the majorities supporting legislation, in the first five Italian Parliaments, revealed that support used to go often beyond the proponents and their parties. According to Giuseppe Di Palma (1977), in no parliament, since 1948, enacted legislation obtained on the average less than 75% of the votes cast: an average that could not be reached by the parliamentary majority alone, even assuming that such majorities were always cohesively behind every bill – which was not always the case, in Italy. What is even more significant is that there was quite a widespread favourable behaviour of the PCI towards legislation initiated by the government or by members of the parliamentary majority: more than 70% of the bills initiated by the government or by Christian Democratic members alone were approved with the vote of the Communist party.

Hence, we could observe two different electoral and party systems, different composition of the executives, but almost an identical behaviour of parliamentary opposition towards the government’s initiatives: this was quite a surprising result, which invited me to look for some
explanations. I believe that these explanations might be found by separating the analysis of opposition into two different levels. On the one hand, I guess, differences among systems will result by the analysis of the opposition’s organisational cohesion; on the other hand, similarities rather than dissimilarities will be found thanks to the analysis of the strategy adopted by opposition in the legislative process and, consequently, in the strategy adopted by opposition in its relationship with the executive. My first hypothesis is the following:

**H.1** The level of *internal cohesion* of opposition varies in relation to the variation of the electoral and party system. In a two-party system the internal cohesion of the *official* parliamentary opposition, composed by one single party, is certainly stronger than the cohesion of parliamentary opposition in a multiparty system. Furthermore, among different multiparty systems, the degree to which coalitions are identified before the election is positively correlated to the level of cohesion of opposition in Parliament.

I expect to find a higher level of cohesion among the opposition members in a multiparty system with structured bipolar dynamics than in a fragmented multiparty system with unpredictable electoral alliances. In order to test this first hypothesis, I will analyse the behaviour of opposition in voting and amending legislation and I will employ a simple index, built to measure the level of cohesion of opposition’s parties:

\[
I_c = \frac{|V_y-V_n|}{N}
\]

\(V_y\) and \(V_n\) respectively correspond to the sum of the favourable and opposing voting behaviours of each opposition party (I won’t consider abstention). \(N\) is the total number of the opposition parties. Therefore, the index of cohesion will be calculated by dividing the difference (in absolute terms) between the number of opposition parties which vote *yes* and the number of opposition parties which vote *no* to a government proposal, with the number of opposition parties. My second hypothesis is strictly related to the first one:

**H.2** Variation in the main structural and systemic variables taken into consideration (electoral and party system and strength and composition of the executives) does not remarkably
affect the strategy adopted by parliamentary opposition in its relationship with the executive, in particular, in the legislative process.

Unlike most of the literature on this subject, I believe that parliamentary opposition mainly plays its role in both two-party and multiparty systems, in particular, as regards its main activities of voting and amending legislation. It does oppose the government on its main acts; it is not inclined to any compromise when the issue on the agenda is very relevant and it seeks to present itself as a credible alternative in front of the electorate. But the strategy adopted in order to do that is not always necessarily adversary, in either two-party or multiparty systems. As I said above, it is interesting to remark that several analyses of party composition of the majorities supporting legislation have revealed that support often goes beyond the proponents and their parties in most parliamentary democracies. A favourable behaviour of the opposition members as regards the legislation promoted by the government is quite widespread. Parliamentary opposition tends to adopt a consensual behaviour in many occasions. Analysing data on voting behaviour more in depth, it comes out that this tendency for consensus is mainly influenced by the issue at hand. The highest level of consensus is usually registered on matters of national interest commonly affecting the whole electorate. “Foreign affairs and defence are prototype examples of such issues”. On the other hand, “as parties are expected to represent different socioeconomic interests in the electorate, then divisions should be frequent on economic and social policies that directly touch these interests”. Therefore, my third research hypothesis is the following:

H.3 To the variation of the policy area corresponds one quite different conduct of the opposition in Parliament. The behaviour of parliamentary opposition varies in relation to the specific policy area that it is supposed to face, to such an extent that we might speak of an issue-oriented parliamentary opposition, instead of a systemic one.

What I am going to test, especially through the analysis of voting in the House on some particular issues, is whether opposition modifies its voting behaviour in relation to the issue on agenda. In order to test these hypothesis, I will analyse the behaviour of opposition in voting and amending legislation and I will measure the level of opposition’s consensus towards the executive

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7 Rose, R., 1984, Do parties make a difference?, London and Basing Stoke, Macmillan Press LTD, pp. 80-81
as the percentage of favourable voting behaviour of opposition parties about the legislation promoted by the government.

Once tested my hypotheses, thanks to the obtained results, I should be able to classify the possible different types of opposition, in relation to the criteria of internal cohesion and strategy adopted, by employing the model shown on Table 1. The main aim is to answer to two important questions, in relation to each case under investigation: *is the cohesion among the opposition members, in voting and amending legislation, high or low? Is the strategy adopted by opposition in relation to the governments and its proposals mainly consensual or adversary?*

Tab. 1 A New Typology of Parliamentary Opposition, between Cohesion and Consensus

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cohesion</th>
<th>Consensus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The final results will be shown in the table above, by locating each system under investigation in the right space, in relation to the answers given to the previous two questions. And there will be one different table for each issue area taken into consideration.

1.5 Case selection and methodology. Parliamentary opposition in Belgium and United Kingdom.

*Case selection.* To carry out my empirical research, I have selected two different cases among the Western European parliamentary democracies: Belgium and the UK. These two cases show remarkable differences in relation to the main independent variables taken into consideration. In Table 2, we can observe the general features of the two countries, regarding the electoral system. The 150 members of the Belgian House of Representatives are elected through PR representation, in twenty multimember constituencies and the possibility of preferential voting (until 1995, there were thirty constituencies and 212 members of the House). Given these electoral rules, the number of parties represented in the Belgian parliament considerably rose, since the 1960s and 1970s. This drastic growth brought to an increasing difficulty in the
government coalitions’ formation and to a lower electoral responsiveness of parties. Every coalition began to need at least four parties to get a proper majority and every coalition had to find an agreement between the Flemish and the French-speaking parties. The pivotal and usually largest party family, the Christian Democrats, remained in office for decades, choosing its coalition partners between the Socialists and the Liberals, until the 1999 election, when the two latter parties formed a coalition together with the Greens, for the first time since the 1960s.

Tab. 2 Electoral Systems in Belgium and UK

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Lower Chamber Seats</th>
<th>Lower Chamber Electoral system</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Belgium</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>PR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK</td>
<td>646</td>
<td>Plurality</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The British electoral system is a plurality system, better known as first past the post, which remarkably favours the representation of the two biggest parties in Parliament and which has consequently effected also the institutionalisation of an official single-party opposition (always represented by the Conservative and Labour party in turn). Furthermore, the UK has always experienced a total alternation in office (a single-party government led by the Conservative party has always been replaced by a single-party government led by the Labour party), while Belgium has always experienced just partial alternation in office, even if the frequency of change in the party composition of the executive has always been very high.

Fig. 2 Coalition and single-party governments in Western Europe, 1945-2006
Figure 2 shows the distribution of coalition and single-party governments among the two selected cases. As we can see, the UK shows an absolute predominance of one-party governments in the period 1945-2005, meanwhile Belgium shows a prevalence of coalition governments, with some rare exceptions. Finally, Tables 3.1 and 3.2 present the different legislatures that I am going to investigate in each of the two cases. In order to test my hypotheses, I will start my analysis from the early 1990s and the following ones are the legislatures that I am going to consider: as regards Belgium, Dehaene I and II (Christian Democrat-Socialist coalition government) from 1992 to 1999, Verhofstadt I (Liberal-Socialist-Green coalition government) from 1999 to 2003 and Verhofstadt II (Liberal-Socialist coalition government), from 2003 to nowadays; as regards the UK, Major II (Conservative government) from 1992 to 1997 and Blair I and II (Labour government) from 1997 to 2005.

Tab. 3.1 Belgian Legislatures under investigation – Governments’ composition and duration

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party composition</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Duration</th>
<th>Seats share</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dehaene I</td>
<td>1992-95</td>
<td>1170</td>
<td>56.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dehaene II</td>
<td>1995-99</td>
<td>1486</td>
<td>54.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verhofstadt I</td>
<td>1999-03</td>
<td>1458</td>
<td>62.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verhofstadt II</td>
<td>2003-07</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>64.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Tab. 3.2 British Legislatures under investigation – Governments’ composition and duration

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Duration</th>
<th>Seats share</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Major II</td>
<td>1992-97</td>
<td>1831</td>
<td>51.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blair I</td>
<td>1997-01</td>
<td>1498</td>
<td>62.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blair II</td>
<td>2001-05</td>
<td>1427</td>
<td>55.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Methodology. As I said above, a favourable behaviour of the opposition members as regards the legislation promoted by the government is quite widespread; furthermore, analysing data on voting behaviour more in depth, it comes out that this tendency for consensus is mainly influenced by the issue at hand. On the one hand, the highest level of consensus is usually registered on matters of national interest commonly affecting the whole electorate: foreign affairs and defence are the most fitting examples of such issues. On the other hand, as parties are expected to represent different socioeconomic interests in the electorate, then divisions should be
frequent on economic and social policies that directly touch these interests, so mainly on the 
internal affaires. This is the reason why I have decided to investigate the behaviour of 
Parliamentary opposition in relation to two very different policy areas: the budgetary and foreign 
policy area.

Voting on budgeting measures is certainly one of the most important activity of 
Parliament (and parliamentary opposition) in all democratic systems. Public spending and 
taxation has a high impact on the public and parliament provides “the crucial link between 
government – and its power to take money from the public and to spend it in their behalf – and 
the public themselves”8. The budgetary is a high spending department, very complex to examine, 
because it often regards many different sectors. Especially on the discussion of the annual budget, 
concerning the public spending, all the other policy areas are involved. Therefore, it is very 
interesting to analyse it for two main reasons: first, for some aspects, it is the most 
comprehensive policy area that I can investigate. Second, the annual budget is “the act” of the 
year, considered the most important act of the government, in many Western European 
democracies and it will be very interesting to see whether the opposition behaves in an either 
consensual or adversarial way and whether this behaviour changes in relation to the different kind 
of system in which it operates. Some of the results collected demonstrate that, in both the cases 
under investigation, parliamentary opposition is never inclined to compromise on budget and this 
behaviour does not change within the Parliamentary Committees either: another very interesting 
finding, since they are usually considered the site of encounter between government and 
opposition par excellence.

As regards the foreign policy, I have decided to split this issue area into three sub-groups; 
this because I believe that, within such a huge area, it would have been misleading to focus just 
on some aspects, such as the votes on the international crises and peace-keeping interventions or 
the votes on European issues and treaties. The issues that I chose within the foreign policy 
macro-area are the following: European integration, developmental aid and international crises. In this 
case, I will be able to test whether the behaviour of opposition varies in relation to the specific 
issue that it is supposed to face, both within the same policy area and between the two different 
macro-areas under investigation.

I have employed two different research methods, in order to test my research hypotheses. 
First, I have examined the voting behaviour of parliamentary opposition in relation to the two policy 
spheres mentioned above. I have selected a number of relevant bills debated and voted in the

House and I have analysed both the voting behaviour and the amending activity of Parliamentary opposition on these bills. Second, I have made a number of qualitative interviews to the clerks working in the Parliamentary Committees, related to the same policy areas that I am interested in (the Budget and the Foreign Affairs Committees). Indeed, I believe it is very significant to report the experiences and the perceptions of third actors, supposed to be more objective and reliable than opposition members themselves. Furthermore, one of the most relevant problems concerning the analysis of the Committee’s work is that reports are not always public and accessible (included presence lists and voting results, all essential data to my investigation). Therefore, interviewing the Committee clerks has a double task: it provides me a large amount of information, otherwise unavailable, and it gives me the real perception of third actors on what is the behaviour of opposition within the Committees. For this reason, beyond these qualitative interviews, I also submitted a questionnaire to all the Committee clerks working in all departments: this in order to have a broader overview of what is the behaviour of opposition within the Committees and to compare it with its behaviour within the House.

2. First empirical findings: parliamentary opposition in Belgium and the United Kingdom.

In the present chapter, I will present some empirical results concerning the first two cases that I have investigated: Belgium and the United Kingdom. As I said above, I have employed two different research methods, in order to test my research hypotheses, but what I am going to show in the present chapter is the result of the analysis of opposition’s voting behaviour in Belgium, from 1992 to 2006, and in UK, from 1997 to 2005. Before going on with the presentation of the collected data, since my investigation concerns the behaviour of opposition in the legislative process, I will briefly illustrate what are the formal rules which regulate this process, in the Belgian and British Parliament.

2.1 Parliamentary rules and legislative process in Belgium and UK

Belgium. In the Belgian Parliament, to become law, a bill has to go through numerous stages in each chamber (except for the bills which are exclusive prerogative of one of the two

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9 In all the steps just proposed, I will refer just to one chamber for each country examined: more specifically, I will analyse the behaviour of parliamentary opposition within the lower chamber of my research cases.
chambers). Bills introduced by a Government Minister are known as Government bills, whereas bills introduced by a parliamentary member are called Private Members’ bills. The President of the House decides to which committees the bills should be sent. The committees have the task of examining Government and Private Members’ bills sent to them. They should appoint, with an absolute majority, one of their members as rapporteur, to report to the House later on. The distribution of rapporteurs between the parliamentary majority and opposition is proportionately made among the members of the committees. Afterwards, deliberations on Government bills and Private Members’ bills should be done in plenary sittings, including a general discussion and a discussion of the single articles. The articles, with the amendments proposed by the committees, should be discussed in their numerical order and each MP has the right to propose further amendments. The House should deliberate on one amendment only if it is supported by at least five MPs.

After voting article by article, a nominal vote is held on the whole bill. Once a bill is passed, it should be submitted to the other House. But since the 1993 Constitutional Reform (brought into force in 1995), bicameral procedures are requested just in some cases: for instance, the budget is exclusive responsibility of the Chamber of Deputies. Anyway, when bicameral procedures are provided by the Constitution, a bill may travel back and forth between the two houses several times, because the exactly same text should be agreed between the houses. I have investigated the voting behaviour of opposition as regards the last vote in the Chamber of Deputies, including the amending activity.

**United Kingdom.** The British procedure for passing different types of Bills is quite similar in both Houses. A Bill must pass through several stages to become a law and the following stages take place in both Houses: first reading (formal introduction of the Bill without debate); second reading (general debate); Committee stage (detailed examination, debate and amendments: in the House of Commons this stage takes place in a Public Bill Committee); report stage (opportunity for further amendments); third reading (final chance for debate - amendments are possible in the Lords). When a Bill has passed through both Houses, it returns to the first House (where it started) for the second House’s amendments to be considered. Both Houses must agree on the final text. There may be several rounds of exchanges between the two Houses until agreement is reached on every word of the Bill. Once this happens the Bill proceeds to the next stages, that is, Royal Assent (granted by the monarch) and Act of Parliament (the proposals of the Bill have now become law).
Although it does not seem so, the British voting procedure is rather peculiar. The House of Commons votes by dividing. MPs generally vote by walking through either an Aye or a No Lobby and their names are recorded as they file past the clerks and are then counted by the Tellers. However this does not always happen. Indeed, the rules now embodied in Standing Orders 38-41 say that: “When a motion is put to the vote, the Speaker (or a deputy) says: The Question is, that ... [for example, the Bill be read a second time]. As many as are of that opinion say Aye - there then follows a chorus of shouted Ayes - of the contrary No – and a similar shout of No - I think the Ayes have it. If there then follow shouts of No, the Speaker calls the division by announcing Clear the Lobbies. The division bells throughout the building ring, the annunciators display Division and the MPs make their way to the Chamber, where, for divisions taking place on party lines, whips are on duty to remind the uncertain MPs which way (if any) their party is voting. Understanding this procedure is fundamental in order to better comprehend the results of my analysis later on. The most important thing to remind, indeed, is that not all legislation passes through a formal vote (division) in the House of Commons. If there is cross-party agreement on a piece of legislation, then no division takes place, since parties won’t divide the House when they agree. Where they don’t agree, however, divisions will take place, and those divisions are likely to be Labour-Conservative divisions, since it is more likely to be the Official Opposition who decide to divide the House. Therefore, to analyse the voting behaviour of opposition just on divisions would be misleading, as we will see in the next paragraphs.

2.2 Opposition in the House: cohesive or fragmented?

My first research hypothesis is that the level of internal cohesion of opposition varies in relation to the variation of some specific systemic factors, such as the electoral and party system and the strength and composition of the executives. In a two-party system, with single-party government, the internal cohesion of the official parliamentary opposition, composed by one single party, is certainly stronger than the cohesion of parliamentary opposition in a multiparty system, with coalition government. In the present paragraph, I will show some empirical data collected in order to verify this first hypothesis, while in the next paragraph, I will illustrate the first findings regarding my second and third hypotheses. In order to test this first hypothesis, I have analysed the behaviour of opposition in voting and amending legislation in Belgium and UK, by employing an index built to measure the level of cohesion of opposition’s parties:
As I said above, $V_f$ and $V_n$ respectively correspond to the sum of the favourable and opposing voting behaviours of each opposition party (I won’t consider abstention). $N$ is the total number of the opposition parties. Therefore, the index of cohesion will be calculated by dividing the difference (in absolute terms) between the number of opposition parties which vote yes and the number of opposition parties which vote no to a government proposal, with the number of opposition parties. $I_c = 0$ represents the lowest level of cohesion among the opposition parties, when exactly 50% of parties votes yes and 50% votes no. On the opposite side, $I_c = 1$ represents the highest level of cohesion of opposition, when all the parties vote in the same way. Whether it is a favourable or contrary way, it doesn’t matter, of course, because afterwards I will also examine the adversarial/consensus strategy of opposition in relation to the government. Here I am just interested in the level of internal cohesion among the opposition parties.

There are two things regarding this index to point out. First of all, in a two-party system, such as the British one, there is no need for the official opposition to look for any coalition partner among the minority parties, therefore, it would be useless to search for cohesion among these actors. In this case, it will be more functional to count the number of votes given by the official opposition to the government’s proposals and afterwards to make a separate analysis of the voting behaviour of the other minority parties (in particular, the Liberal Democrats). Second, in multiparty systems, this index does not take into account the parliamentary weight of each opposition party, on purpose. Indeed, what I am particularly interested in here is to verify whether the opposition parties adopt a common strategy towards the government and in front of the electorate.

Figure 3 shows the general index of cohesion of opposition, in relation to the votes on the Budget Général des Dépenses and on foreign policy issues (divided in European integration, international crises and developmental aid) in Belgium, from 1992 to 2006, and the votes on the Finance Bill and again on foreign policy issues, in the UK, from 1997 to 2005. As we can see, the two countries shows a remarkable difference on the general index of cohesion: the level of cohesion of the Belgian parliamentary opposition, indeed, is quite low ($0.5254$), while the level of cohesion of the British opposition (represented here by the Conservative party) is very high. As I said above, $I_c = 1$ represents the highest level of cohesion of opposition, when all the parties (or, in this case, the party members) vote in the same way. The level of cohesion of the British
opposition is 0.9962, which means that is very close to the maximum. Since 1997, indeed, some Conservative MPs have decided to rebel to their whip and to vote in a different way from what the party said, just a few times: in particular, this happened on some foreign policy issues, such as the declaration of war to Iraq in 2003.

However, even splitting the analysis of cohesion by issue area, the result remains almost the same. As we can observe in Figure 4 and 5, indeed, the degree of cohesion of the Belgian opposition shifts from 0.5046, in the budgetary area, to 0.5714 in the foreign policy area. Therefore, it remains quite low. On the opposite side, in the UK, the level of cohesion remains very high in both areas: from 1, in the budgetary area, to 0.9913 in the foreign policy area.
These results seem to confirm my first research hypothesis. In a fragmented multiparty system, such as Belgium, opposition does not adopt any common strategy in voting and amending legislation. Just party families, as the Flemish and Francophone Liberals or the Flemish and Francophone Christian Democrats, use to vote in the same way and to support the amendments proposed by the other twin party. As I said above, in my opinion, the reason of this low cohesion is that the Belgian opposition parties are too weak, in terms of both votes and seats, to be able to compete alone for government. Given the Belgian PR system, parties in opposition always represent also one potential partner of the current government parties at the following election. Therefore, it seems that no opposition party has any interest to work on a lasting relationship with any other opposition member. Furthermore, one of the stronger opposition parties (in terms of seats) is the extreme right, anti-system Vlaams Belang and no coalition can be made with this party by any other opposition party (with the exception of the Front National, the other extreme-right party, which has never gained more than two seats in Parliament). On the other hand, in a two-party system such as the British one, the official opposition has a great interest to present itself as cohesive as possible in front of the electorate, in order to compete for government at the following election. Whether to this cohesiveness corresponds also an adversary behaviour towards the executive will be the topic of the next paragraph.

2.3 Opposition in the House: adversary, consensual or issue-oriented?

As I already said, I believe that variation in the main structural and systemic variables does not remarkably affect the strategy adopted by parliamentary opposition in its relationship with the executive, in particular, in the legislative process. I think, indeed, that parliamentary
opposition mainly plays its role in both proportional and plurality systems, in both two-party and multiparty systems, as regards its main activities of voting and amending legislation. It does oppose the government on its main acts, it is not inclined to any compromise when the issue on the agenda is very relevant and it seeks to present itself as a credible alternative in front of the electorate. Nevertheless, the strategy adopted in order to do that is not always necessarily adversary. Parliamentary opposition tends to adopt a consensual behaviour in many occasions. And analysing data on voting behaviour more in depth, it comes out that this tendency for consensus is mainly influenced by the issue at hand. Therefore, I guess that to the variation of the policy area corresponds one quite different conduct of the opposition in Parliament, to such an extent that we might speak of an issue-oriented parliamentary opposition, instead of a systemic one.

The analysis of the votes on the budgetary and foreign policy area in Belgium (always from 1992 to 2006) and in the UK (from 1997 to 2005) seems to confirm these hypotheses. Looking at data collected, I can assert that opposition does modify its voting behaviour in relation to the issue on agenda. Figures 6, 7, 8, and 9 illustrate the voting behaviour of the four mainstream parties which have been in opposition in Belgium, since 1992. The Christian Democrat CVP (now CD&V) and PSC (now CDH) were in government until 1999 and since that time have been in opposition; the Liberal PVV (now VLD) and PRL (now MR) were in opposition from 1992 to 1999 and have been in government for the last 8 years. As we can see, the level of favourable voting behaviour of these parties towards government legislation (measured in a scale form 0 to 1), when they were in opposition, remarkably change in relation to the issue area under discussion. The level of consensus towards budgetary measures is, indeed, quite low for the Christian Democrats and very low for the Liberals. But looking at the foreign policy area, this adversary tendency clearly moves towards a more consensual behaviour.

It is necessary to remind that within data include votes on both bills and amendments and this is the reason why we can observe some particular results on Figure 10 and 11, regarding the green Agalev-Ecolo and the extreme right VB. Those two parties were, indeed, much inclined to present many amendments to the government legislation and, of course, to vote in favour of these amendments. This helps explaining a higher tendency to consensus also in the budgetary area, for both parties; while, regarding the foreign policy area, the opposite tendency, especially during the 1990s governments, has different reasons. Within this issue area, European integration was perceived by these parties as a symbolic issue: on the one side, regional and extreme right parties were strongly euro-sceptical, while the Greens opposed the idea of an Economic Union, made by the State leaders and far from the citizens (at least until 1999,
when they joined the majority supporting the new government). On the other side, the main political parties of government and opposition used to support the various proposals regarding the European integration, without any partisan view, no matter who was leading the government. This consensual behaviour was more widespread even among the other parties (Greens, VB and regionalist parties) in the other issues under investigation, belonging to this area and regarding developmental aid and international crises.
Figures 12 illustrate the voting behaviour of the Conservative party, the British official opposition, since 1997 to 2005. Exactly as in the previous case, we can observe that opposition does modify its voting behaviour in relation to the issue on agenda. Again on a scale from 0 to 1, we can see that the level of consensus, given by the favourable voting behaviour of opposition towards the government’s proposals, remarkably change in relation to the issue under debate. On the one hand, in the budgetary area, opposition tends to be completely adversarial and to vote
against government’s bills most of the time. On the other hand, in the foreign policy area, this conduct changes and opposition becomes more consensual.

![Fig. 12 Conservative favourable voting behaviour by issue](image)

Furthermore, what we should remind looking at the British data is that not all legislation passes through a formal vote in the House of Commons. If there is cross-party agreement on a piece of legislation, then no division takes place: parties won’t divide the House when they agree. Where they don’t agree, divisions will take place and those divisions are likely to be Labour-Conservative divisions, since it is more likely to be the Official Opposition who decide to divide the House. This means that all divisions I have examined, in both policy areas, were already supposed to be quite adversarial, otherwise the House would not have divided at all. Philip Cowley (2002), a British scholar and expert of the MPs voting behaviour, has identified two different measures of consensus of opposition towards the government: the consensus which exists between the two major parties on the principle of legislation (68% in 2001-2005 legislature) and the consensus which exists between them on all votes (5%). So the idea that all legislation in the British Parliament sees adversarial politics is not true, but when there are divisions in the House it is quite rare to see opposition voting with the government.

Therefore, especially regarding the foreign policy area, most of the enacted legislation I was interested in passed without a formal vote in the House (in particular, issues concerning developmental aid). Even so, a different conduct of opposition in relation to the issue on agenda is evident from my data. And this is so also looking at the voting behaviour of the Liberal Democrats, in Figure 13.
Conclusions.

As I said at the beginning, this paper represents a work in progress. It is thought to give the reader a general scheme of my research project, that obviously needs to be implemented, and to show some empirical results supporting my main research hypotheses. What I can say, for the moment, is that data collected until now have all confirmed my main research hypotheses. According to the data gathered in Belgium and UK, the level of internal cohesion of opposition does actually vary in relation to the variation of the systemic variables taken into consideration. In the British two-party system, the internal cohesion of the official parliamentary opposition, composed by one single party, is much stronger than the cohesion of parliamentary opposition in a multiparty system such as the Belgian one. Furthermore, variation in the electoral and party system does not seem to remarkably affect the strategy adopted by parliamentary opposition in its relationship with the executive, in the legislative process. On my data, it is possible to observe quite a similar behaviour of opposition in all the systems under investigation, when it has to confront itself with the government. Parliamentary opposition is more issue-oriented, than consensual or adversary in a systemic way. Analysing data on voting behaviour more in depth, it has come out that the tendency for either a consensual or an adversary behaviour is mainly influenced by the issue at hand.

This two-dimension model of analysis seems to be quite functional in the study of parliamentary opposition: it has been very useful to investigate parliamentary opposition in a new way, by keeping separated two different contexts, in which opposition might behave in a very different way. I believe that different types of opposition exist in Western European
parliamentary democracies, but in order to distinguish them and to understand which factors can explain this distinction, we need to separately analyse the behaviour of opposition regarding the internal relationship among its own actors and its external relationship with the executive. At the end of this research work, I hope to be able to confirm the usefulness of this model, which might be valid in the study of many other empirical cases and I hope to give a significant contribution to the understanding of one of the most important aspects of the functioning of contemporary democracies, that is, parliamentary opposition.
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