

# **Rewarding some, but not all? The selectoral consequences of parliamentary activity for newcomers and experienced MPs in Belgium (1995-2019)**

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## **Summary**

This article examines whether political parties reward the parliamentary activity of members of parliament (MPs) through candidate selection processes. Previous research on this question provides mixed evidence. Moreover, studies often disregard potentially unequal effects among different kinds of MPs. Using new data on all members of the Belgian Chamber of Representatives between 1995 and 2019 (N=1,108), this contribution shows that several types of parliamentary activity indeed matter both for MPs' general renomination as well as for their claim to realistic list positions. Furthermore, our study provides evidence that parliamentary activity matters more for the reselection of newcomers than for experienced MPs.

**Keywords:** accountability, Belgium, candidate selection, parliamentary behaviour, political parties

## **Introduction**

The accountability of elected representatives is a necessary condition for the well-functioning of representative democracies. Ever since the seminal work on incumbent performance and on the personal vote by Ferejohn and colleagues (Ferejohn, 1986; Cain, Ferejohn, & Fiorina, 1984), scholars have been interested in the link between representatives' behaviour and voter support. Although this 'electoral connection' also gained attention in party-centred, European contexts (Bouteca et al., 2019; Bowler, 2010; Bräuninger, Brunner, & Däubler, 2012; Martin, 2010), a growing body of studies redirect their focus towards the consequences of legislators' parliamentary work for their prospects of being reselected as an electoral candidate, which is a first but crucial hurdle that incumbents must overcome prior to running for re-election (e.g. Borghetto & Lisi, 2018; Däubler, Christensen, & Linek, 2018; Louwerse & Van Vonno, 2021; Yildirim, Kocapınar, & Ecevit, 2019). Since these studies produced heterogeneous results, however, it remains an empirical question whether party selectorates reward active members of parliament (MPs) and punish those who display slacking behaviour. It is also unclear whether such patterns occur for all kinds of MPs.

Focusing on Belgium's party-centred, flexible-list PR system, this article contributes to this emerging literature by examining to what extent the parliamentary activity of individual MPs affects their re-selection to a (realistic) list position. To this end, we constructed a new dataset containing detailed information on the parliamentary activity (i.e. oral questions during plenary sessions and committee meetings, single-authored bills), list positions, and background characteristics of all members of the Belgian Chamber of Representatives between 1995 and 2019 (N= 1,108). Apart from testing the effect of parliamentary activity in another context, we introduce an innovative element to the existing studies. We argue that being more active matters more for the reselection of parliamentary newcomers (i.e. those who serve their first term) than for more experienced MPs. Experienced MPs typically have already established their reputation

and have obtained a strong position in the party, potentially based on earlier parliamentary performance. This is not the case for newcomers, whose position in the party will be more precarious, and whose reselection will probably depend more on their level of parliamentary activity during their first term in office.

Our analyses provide evidence for a connection between MPs' parliamentary activity and their general reselection prospects: MPs who table more plenary questions and submit more single-authored bills are more likely to be re-nominated. As regards the specific position on party lists, only MPs who ask more plenary questions are more likely to get re-nominated to a realistic list position. Furthermore, we do find that newcomers particularly benefit from asking more parliamentary questions in committees and plenary sessions, in terms of being reselected to a realistic list position. This proves the relevance of distinguishing between reselection in general and reselection to realistic positions, and between MPs based on their prior experience. As such, these findings provide important new insights into how political parties may have different standards and apply different evaluation criteria when holding representatives accountable for their activity in the legislature.

## **Theory and hypotheses**

### **Parliamentary activity and reselection in party-centred systems**

One of the strongest drivers of MPs' behaviour is their desire to get re-elected (Mayhew, 1974). Guided by the electoral rules in a particular institutional context, legislators are incentivised to show diligence and responsiveness to the desires of both their constituents and to selectors in their party (Müller, 2000; Strøm, 2012). Prior to actually running for re-election, incumbents must indeed overcome one crucial hurdle: that of their re-selection as an electoral candidate. Particularly in party-centred electoral systems with centralised candidate selection procedures,

this ‘choice before the choice’ is a crucial step in which party selectors make or break political careers by (not) granting incumbents an eligible position on the party list (Hazan & Rahat, 2010).

Political parties may have many reasons to (re-)select particular candidates (Hazan & Rahat, 2010; Put & Maddens, 2013). One recurrent finding is that incumbent MPs have a higher chance to become selected than other candidates (Ashworth & Mesquita, 2008). In addition, parties might particularly favour electorally appealing candidates, who have proved in the previous elections that they could obtain many preference votes (André, Depauw, Shugart, & Chytilék, 2017).<sup>1</sup> Or, they might re-nominate those who enjoy considerable public recognition, either due to a national leadership role or due to a distinct local embeddedness within the electoral constituency (Put & Maddens, 2013).

Beyond that, however, also individual politicians’ behaviour might influence parties’ reselection strategies. First of all, party loyalty might matter (e.g. Carey, 2007; Kam, 2009). In this view, candidate selection not only serves as an *ex ante* screening tool, aimed at selecting candidates whose policy preferences align with that of the party, but also as an *ex post* disciplining tool, through which party selectorates hold representatives accountable by ensuring that they contribute to the party goals and loyally execute the party program for which they were mandated by the (party) electorate (Müller, 2000). Even the mere knowledge that they might not get re-nominated when they dissent is already a powerful behavioural incentive that may cause individual MPs to toe the party line (Van Vonno, Malka, Depauw, Hazan, & Andeweg, 2014). Indeed, empirical research shows that party unity tends to be higher in

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<sup>1</sup> Yet, the previous amount of preference votes does not seem to matter much for the attribution of a realistic vs. non-realistic list position (Put, Smulders, & Maddens, 2021).

systems with centralised selection rules where party elites decide over incumbents' career continuation (Depauw & Martin, 2009).

Yildirim et al. (2019), however, argue that this does not satisfactorily explain why some incumbents are reselected and others not, given that political systems are often characterised by little variation in party loyalty but high levels of legislative turnover. Particularly in party-centred systems, formal defections rarely occur (Depauw & Martin, 2009) and individual discontent is usually not expressed publicly but behind the closed doors of the party group meetings. A number of recent studies have therefore turned towards the consequences of MPs' level of parliamentary activity (Borghetto & Lisi, 2018; Däubler et al., 2018; Louwerse & Van Vonno, 2021; Marangoni & Russo, 2018; Papp, 2019; Yildirim et al., 2019). There are multiple reasons why party selectorates might favour active MPs over 'leisure shirkers' (Müller, 2000, pp. 320-321) or 'slackers' (Frech, Goet, & Hug, 2021, p. 6).

We distinguish between internal and external reasons, which can on their turn be linked to the goals that parties pursue: office, policy and votes (Müller and Strøm, 1999). First, parties may reward those MPs who bring their A-game in parliament, because it contributes to an optimal functioning of the (parliamentary) party (*internal reasons*). By doing 'the donkey work' instead of only enjoying the prestige that comes with parliamentary office, representatives contribute to the party's collective policy goals (Müller, 2000). Party groups are characterised by internal issue specialisation. Not taking up one's share (by not actively engaging in committee work, attending debates, initiating or amending bills, asking parliamentary questions) means that the party and its policy views might be underrepresented in a policy area or that other group members will have to step up their game (Louwerse & Van Vonno, 2021).

In addition, parliamentary tools are not only used for policy-seeking purposes, but may also serve to signal personal involvement, expertise and concern to voters, following a personal vote-seeking logic (Bräuninger et al., 2012) (*external reasons*). Voters may not only reward

MPs for their parliamentary performance because of their increased visibility (Däubler, Bräuninger, & Brunner, 2016) but also because of MPs' proven competence and integrity (Mondak, 1995). This is also of importance in party-centred systems. Since parties tend to reward candidates with a strong personal electoral reputation (André et al., 2017), it could be expected that also party selectorates value efforts by individual MPs to gain public prominence through their parliamentary activity (Yildirim et al., 2019). The underlying logic is that active MPs are more able to attract attention (either from their constituents or from the media), which will result in electoral attractiveness. In sum, active MPs serve both party's policy-seeking and vote-seeking goals, and are therefore expected to be rewarded by the party with a (high) position on the candidate list.

Although some studies have established a positive relationship between MPs' parliamentary activity and their general chances for reselection (e.g. Louwse & Van Vonno, 2021; Papp, 2019; Yildirim et al., 2019), these findings have not, or only partially, been confirmed in other cases (Borghetto & Lisi, 2018; Crisp, Olivella, Malecki, & Sher, 2013; Däubler et al., 2018; Marangoni & Russo, 2018; De Coninck, 2020). In part, the different results could stem from the varying use of parliamentary tools in specific contexts. Moreover, the relation has more often been identified for MPs' chances to get re-nominated, instead of their (realistic) position on the electoral list (for a summary see e.g. Papp & Russo, 2018). One of the exceptions is De Coninck (2020) who finds no evidence that parties reward highly performing MEPs with realistic list positions.

This study argues that it is important to distinguish between reselection in general vs. reselection to realistic list positions. As a general hypothesis, we expect that the more active an MP was throughout the legislative term, the more likely it is that the MP will be reselected as an electoral candidate by the party (H1) and the more likely that the MP will be rewarded with a realistic list position (H2). Realistic position can be defined as "all those positions that are

seen at least as winnable before the elections” (Hazan and Rahat, 2010, 14). In closed and flexible list PR systems, where rank order plays a decisive role with regard to the allocation of seats between candidates within party lists, this distinction between realistic and other list positions is of crucial importance. After all, only realistic positions can (more or less) guarantee a seat in parliament (Put et al., 2021).

*Hypothesis 1: The more active an MP was in parliament, the more likely the MP will be reselected as an electoral candidate.*

*Hypothesis 2: The more active an MP was in parliament, the more likely the MP will be reselected to a realistic list position.*

### **Why activity might matter more for newcomers in parliament**

We moreover argue that party selectors potentially pay more attention to the parliamentary activity of some MPs than others, as expectations towards the behaviour of legislators may depend on their status within the party group or on the career stage they are in. Although authors have argued before that the relationship between parliamentary activity and reselection may be stronger for electorally vulnerable MPs (Borghetto & Lisi, 2018; Yildirim et al., 2019), differences based on MPs’ characteristics have been largely neglected so far.

Some MPs, for instance, might have acquired a leadership position, like whip or group chairman, that requires them to perform tasks that are not necessarily registered in parliamentary minutes, such as overseeing backbenchers’ behaviour and ensuring group cohesion (de Vet & Wauters, 2018). Also other MPs with a longer track record in parliament (but who are not in a leadership position) may have advantages to become reselected. These include having a fixed constituency of supporters, name recognition and media visibility (Ashworth & Mesquita, 2008; Put & Maddens, 2013). These attributes yield more votes and

make these politicians attractive for parties to select (regardless of their parliamentary activity), as they realise a party's vote-seeking goals.

Consequently, we argue that the relationship between the parliamentary activity and the reselection may be moderated by the stage of the parliamentary career. We argue that whether MPs dispose over any previous experience in parliament moderates the importance party selectors' may assign to their parliamentary work. Newcomers in parliament, who have yet to learn and internalise all parliamentary norms, may typically try to compensate their lack of procedural insights and policy expertise by overinvesting in low-cost activities such as tabling many parliamentary questions (Bailer & Ohmura, 2018). By already showing high levels of activity in an early phase, they try to show their eagerness and ambition to party leaders. Since newcomers still have to build their reputation among their party voters and journalists, party selectors may, for electoral reasons, particularly appreciate newcomers' efforts to increase their visibility through parliamentary activity.

When backbenchers gain experience and build personal networks, they may start using parliamentary instruments more selectively, but also more effectively (Miquel & Snyder Jr, 2006; Volden & Wiseman, 2009). Doing so, they may establish their reputation among party selectorates as MPs who can successfully influence law-making and skilfully guide bills through difficult floor debates. Hence, particularly newcomers (i.e. those who serve their first term) may try to attract party selectorates' attention through high levels of parliamentary activity in order to improve their reselection prospects. While it can be expected that party leaders already know the capabilities and strengths of more experienced incumbents, for newcomers a first term as an MP may serve as a 'trial period' based on which party leaders decide to extend or end a newcomer's parliamentary career. This does not mean that policy-seeking motives are not important for the re-selection of experienced MPs. Owing to their experience, they are better in efficiently using parliamentary instruments: they do not



necessarily have to table many legislative bills and/or parliamentary questions to have much impact. Moreover, they are more familiar with other ways (e.g. behind the scenes) to realize a party's policy goals. In other words, policy goals continue to be relevant for experienced MPs, but the amount of parliamentary activity is to a lesser extent than for newcomer MP a good indicator for parties to grasp their contribution to policy goals.

In sum, we assume that parliamentary activity is less important for the re-selection of experienced MPs because they have a stronger personal reputation than newcomers (helping to realize a party's vote-seeking goals) and because parliamentary activity is used more efficiently and other ways to realize a party's policy goals are more often compared to newcomers.

Therefore, we expect that being more active matters more for newcomers' reselection as a candidate in general (H3) and for their reselection to a realistic list position in particular (H4).

*Hypothesis 3: Being more active in parliament matters more for the reselection of parliamentary newcomers as an electoral candidate than it does for more experienced MPs.*

*Hypothesis 4: Being more active in parliament matters more for the reselection of parliamentary newcomers to a realistic list position than it does for more experienced MPs.*

## **The case of Belgium**

We study the link between the parliamentary activity and reselection of all members of Belgium's Chamber of Representatives between 1995 and 2019. This assembly consists of 150 seats which are elected under a flexible-list proportional representation electoral system. These seats are elected in multimember districts ranging from 3 to 24 seats. In 2002, all electoral

districts were enlarged to coincide with the Belgian provinces. The average district magnitude rose from 7.5 to 13.6 seats.

Belgian voters are able to cast (multiple) preference votes as well as a party list vote by which they endorse the list of candidates as rank ordered by the political party. Only very few candidates reach the number of preference votes needed to obtain a seat, i.e. the eligibility figure<sup>2</sup>. These are mostly candidates at the top of the list. Next, the list votes (half of the list votes since 2003) are distributed to the highest ranked unelected candidates, until they reach the eligibility figure. The consequence is that the large majority of seats is allocated to candidates following the party-determined rank order. Candidate lists thus behave in a rather closed manner in practice, giving political parties a strong grip on their MPs via the rank ordering of candidates on their lists. For incumbents seeking re-election, it comes down to securing one of the highest ranked positions on the party lists. Two thirds of these realistic positions at the top of the list are occupied by incumbents (Put and Maddens, 2013).

Note that Belgian political parties present two separate candidate lists per electoral district in all parliamentary elections. The list of effective candidates are those candidates who can get directly elected for a parliamentary seat. The list of successor candidates are those candidates who would replace one of the initially elected effective candidates if the latter leaves parliamentary office, e.g. by becoming government minister.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The minimum number of preference votes needed for an individual candidate to get elected equals the total number of votes cast for the party in the district divided by the sum of the total number of seats in the district plus one.

<sup>3</sup> We exclude party switchers from the analysis, as those politicians who change party affiliation are not being evaluated by the same party selectorate as during the previous nomination process that got them into the federal Chamber of Representatives. We identified 13 party switchers among the members of the Chamber of Representatives between 1995 and 2019.

An important characteristic of Belgium's institutional context is that the country has a federal structure where elections for different policy levels have often been organised simultaneously. In contrast with earlier studies, the availability of parliamentary office is therefore substantially higher in Belgium. Earlier work indicates that Belgian politicians often hop between different levels over consecutive elections, continuing their parliamentary careers in the regional or European Parliament after having spent their previous term in federal parliament, or vice versa. An analysis of the mobility patterns between the regional and the national parliaments showed that there is no hierarchy between these levels and that, from a career perspective, mandates at both levels are equivalent (Vanlangenakker et al., 2013). Moreover, Belgian law stipulates that the remuneration of regional MPs should not exceed that of federal MPs<sup>4</sup>, and net remunerations are close to identical in practice: about 5,700 euro a month as was revealed by a recent media report.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, we regard the reselection as a candidate for concurrent regional elections as an equal reward for a good performance in the Chamber of Representatives.

Belgium has two party systems that are organised at the regional level, and the same regional parties run for parliamentary elections at the regional and federal level, following identical electoral rules. When it comes to Belgian parties' candidate selection processes, Vandeleene et al. (2016) show that there are hardly any differences between the involved procedures and actors at the regional and federal election level. Put another way, the same selectorate that was responsible for selecting a politician as electoral candidate for the Belgian Chamber of Representatives will be tasked to select candidates for the regional elections. Belgian party

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<sup>4</sup> Art 31ter, *Bijzondere wet tot hervorming der instellingen*, 8 August 1980.

<sup>5</sup> This information was published by the newspaper *Het Nieuwsblad* on 13 November 2021 ('Het salaris van de mandataris').

selectorates thus have the flexibility to shuffle around their federal MPs to become candidate for another level of government at the next election.

## **Data and methods**

To analyse the effect of parliamentary activity on intra-party reselection, we collected data on all members of the Belgian federal Chamber of Representatives during six consecutive parliamentary terms between 1995 and 2019 (N= 1,108). We require three types of data to test our hypotheses, relating to MPs' parliamentary activity, reselection fortunes and political careers.

First, we registered the *parliamentary activity* for all Belgian federal MPs by counting (1) the number of oral questions asked during plenary sessions; (2) the number of oral questions asked in parliamentary committees; and (3) the total number of single-authored parliamentary bills submitted. We selected these three types of parliamentary activity as independent variables for a number of reasons. First, in doing so, we connect to earlier studies that often focused on these parliamentary activities (e.g. Marangoni & Russo, 2018; Borghetto & Lisi, 2018; Däubler et al., 2018) Distinguishing between several types of parliamentary activity is important because some are more clearly linked to MPs' reselection prospects than others (e.g. Louwerse & Van Vonno, 2021; Yildirim, Kocapınar, & Ecevit, 2019). Second, and substantially more importantly, these activities have varying formal characteristics and cover both plenary and committee work, as well as both oversight and law-making activities. As such, it is rather likely that other types of activity, like MPs' use of interpellations, resolutions or amendments, would produce similar results.

Oral questions are frequently used oversight instruments that make up a large share of MPs' day-to-day activity in the legislature. However, while oral questions in committees deal with detailed policy issues and may be submitted on an individual basis, oral questions during more

mediatised plenary sessions deal with salient and topical political matters and are more distinctly steered by parties. Single-authored bills, lastly, are law-making activities for which an MP bears the full cost of drafting (unlike co-authored bills) and can thus most strongly advance the personal reputation of legislators (Bräuninger, Brunner, & Däubler, 2012, p. 9). To account for both the unequal length of parliamentary terms in Belgium<sup>6</sup> and variation in duration of office, we control for the number of years that each MP spent in office during the term.

Second, we collected information about the *reselection fortunes* of all outgoing members of the federal Chamber, by coding whether incumbents were re-selected by their party selectorates and, if this was the case, in what type of list position. To account for multi-level career patterns where Belgian politicians hop from parliamentary office on one level to another (Dodeigne, 2014), we not only registered whether outgoing members of the Chamber were reselected for federal party lists but also for regional and European Parliament elections that were organised concurrently with a federal election (i.e. in 1999, 2014, 2019). As explained earlier, the integrated career patterns, the identical party selectorates, and the comparable (financial) status imply that Belgian parties have the flexibility to reward active MPs with reselection at different levels.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, direct elections for the Senate as a second federal assembly were organised simultaneously with the Chamber of Representatives elections until 2010, which allowed an additional set of parliamentary offices to be allocated among members of the Belgian parliamentary elites. Therefore, we also verified whether incumbent Chamber of Representatives MPs ran for Senate elections between 1999 and 2010. Based on this

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<sup>6</sup> Since 2014, the national parliamentary term has been extended from four to five years to allow for concurrent national, regional and European Parliament elections in Belgium.

<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, in the empirical analysis we will also verify whether our results are driven by the choice to consider reselection as candidate for other elections as equal to reselection for the Federal Chamber of Representatives.

information, we constructed a first dependent variable with binary response categories. This variable ‘re-selection’ is coded 0 if the incumbent member of the Chamber of Representatives is not a candidate for the subsequent federal election or any parliamentary election organised simultaneously, and coded 1 if the incumbent was identified as a candidate on any of these party lists.

In Belgium’s flexible list PR system, some positions on the candidate list provide a higher probability of getting elected for parliamentary office, and therefore signal a greater level of selectorate support for incumbent MPs (see above). Recent research confirms that Belgian parties themselves distinguish between realistic and unrealistic positions during their internal selection processes (Vandeleene and van Haute, 2021).<sup>8</sup> The operationalisation of ‘realistic’ and ‘unrealistic’ list positions in multimember districts, where electoral vulnerability is affected by both inter- and intra-party competition, is a contentious endeavour (e.g. Hazan and Rahat, 2010; Stoffel and Sieberer, 2018). Vandeleene et al. (2019) distinguish between a ‘conservative’ method, which relies on past election results and does not take into account the issue of electoral volatility, and a prospective method, which calculates realistic positions based on opinion polls.<sup>9</sup> In the main analysis, we will apply the conservative method and utilize a

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<sup>8</sup> An alternative approach would be to focus on list promotions (i.e. moving up on the candidate list) instead of looking at realistic versus unrealistic list positions. However, earlier research on the Flemish case has indicated that promotions to higher positions on party lists are only rarely meaningful, in that they involve a move from an unrealistic to a realistic list position (Put et al., 2021). Moreover, the electoral district reform of 2002, smaller changes in the electoral districts involving the Brussels capital region as well as the existence of a separate list of successor candidates yield list many positions in two consecutive elections incomparable.

<sup>9</sup> We argue that such a prospective method is not feasible in the context of Belgian parliamentary elections, mainly due to the lack of frequently organized opinion polls over the entire time period under investigation, and the complete absence of district-level poll results. Moreover, Belgian polls usually take place months before election day, which implies that these are not necessarily accurate at the time of candidate selection.

strict operationalisation of this variable, based on the number of seats won by the party in the district during the previous election (i.e. party magnitude P). If the party won P seats in the district previously, then the P highest ranked candidates on the party list are considered to hold realistic positions.<sup>10</sup> Based on this coding scheme, we created a second dependent variable which is coded 1 if the incumbent Chamber of Representatives MP was assigned to a realistic list position and 0 if this was not the case.

A third set of variables relates to the *political career characteristics* of Belgian federal MPs. A key variable is the level of prior parliamentary experience of each MP, either at the federal, regional or European level. We create a dummy variable that indicates whether the MP has held any type of parliamentary office before (0) or whether this was the first term, which implies that the MP is a parliamentary newcomer (1).

We also take into account whether the MP holds a position of party or parliamentary group leader (1) or not (0). MPs' electoral vulnerability in the previous election is calculated by dividing the order of election of an MP by the total number of seats received by the party in the district (see André et al., 2015). For instance, a legislator winning the third of the five seats in the district has a vulnerability of 0.6. Higher values imply higher levels of electoral vulnerability. Finally, we control for MPs who became a member of the federal or a regional cabinet during the preceding legislative term, as similar to switching between parliamentary

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<sup>10</sup> To verify the sensitivity of our empirical results to the specific choices made regarding the operationalisation of realistic list positions, we will also apply a broader and more complex operationalisation, which considers an additional number of positions as realistic, taking into account both party and district magnitude (Put and Maddens, 2013; Put et al., 2021). More details about this more flexible operationalisation can be found in the Online Supplementary Material.

offices at several levels, Belgian politicians can also be rewarded with ministerial office at different government levels.

Further controls include the gender and age of the incumbent MP. Age is a crucial variable to verify whether our findings are driven by voluntary exits resulting from retiring MPs. As regards the political party of the MP, we control for the government status (1: in government; 0: in opposition) and the ideological position (0-10 general left-right scale from the Chapel Hill Expert Survey dataset (Bakker et al., 2020)).

In terms of modelling strategy, we run logistic regression models to estimate the effect of parliamentary activity on reselection and reselection in realistic list positions. The inclusion of fixed effects for parliamentary party groups and parliamentary terms<sup>11</sup> accounts for unobserved heterogeneity between groups of MPs in the data set.

## **Empirical analysis**

### **The general effect of parliamentary activity on reselection**

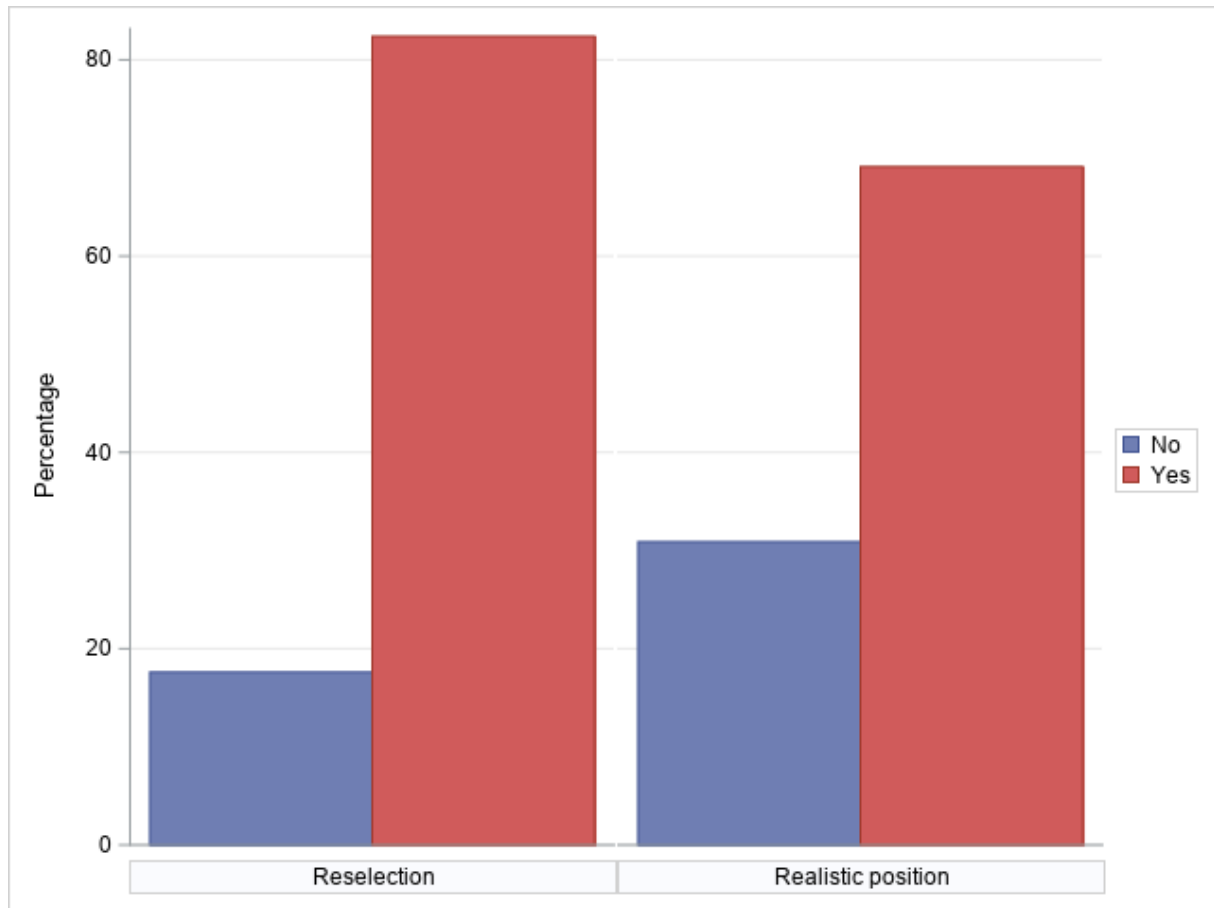
To begin with, we present some descriptive statistics on the dependent variables and the independent variables of interest in this study. Figure 1 shows the distribution of MPs over the two categories of the dependent variables. Only 17.6% (n=195) of incumbent MPs in Belgium (1995-2019) do not get re-nominated in any type of list position in subsequent federal elections, nor for regional or European elections that are being organised concurrently. Of the 913 MPs that were re-nominated in the subsequent election, 69.1% get assigned to realistic list positions.

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<sup>11</sup> As an alternative to the models reported in the main text, we have used a dummy for pre- and post-2002 reform elections to capture differences over time, which yielded substantively similar results.



**Figure 1:** Reselection and allocation to realistic list positions of Belgian Chamber of Representatives MPs (1995-2019).



Descriptive statistics for our independent variables indicate that Belgian MPs ask on average 11.5 oral plenary questions and 59.3 committee questions during a parliamentary term, while they submit around 1.81 single authored bills per MP in a parliamentary term. However, these values hide a great deal of variation with several MPs asking no parliamentary questions at all or never submitting any private members' bills in contrast to some MPs that are highly active in parliament (See Table A in the Online Supplementary Material).

To analyse whether parliamentary activity affects the reselection chances of outgoing members of the Belgian Chamber of Representatives, we first present the results of two logistic regression models with respectively reselection generally and reselection in realistic list positions as

dependent variables. In line with earlier research on other country cases (e.g. Louwerse & Van Vonno, 2021), Table 1 provides mixed evidence for positive effects of parliamentary activity on incumbent reselection. As regards reselection in general, plenary oral questions and single-authored bills are significantly and positively associated with returning to party lists in subsequent elections. Being a parliamentary party group leader, a party leader or a cabinet member also has a statistically significant and positive effect on reselection chances. Moreover, MPs of government parties have a significantly higher likelihood of reselection than MPs running for parties in opposition. Finally, chances of reselection decrease as MPs get older.

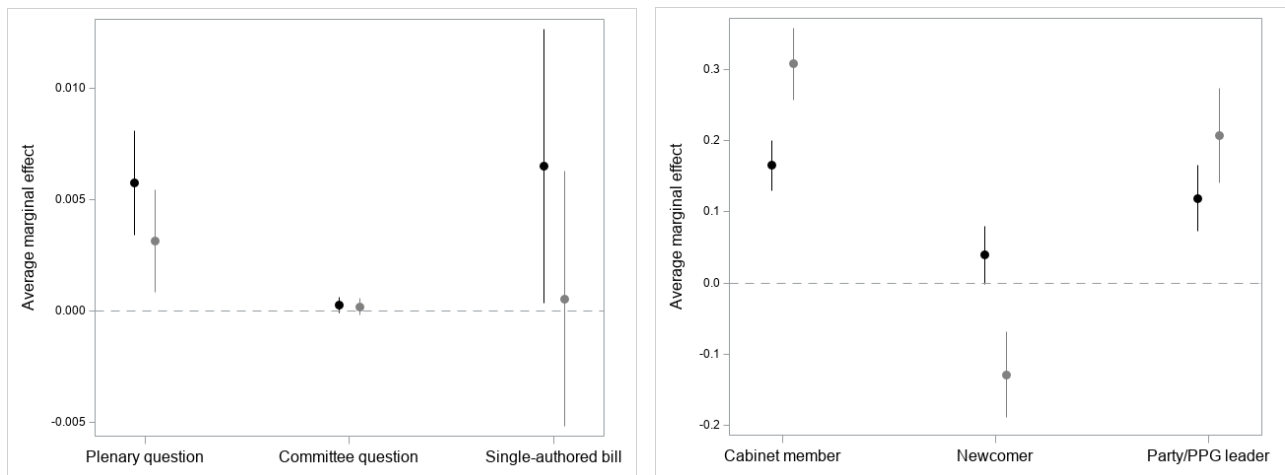
< Table 1 about here >

When looking at receiving realistic list positions, only asking plenary oral questions leads to a significantly higher likelihood of success. When we use the broader operationalisation (See Table B in the Online Supplemental Material), we only find that with every single authored bill proposed during the parliamentary term, the probability of getting reselected in a realistic list position increases. Leadership, cabinet membership and newcomer status consistently have an important impact on receiving realistic positions, regardless of operationalisation strategy for realistic positions.

In terms of substantive effect size, Figure 2 displays the average marginal effects for the three types of parliamentary activity (left) and three MP career characteristics (right) in the two models reported in Table 1. For plenary oral questions, it shows that every additional question increases the probability of getting reselected on average by 0.6%. Cabinet membership and party leadership positions clearly have the strongest effect on reselection of incumbent MPs, both in general terms as for realistic positions. We find a 16.5% increase in the probability of

reselection for cabinet members and a 11.9% increase for leaders. For realistic positions, the effect is even larger (30.4% and 20.6% respectively). Finally, newcomers are on average 14.1% less likely to access realistic list positions than more experienced MPs.

**Figure 2:** Average marginal effects of Belgian Lower Chamber MPs’ parliamentary activities (left) and career characteristics (right) explaining reselection and reselection for realistic list positions.



*Note:* Average marginal effects and 90%-confidence intervals for reselection (black) and reselection for realistic list positions (grey) respectively. Estimates are based on the two logistic regression models shown in Table 1.

In sum, we find some support for hypotheses 1 and 2, with oral questions during plenary sessions and single-authored bills making a difference for the reselection of incumbent MPs. When it comes to realistic list positions, we similarly find that the oral plenary questions is the only effective parliamentary activity which has a positive effect. The effect of parliamentary activity, however, depends on the specific operationalisations of these positions.

Table C in the Online Supplemental Material shows that these results do not hinge on the methodological choice to also consider incumbent MPs’ reselection to lists in other concurring elections. If we only consider reselection to a list for the elections of the federal Chamber, again we find a positive effect for asking plenary questions and submitting single-authored bills on the probability of getting re-selected.

### **Does parliamentary activity matter more for newcomers?**

In line with hypotheses 3 and 4, we now test whether the effects of parliamentary activity are different for parliamentary newcomers versus more experienced MPs. As the scores for each of the three activities are correlated (Pearson  $r$  between 0.11 and 0.47), we follow the approach similar to Louwse and Van Vonne (2021) to first estimate separate models for each activity before running a full model where all activities are included simultaneously. The first three columns in Table 2 show the results of logistic regression models analysing re-selection where we separately add an interaction term for each of the types of parliamentary activity, the fourth column presents results of the full model.

The results show no support for hypothesis 3. In line with the model analysing reselection in Table 1, we find that asking plenary questions increases the probability of getting re-selected. This effect is not significantly different for newcomers versus more experienced MPs. The results for committee questions even run counter to hypothesis 3, and indicate that these questions are more important for more experienced MPs than for legislative newcomers. The full model in column IV (combining all interaction terms) reconfirms the importance of plenary questions, but also shows that parliamentary activities are generally not more important for newcomers than for experienced incumbents. The results are substantively similar when we consider MPs running for other types of parliamentary office in subsequent elections as not re-selected (See Table D in the Online Supplemental Material). The counterintuitive negative interaction coefficient for committee questions is not confirmed in this additional analysis.

Columns V to VIII in Table 2 present the results of logistic regression models explaining reselection to realistic list positions. Both for questions asked in plenary sessions and parliamentary committees, the models indicate that especially newcomers benefit more from being active than experienced MPs. These coefficients thus provide support for hypothesis 4 that being active in parliament is more important for MPs who are inexperienced. In the full

model (column VIII in Table 2), the interaction terms for plenary and committee questions show the expected sign but do not longer reach conventional levels of statistical significance, which might be the result of combining all interaction effects into one model.<sup>12</sup>

For the sake of overview and clarity, the results in Table 1 and Table 2 can be summarized as follows. First, regarding **reselection** in general terms, asking plenary questions is associated with higher chances of getting reselected, regardless of newcomer status. While the same holds for single-authored bills, raising committee oral questions does not make a difference in terms of reselection, neither for newcomers nor for more experienced MPs. Second, regarding **realistic list positions**, raising plenary questions is important but even more so for parliamentary newcomers. Asking committee questions makes a difference for newcomers but not for experienced MPs. Finally, we find no evidence that submitting single-authored bills makes a difference for receiving realistic positions.

An analysis with the broader operationalization of a realistic position (Table E in the Online Supplemental Material) confirms that being a newcomer significantly interacts with parliamentary activity, and this time even for all three types of activities included in our data set. However, in the full model neither of these interactions reaches statistical significance. We also verified to what extent these results rely on the decision to include incumbent Chamber MPs' realistic list positions for other parliaments (Table F in the Online Supplemental Material). When excluding level-hoppers from the analysis, the interaction term between plenary questions and newcomers falls short of statistical significance ( $P=0.12$ ), which is likely

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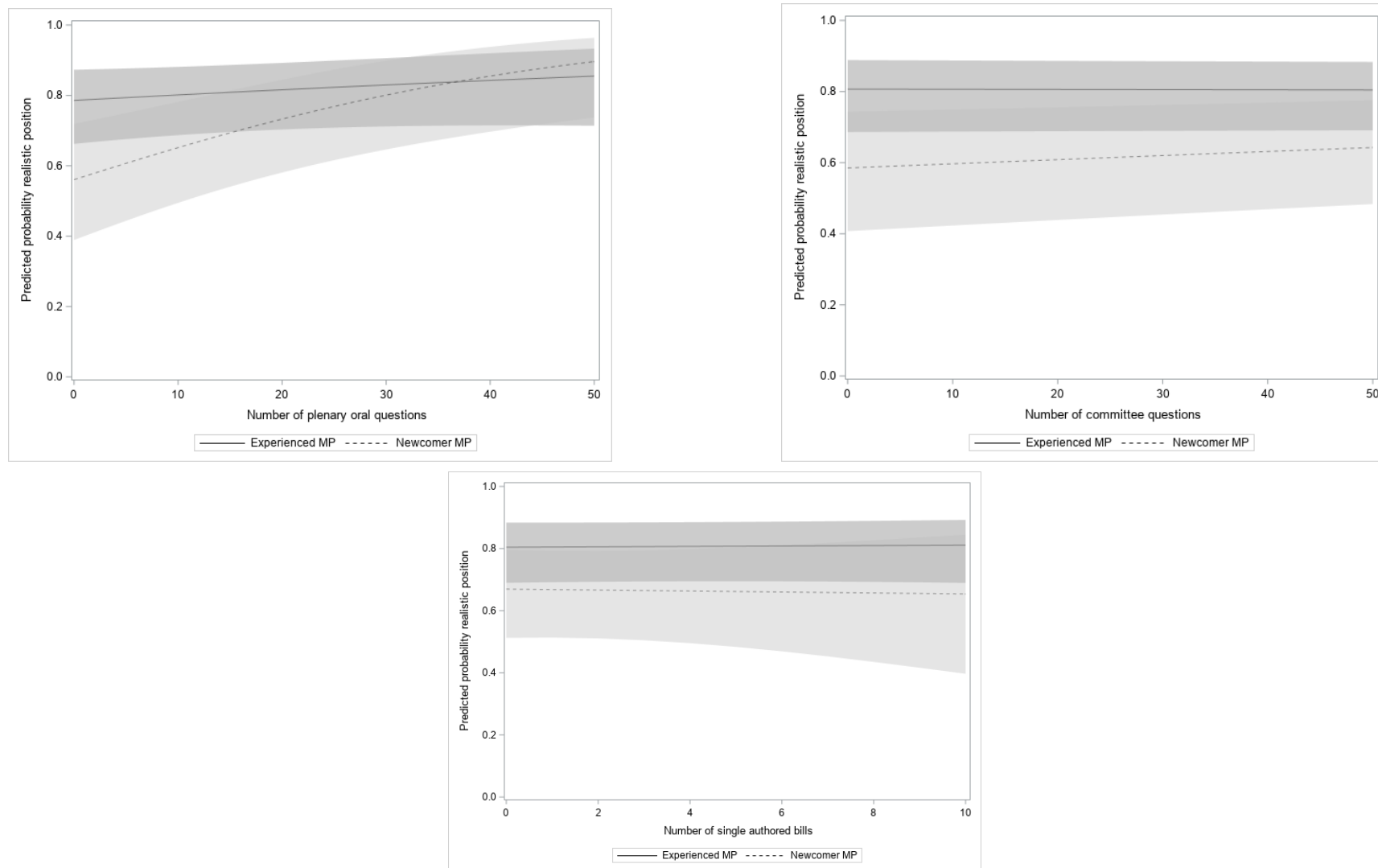
<sup>12</sup> Variance inflation factors for the model reported in column VIII in Table 2 indicate relatively high values for plenary questions (2.4), the interaction term between plenary questions and newcomers (3.1) and the interaction term between committee questions and newcomers (2.5), which is expected with the inclusion of interaction effects in a logistic regression model.

a result of insufficient statistical power (N=748). The finding that committee questions are more important for newcomers than for experienced MPs, on the contrary, still holds when only realistic positions for the Chamber of Representatives are considered. Finally, we also verified whether the results differ substantively when we not only control for duration in office, but exclude MPs who only stayed in office for a very short time. The results of Table 1 and Table 2 are replicated in Table G and Table H of the Online Supplemental Material. We find no substantive differences in the reported results compared to the findings in the main text.

< Table 2 about here >

Figure 3 visualizes the interaction effect between newcomer status and the three types of parliamentary activities. Other covariates are held at their respective means (or modal values in case of categorical predictors). We see that, as the number of plenary questions increases, the predicted probability of receiving a realistic position becomes significantly higher for newcomer MPs. For experienced MPs, this positive effect does not materialize as the predicted probability for this group remains around 0.8 for all numbers of plenary questions. There is no evidence of a significant interaction for the other two activities. For the number of committee questions, the smaller effect size leads to a less outspoken visualisation of the interaction with newcomer status. Finally, as regards single authored bills, the difference in predicted probabilities between newcomers and experienced MPs in the graph can only be explained by the significant effect of the newcomer status variable in column VII of Table 2.

**Figure 3:** Simulation of the interaction effects between newcomer status and parliamentary activities (based on Table 2, Columns V-VII).



*Note:* Solid and dashed lines indicate predicted probabilities of accessing a realistic list position for experienced and newcomer MPs respectively, with 90% confidence limits.

## Conclusion

The question to what extent elected officials are held accountable is crucial for the well-functioning of representative democracies. Not only voters but also parties may hold representatives accountable, by determining which incumbent MPs figure on (which positions on) their candidate lists. Several studies in different institutional contexts have investigated whether parliamentary activity has an impact on the reselection of MPs, but evidence is mixed.

Similar to what recent studies by Yildirim, Kocapinar & Ecevit (2019) and Louwerse & Van Vonno (2019) found, our results on Belgium, as a new case in this literature, suggest that, in general, parliamentary activity indeed matters for MPs' reselection but that it depends on the kind of activity. The number of plenary questions and the number of single-authored bills submitted by MPs have a positive effect on their reselection in general. For reselection to a realistic list position in particular, oral plenary questions seem to matter most.

Furthermore, although some authors already highlighted important conditional effects of electoral rules and incentives (e.g. Papp, 2019; Marangoni & Russo, 2018) or legislators' electoral vulnerability (e.g. Borghetto & Lisi, 2018; Yildirim, Kocapinar & Ecevit, 2019), our study provides additional evidence that being very active in parliament is not equally important for all MPs. We distinguish between newcomers in parliament and more experienced MPs, and argued that the former are more incentivized to show diligence to party selectors through their parliamentary activity than the latter group of MPs, who have typically already built up some personal reputation and already had the chance to earn their (parliamentary) stripes in the past. Indeed, when distinguishing between MPs based on their parliamentary track record, we find some evidence that particularly newcomers are more rewarded with a realistic list position for the amount of oral plenary and committee questions that they have tabled in the previous term, but these activities do not yield them an extra benefit when it comes to reselection in general.



This study was based on the Belgian case, which represents a flexible list PR electoral system. This type of list PR system has become very popular on the European continent, with at least ten countries using this ballot structure. The incentive structure provided by the Belgian electoral system to legislators is highly similar to these other countries, and fosters personalized behaviour during electoral campaigns and in legislative assemblies. As such, we believe that our results can travel to the context of other flexible list cases. We also contribute to the expanding literature on flexible list PR, and its impact on legislative behaviour (Bräuninger et al., 2012; Däubler et al. 2018).

Our findings have some substantive implications. Even in an era of mediatisation and personalisation, the reselection and hence the re-election of MPs appears to depend to a certain extent on the performance in parliament. Of course, it remains to be seen how the causal mechanism works. We distinguished between an internal and an external mechanism. The activities of MPs may be appreciated because they contribute to the internal functioning of the parliamentary group, or because they increase the external visibility of the party, in the media and the public opinion. A relevant finding in that respect is that not only the activities in the highly mediatised plenary sessions have an impact, but also those in the more hidden committee meetings (but to a lesser degree).

However, we also found that when it comes to being selected for a realistic position, experienced MPs are less subject to an evaluation of their parliamentary activity. They are less rewarded for diligence, or sanctioned for idleness, at least as concerns the normal parliamentary routine investigated here. This result indicates that the first term of an MP can be considered as a ‘trial period’ on the basis of which the party selectors decide to extend or end a newcomer’s parliamentary career. Once that hurdle is taken, the routine work in parliament seems to become less important for the furthering of an MP’s career.

True, this is stretching things a bit. Such a far reaching conclusion about the selection mechanism cannot be drawn without also taking into account the quality of parliamentary work. And providing clearer evidence for a causal effect of parliamentary activities on reselection would require interviews with the selectors. But even so, we believe to have found a clear trace of a ‘trial period’-effect, clear enough in any case to trigger further (qualitative) research on the matter.

**Table 1:** The effect of parliamentary activity on reselection and receiving realistic list positions.

	<b>Reselection</b>	<b>Realistic position</b>
Plenary oral questions	0.049*** (0.012)	0.018** (0.008)
Committee oral questions	0.002 (0.002)	0.001 (0.001)
Single authored bills	0.055* (0.032)	0.003 (0.020)
Legislative newcomer	0.339 (0.225)	-0.721*** (0.203)
Party/PPG leader	1.346*** (0.468)	1.421*** (0.358)
Cabinet member	2.053*** (0.436)	2.428*** (0.406)
Electoral insecurity at t-1	-0.177 (0.330)	-0.105 (0.308)
Duration leg. office (in years)	0.186** (0.093)	0.481*** (0.102)
Government party	0.475** (0.219)	-0.321 (0.214)
Ideological position party	0.028 (0.164)	-0.036 (0.140)
Age	-0.077*** (0.011)	-0.067*** (0.010)
Male dummy	0.188 (0.208)	-0.184 (0.190)
PPG FE	Included	Included
Legislative term FE	Included	Included
Intercept	3.556*** (1.159)	2.537** (1.013)
N	1,108	913
R <sup>2</sup>	0.163	0.205

*Note:* Entries are log odd coefficients, standard errors are reported between parentheses. Significance levels: \*  $p < 0.10$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.05$ ; p  $< 0.01$ .

**Table 2:** Effect of legislative activity for Belgian Chamber of Representatives MPs (1995-2019) on reselection and realistic position, according to newcomer status.

	Reselection					Realistic position		
	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII	VIII
Plenary oral questions	0.058*** (0.014)	0.045*** (0.012)	0.049*** (0.012)	0.048*** (0.015)	0.024*** (0.009)	0.019 (0.008)	0.018** (0.008)	0.013 (0.010)
Committee oral questions	0.002 (0.002)	0.006** (0.002)	0.002 (0.002)	0.005** (0.002)	0.001 (0.001)	-0.000 (0.001)	0.001 (0.001)	0.000 (0.001)
Single authored bills	0.055* (0.032)	0.056* (0.032)	0.051 (0.032)	0.047 (0.032)	0.004 (0.020)	0.002 (0.020)	0.004 (0.021)	0.007 (0.021)
Legislative newcomer	0.559** (0.289)	0.789*** (0.279)	0.297 (0.243)	0.776** (0.307)	-0.528*** (0.136)	-1.085*** (0.264)	-0.707*** (0.218)	-1.193*** (0.293)
Party/PPG leader	1.336*** (0.471)	1.433*** (0.473)	1.347*** (0.468)	1.428*** (0.473)	1.429*** (0.357)	1.394*** (0.358)	1.420*** (0.358)	1.398*** (0.358)
Electoral insecurity at t-1	-0.164 (0.331)	-0.180 (0.332)	-0.174 (0.330)	-0.168 (0.333)	-0.108 (0.309)	-0.086 (0.310)	-0.107 (0.309)	-0.101 (0.311)
Duration leg. office (in years)	0.199** (0.094)	0.211** (0.095)	0.183* (0.094)	0.210** (0.095)	0.462*** (0.102)	0.459*** (0.102)	0.482*** (0.102)	0.455*** (0.103)
Government party	0.486** (0.220)	0.521** (0.221)	0.475** (0.219)	0.523** (0.222)	-0.319 (0.214)	-0.319 (0.214)	-0.323 (0.214)	-0.326 (0.215)
Ideological position party	-0.002 (0.163)	0.009 (0.165)	0.032 (0.164)	0.004 (0.165)	0.038 (0.152)	-0.018 (0.143)	-0.036 (0.140)	0.028 (0.152)
Age	-0.077*** (0.011)	-0.076*** (0.011)	-0.078*** (0.011)	-0.076*** (0.011)	-0.067*** (0.010)	-0.069*** (0.011)	-0.067*** (0.010)	-0.069*** (0.011)
Male dummy	0.209 (0.209)	0.259 (0.211)	0.187 (0.208)	0.264 (0.211)	-0.203 (0.191)	-0.207 (0.191)	-0.185 (0.190)	-0.219 (0.192)
Plenary x Leg. newcomer	-0.032 (0.021)			-0.011 (0.025)	0.014* (0.008)			0.021 (0.018)
Committee x Leg. newcomer		-0.008***		-0.008**		0.005**		0.004

		(0.003)		(0.003)		(0.002)		(0.003)
Single authored x Leg. newcomer			0.051 (0.115)	0.111 (0.121)			-0.011 (0.061)	-0.046 (0.063)
PPG FE	Included	Included	Included	Included	Included	Included	Included	Included
Legislative term FE	Included	Included	Included	Included	Included	Included	Included	Included
Intercept	3.558*** (1.149)	3.296*** (1.168)	3.555*** (1.158)	3.318*** (1.162)	1.823* (1.032)	2.724*** (1.027)	2.533** (1.013)	2.552** (1.057)
N	1,108	1,108	1,108	1,108	913	913	913	913
R <sup>2</sup>	0.165	0.169	0.163	0.170	0.209	0.210	0.206	0.211

*Note:* Entries are log odd coefficients, standard errors are reported between parentheses. Significance levels: \* p < 0.10; \*\* p < 0.05; p < 0.01.

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