Debates in the Estonian *Riigikogu*

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Abstract

In this chapter, we analyze the speechmaking among Estonian MPs between 2011 and 2019. We find that those holding parliamentary office in committees and party groups enjoy privileged floor access and are more active speakers compared to regular MPs. Opposition backbenchers, enjoying more freedom or eager to make their mark, participate more actively in parliamentary debates than their governing party colleagues. We also find that members of the coveted EU Affairs Committee as well as MPs from smaller parties and those with a greater personal electoral appeal (based on preference votes) speak more actively. The impact of gender, age and legislative experience on speech activism is less clear.

Keywords: parliamentary speeches, Estonia, legislative politics, gender, government and opposition, party size.

Introduction

Since regaining independence in 1992, Estonia has not only escaped the communist political and economic legacies but also abandoned the chaotic parliamentary culture of early post-communist years. Gone are the poorly enforced discipline in amorphous political parties, unclear loyalties of MPs, fledgling majorities and endemic party switching. For more than a decade, party groups have been rather monolithic, with most MPs habitually towing the party line behind policies coordinated from outwith of the legislative branch. As this chapter shows, governing party MPs are much quieter during debates than those from the opposition benches. The chairs of committees and party groups enjoy most floor time and have in recent years made more than half of all speeches; many others have been made by backbenchers chosen to represent a committee or a party group in the plenary. Still, backbenchers benefit from considerable access to the rostrum that is more frequently used by smaller opposition parties and those with a stronger personal mandate.

Institutional and party system background

The Estonian parliament (*Riigikogu*) convened in 1992 as the country regained independence after decades of Soviet rule. The 101 members of the unicameral parliament are elected for four years (three in 1992-1995). In practice, many serve shorter periods as the strict separation of powers requires government ministers to suspend their mandates. Conversely, many substitute MPs fail to complete a term upon ministers returning after government changes (15 since 1992).

Riigikogu is elected based on proportional representation with a five percent national threshold. 12 multi-mandate districts (5-15 mandates) return most MPs but about 20 percent enter through national party lists that ensure proportionality between parties' vote and seat

shares.[1] The two tiers make personal vote seeking incentives somewhat ambiguous. On the one hand, district lists are open, and candidates are reordered according to preference votes. Preference voting is also embedded in ballot design as voters cannot choose a party without indicating a candidate preference. On the other hand, candidates higher up on lists are better placed to accumulate preference votes. Also, plum spots on closed national lists and coattails of popular candidates – especially in large districts with lower quotas – offer backdoors for those with meagre personal following.[2]

Until mid-1990s, the proportional representation system produced a fragmented party landscape. This was aided by the flourishing of *ad hoc* electoral coalitions that scattered into multiple parliamentary party groups after elections. However, individual parties have dominated elections since 1999 when coalitions, rapped for party system instability, were banned from parliamentary elections.[3] Two further rules have stabilized the party system and buttressed the electoral and parliamentary roles of parties. Firstly, since 1995, all parties must maintain public lists of 500 members (1,000 until 2014). Secondly, since 2003, only parties running in elections can form parliamentary groups ("factions") and MPs cannot switch between them; any defectors become formally independent MPs – although they often join or cooperate with other parties.[4] The internal organization of factions is minimally regulated by the law that only outlines the rules on formation and leadership (one chair and up to two deputy

[1] However, the modified d'Hondt formula (divisors 1,2,3, etc raised to the power of 0.9) is one of the least proportional formulas in use.

[2] Minimum preference vote requirements apply. Candidates must win at least 10% of the district quota (valid votes / magnitude) to qualify for district mandates and at least 5% to qualify for national compensation mandates.

[3] The only exceptions are independent candidates (none has entered the parliament), as well as candidates from minor parties and independents running on other parties' lists.

[4] Party groups can only be abolished if they fall below the minimum required size (5 MPs). However, this has not happened since 1999.

chairs depending on size). Intra-party tensions seldom surface before they are critical and lead to defections – as in 2012 when eight Center Party MPs left after clashing with party leadership.

Parties with roots in early or mid-1990s have dominated the parliament over the last two decades. The center-left Center Party (*Keskerakond,* K, the main successor to the Popular Front independence movement) and the market liberal Reform Party (*Reformierakond,* RE, established in 1994) have been the polar adversaries. They are complemented by two other well-established parties – the Social Democrats (*Sotsiaaldemokraatlik Erakond*, S, another Popular Front successor) and the national conservative Pro Patria (*Isamaa*, I, the successor to the more radical independence movements of late 1980s). This equilibrium was briefly disrupted in 2003 by the meteoric rise of *Res Publica* (later merged with Pro Patria) and, more recently, by the upsurge of the radical right Conservative People's Party (*Eesti Konservatiivne Rahvaerakond*, EKRE). Only two other small parties have entered the parliament this century – the Greens (*Erakond Eestimaa Rohelised*, ERE, 2007-11) and the Free Party (*Eesti Vabaerakond,* EVE, a conservative party with a modern twist, 2015-19). The parliamentary parties have been mostly clearly defined but twenty defections nevertheless took place between 2011 and 2019 – even though MPs cannot switch party groups, they often do so informally.

The proportional electoral rules and multi-party system have engendered a tradition of coalition governments that nearly always rely on a parliamentary majority. Only rarely have minority governments formed or majorities been lost due to defections. This has institutionalized a parliamentary political culture with clearly set roles for the government and the opposition, and predictable patterns of parliamentary activity. The tradition of majority coalitions enacting detailed government programs – that coalition MPs are required to abide by – has bolstered executive dominance and strong party discipline. As governments seldom lose votes, parliamentary debate remains an important instrument for the opposition to make

themselves heard; as we will see, it is used much less enthusiastically by governing party backbenchers.

The institutional setting of legislative debate

Speaking arrangements and time are regulated in *the Riigikogu Rules of Procedure and Internal Rules Act* (RKKTS 2019). MPs participate in plenary debates as chosen representatives of a committee, a party group or as individual members on their own behalf. During the readings of legislative bills, time between party groups is allocated equally rather than proportionally to their size. While the first and third readings only involve committee and party group representatives, during the second readings the access to the floor is free. Individual MPs can also make speeches when submitting interpellations and during the weekly "free microphone". Party group and committee chairs do not feature prominently in the law but party groups have some informal rules and traditions – for example, the choice of bill presenters depends on MPs' specialty topics and spearheading.

During parliamentary sessions, the plenary convenes for four days of sittings in three consecutive weeks, followed by a week with no sittings. Since 1999, the regular plenary sessions have on average lasted 1,300 hours per four-year term. The number (and duration) of extraordinary sessions has declined from 24 (66 hours) in 1999-2003 to 6 (19 hours) in 2015-2019. Most of the time during the sittings is devoted to debates, with limited time allocated for chair's notices at the commencement and for electronic voting (*Riigikogu XIII koosseis*, 2019, 114). Extraordinary sessions or additional sittings during sessions can be called by the Board of *Riigikogu* (the Speaker and two Deputy Speakers)[5] based on a proposal of at least 21 MPs

[5] Officially, the President and Vice-Presidents of *Riigikogu.* We use "Speaker" throughout to avoid confusion with the President of Estonia.

or the President.[6] The plenary agenda is set by the Board based on proposals from standing committees and formally adopted at the first plenary of the week. All proposed bills undergo a first reading but can then either voted out or put on hold in the lead committee if the governing coalition so decides.[7]

Contributions to the debate take the form of speeches, and comments and questions. *Comments* are made from the seat and include questions to the presenters (e.g. ministers, high officials, other MPs), procedural questions to the Speaker and short comments (up to two minutes). Proper *speeches* are delivered from the rostrum, mostly during the readings of legislative bills (see Table 1). The speeches are used for presenting proposed bills,[8] reporting on behalf of the lead committee or commenting on behalf of a party group. A presenter nominated by the lead committee offers committee's position in all three readings. The first readings address the context and aims of the bill and only one representative per party group can make a speech. The second readings focus on the details and finer aims of the bill and all MPs (including independents) can take part in the discussions. The third readings are devoted to the final scrutiny and wording of the bill, and only one representative per party group can rise to the rostrum. The processing of constitutional amendments and state budgets deviate somewhat from the standard practices and offer individual MPs more opportunities to speak. For these, extended discussions can be held during all three readings that, for constitutional amendments, can span several parliamentary terms.

[6] Since 1995, 3.4 extraordinary sessions per year have been held, including 10 days of presidential elections.

[7] This allows to block debates on opposition bills as governing coalitions usually maintain a majority in all standing committees.

[8] Bills can be proposed by individual MPs, committees or party groups. In addition to bills, draft resolutions, statements and communications can be submitted by MPs (the latter two require signatures from one fifth of MPs). These proposals can be passed faster, only after one or two readings.

Table 1: Main types of parliamentary discussions

In English	In Estonian	Description	Allotted time
First reading	*Esimene lugemine*	Devoted to the overall context and aims of a bill; speeches limited to one representative per party group.	20 min per presenter, 5 min per speech from the rostrum (can be extended by up to 3 min).
Second reading	*Teine lugemine*	Devoted to the details and finer aims of a bill and all MPs (including independents) can take part in the discussions.	Same as above
Third reading	*Kolmas lugemine*	Devoted to the final scrutiny and wording of the bill; speeches limited to one representative per party group	Same as above
Free Microphone	*Vaba mikrofon*	Any MP can speak from the rostrum	Every Monday, during sessions, up to 5 min without discussions
Discussion on a matter of significant national importance	*Olulise tähtsusega riiklik küsimus*	These special sittings can be called by a committee or a party group (limited to once a year for party groups) and any number of MPs or outside speakers can be called. On average, 7.6 such discussions annually held in 2011-2019.	The rules pertaining the number and length of discussions will be set by the board of *Riigikogu* before every event.
Interpellations	*Arupärimised*	MPs can submit written questions to ministers and other high officials which will be discussed on the plenary floor. The interpellator (MP) presents the question from the rostrum after which a discussion commences.	5 minutes to present the interpellation from the rostrum

The rostrum can be used for two other types of interventions besides scrutinizing bills. Firstly, the weekly "free microphone" sessions allow MPs to give speeches on issues that matter to them (e.g rebuttals to media reports, pet topics such as policies affecting their constituencies or voters). However, MPs use them sparingly compared to 1990s. One can speculate that modern means of communication (e.g. the social media) are yielding these interventions arcane and MPs would rather engage in debates with others during the plenary rather than speaking to an inattentive or sometimes empty plenary hall. Secondly, the rostrum is used for speeches during discussions on matters of significant national importance. These special sittings can be called by a committee or a party group (limited to once a year for party groups) and any number of MPs or outside speakers can be called. The debate is limited to specific topics and all MPs can ask questions from the presenters and contribute comments on the topic (mainly from the seat). Overall, floor access is relatively open in Estonia as individual

MPs have various opportunities for participating in debates. This squares with Procksch & Slapin's expectation that personal vote seeking incentives correlate with easier backbencher access to the floor (2015: 59). Parts of the proceedings allocate time equally between party groups, but the choice of representatives is not regulated; any MP could end up representing their party group at some point. As noted above, parties have grown more cohesive, hierarchical and disciplined over time and the limits on "free for all" time during the first and third readings of bills may enforce these tendencies. Furthermore, independent MPs who have left their parties cannot participate in the first and third readings – their access to the floor is limited to the second readings and to short oral questions from the presenters.

What is the role of intra- and interparty politics in legislative debates?

Estonian parliament's API (https://api.riigikogu.ee/swagger-ui.html) records speech data for the three parliamentary terms (2011-19). During that period, the governing coalitions changed five times, including two mid-term changes. As a result, many MPs switched from government to opposition and vice versa, and many committee and party group chairs changed. In our analysis, we consider five *episodes* with different governing coalitions (Table 2). After the 2011 elections, Andrus Ansip (Reform Party, RE) returned as the Prime Minister in coalition with *Pro Patria* (I). After Ansip became an EU commissioner in 2014, Taavi Rõivas (RE) succeeded him as the Prime Minister but replaced I with Social Democrats (S) as the junior coalition partner. Rõivas returned after the 2015 election but losing seats in the parliament, invited both I and S to the governing coalition. In 2016, following a decade of RE-led governments, the Centre Party (K) took over when Jüri Ratas replaced Edgar Savisaar, a long-time controversial leader of the party; I and S remained junior partners until the 2019 parliamentary election. As all governing parties suffered seat losses in 2019, the surging radical right Conservative People's Party (EKRE) replaced S in the governing coalition. The

government changes highlight the limited value of party families for analyzing Estonian politics. RE and K are both nominally liberal parties in the European Parliament but remain arch rivals in Estonian politics and have recently alternated at the helm of the government.[9] However, as only six parties featured in the parliament during the period of analysis, we include party dummies in some of the regression models.

Table 2: Episodes of governing coalitions

Cabinet	PM's party	Coalition partners	Start	End	Parliament in session (days)
Andrus Ansip III	RE	I	6/04/2011	26/03/2014	775
Taavi Rõivas I	RE	S	26/03/2014	9/04/2015	262
Taavi Rõivas II	RE	I, S	9/04/2015	23/11/2016	415
Jüri Ratas I	K	I, S	23/11/2016	29/04/2019	686
Jüri Ratas II	K	EKRE, I	29/04/2019	28/12/2019[a]	175

[a] Last day included in the analysis.

Descriptive Analysis

390 people served as MPs in the three parliaments, but as we focus on episodes, we analyze 539 cases of MP-in-episode. We exclude those who served less than 50 days during an episode, and speakers and vice-speakers of the parliament.[10] Men dominate among MPs (75%) although the share of women has increased from 20% (2011) to 32% (2019). Men also serve slightly longer on average (387 and 375 days, respectively), suggesting that women are more common among temporary substitute members sitting in for cabinet ministers. Men dominate among

[9] In addition, the Free Party, one of the parties included in the analysis, is very difficult to classify.

[10] Speakers and vice-speakers normally do not participate in debates. In two cases, we removed a short spell as vice-speakers from the overall length of sitting as an MP. MPs who served for less than 50 days were mostly temporary substitutes (e.g. before ministers from parties leaving the governing coalition returned to parliament). We also removed periods when the parliament was not sitting (i.e. Christmas and summer breaks).

committee chairs (84%) but women have punched above their weight as party group chairs (31%).

The share of female MPs varies between political parties (Figure 1). Unsurprisingly, the conservative Pro Patria (I) and, in particular, the radical right Conservative People's Party (EKRE) have had the lowest share of female MPs. Conversely, more than a third of Social Democrat (S) and Free Party (EVE) MPs have been women. Parties with few women speak with a very masculine voice (especially EKRE) while the female and male MPs of other parties speak equally often – although the most avid debaters are often men.

Figure 1: Gender and speechmaking, by party affiliation

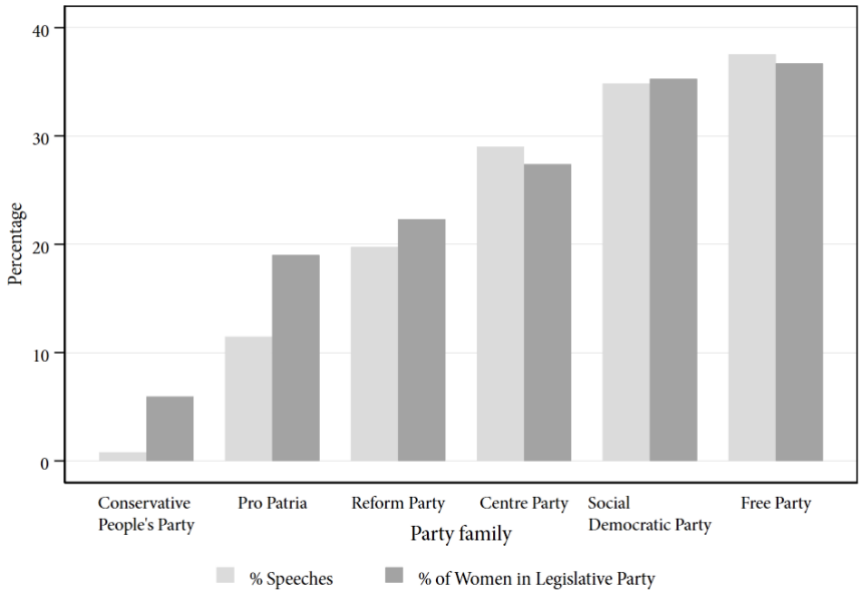
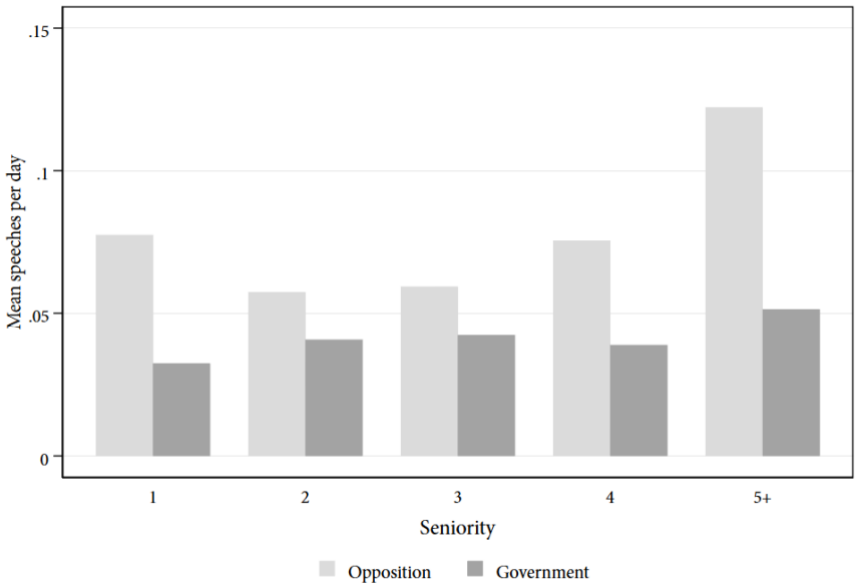


Figure 2: Seniority and speechmaking, by government status



We measure *seniority* as the number of parliaments an MP has been elected to, regardless of membership duration. Senior members of governing parties who relinquish their seats upon becoming ministers thereby still accumulate seniority. We found that among opposition MPs, seniority has a slightly skewed U-shaped effect on debating activity – those in their second and third term are the least active, perhaps because fresher enthusiasm fades before veteran experience sets in (Figure 2). The impact of seniority on speechmaking activity is ambiguous among governing party MPs.[11]

[11] In descriptive statistics we focus on *speeches per day* because the length of MPs' tenure varies considerably Out-of-session days are excluded from the number of days; however, weekends and days with no sittings are included (Fridays and every fourth week). Hence, the number of speeches per day of sitting is higher the figures cited here. In the regression analysis below, we use a proportional intensity model to account for the important differences in duration, using the logged duration as an offset (Hilbe 2014: 63-64).

Multivariate Analysis

The following analysis explains the number of MPs' speeches (as detailed word counts are not available) in each of the five episodes – i.e. periods with different governing coalitions. In addition to gender and seniority discussed above, we consider the effects of MPs holding key parliamentary offices, their governing party membership, age and parliamentary party size (number of MPs in parliamentary group).[12] For reasons set out by Slapin and Proksch (this volume) and expectations derived from our analysis of parliamentary debate regulations (discussed above), we anticipate that leadership of a standing committee or a party group increases speech frequency. We analyze these roles at two levels – holding a chair and holding any leadership (chairs and deputy chairs).[13] Our models include two sets of dummies. First, we are controlling for episode fixed effects. Although the models account for the time MPs sat in the parliament – using duration as the offset variable – debates were overall livelier in some episodes than others. We also consider party dummies as parties can vary in their practices and MPs' penchant to rise to the rostrum. In contrast to most other chapters in this volume, we do not include dummies for party leaders or ministers. Leaders of Estonian governing parties usually sit in the cabinet and must relinquish their parliamentary seats. Opposition party leaders

[12] For MPs who held parliamentary offices or represented governing parties for only a part of an episode, we calculated the portion of time in these positions.

[13] The pooling of chairs and deputy chairs in the second variable makes the results easier to interpret as otherwise the coefficients for deputy chairs would contrast them to ordinary MPs *and* chairs. The variables for committee and party group chairs as well as governing status are coded as interval variables ranging from 0 to 1. In a limited number of cases, the chairs did not serve for the full episode or defecting MPs switched from supporting the government to opposition (or vice versa). They have been coded with intermediate values reflecting on the portion of time served.

often chair their parliamentary groups or become Riigikogu deputy speakers who are, respectively, very engaged or conspicuous in parliamentary debates.[14]

Table 3: Descriptive statistics

Variable	Mean	Sd	Min	Max
Speeches	21.6	28	0	297
Membership duration (days)	393	223	68	775
Government party	0.567	0.493	0	1
Female	0.25	0.433	0	1
Seniority	2.08	1.2	1	6
$\log_{10}$Seniority	0.251	0.24	0	0.778
Age	49.1	11.28	24	77
Party group chair	0.0491	0.204	0	1
Party group deputy chair	0.0794	0.255	0	1
Committee chair	0.108	0.299	0	1.02
Committee leadership	0.207	0.390	0	1
Party size	25.8	8.45	7	38
Committee chair [prominence] [a]	0.0454	0.151	0	1
Committee leadership [prominence] [a]	0.0872	0.201	0	1
EU Affairs Committee [a]	0.221	0.415	0	1
Preference votes / M [a]	263	219	25.3	1354.8
$\log_{10}$(Preference votes / M) [a]	2.29	0.342	1.40	3.13

[a] – see "Prominence matters: additional determinants of speech activism" for the discussion of variables

Some variables exhibit severe skewness, starting from the number of speeches per MP per episode, our dependent variable (Table 3).[15] The most active 14% of MPs delivered half of all speeches – Mihhail Stalnuhhin, a veteran MP of the Centre Party, alone contributed more than 5% of all speeches. In contrast, 4% of MPs never gave a speech.[16] The skewness in the

[14] Speakers and deputy speakers are excluded from the data altogether as their contributions during debates are nearly always procedural.

[15] Membership duration, our offset variable is logged because of the log link function in negative binomial regression.

[16] The opposition benches seated fewer tongue-tied MPs than the government ones and they were rare among the holders of parliamentary offices (just 1.5% committee and 3% faction chairs or their deputies).

dependent variable is accounted for by our use of negative binomial regression but we log seniority as its marginal impact should decline over time – i.e. the difference between first and second term MPs is more substantial than between fifth and sixth term MPs. To account for the U-shaped relationship between seniority and speech activity (discussed above) and a possible curvilinear effect of age, we add quadratic terms of these variables.

We analyze two models for all MPs – a *basic model* with MP-specific variables only (Model 1 in Table 4) and a *full model* including variables on parliamentary offices, party size and party fixed effects (Figure 3 and Model 2 in Table 4). Our preliminary analysis suggested that members of governing and opposition party MPs engage in parliamentary debates differently; therefore, we also ran separate models for opposition and governing party MPs (Models 3 and 4 in Table 4). We use a negative binomial specification throughout as our data suffers from overdispersion (see Proksch & Slapin 2011: 67).[17] As many MPs featured in several episodes, we use clustered standard errors (Hilbe 2011: 170) – the observations from different episodes are not independent as some individuals can be intrinsically more inclined to speak than others.

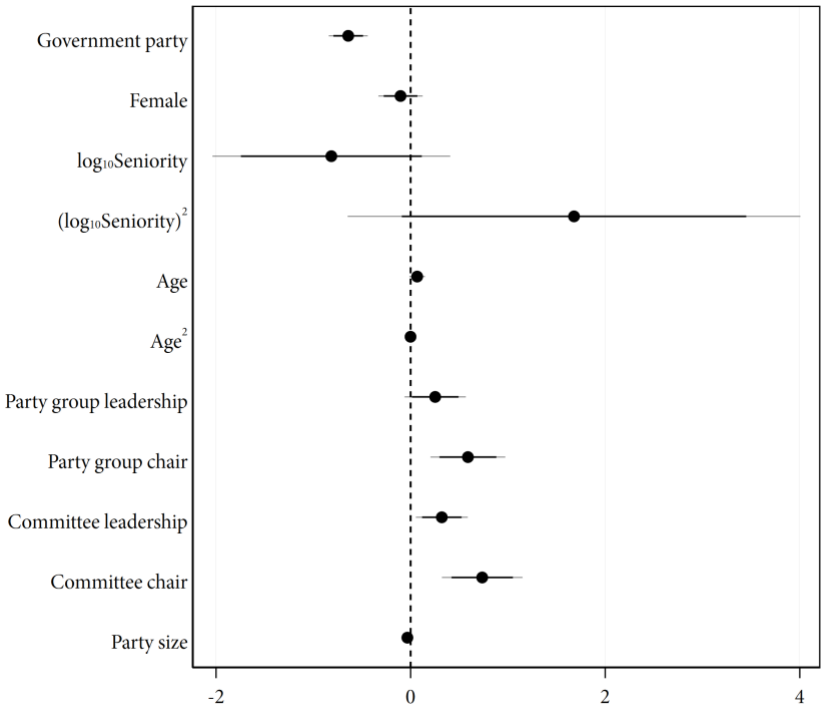
[17] Tested in R using the *dispersiontest* function in the *AER* package (Kleiber & Zeileis 2008).

Table 4: Negative binomial regression models

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3 (Government MPs)		Model 4 (Opposition MPs)	
Government party	-0.689***	(0.083)	-0.641***	(0.078)				
Party group leadership			0.253*	(0.122)	0.281	(0.155)	0.200	(0.186)
Party group chair			0.589***	(0.149)	0.323	(0.207)	0.857***	(0.204)
Committee leadership			0.321**	(0.104)	0.884**	(0.298)	0.402**	(0.126)
Committee chair			0.736***	(0.161)	0.201	(0.315)	-0.819***	(0.141)
Female	-0.106	(0.110)	-0.104	(0.088)	-0.232*	(0.115)	0.049	(0.121)
$\log_{10}$Seniority	-0.455	(0.608)	-0.815	(0.474)	-0.035	(0.594)	-1.800*	(0.732)
$(\log_{10}\text{Seniority})^2$	1.417	(1.140)	1.680	(0.903)	0.436	(1.039)	3.313*	(1.352)
Age	0.029	(0.034)	0.067*	(0.031)	0.024	(0.035)	0.097*	(0.041)
Age^2	-0.000	(0.000)	-0.001*	(0.000)	-0.000	(0.000)	-0.001*	(0.000)
Party size			-0.033*	(0.014)	-0.027	(0.019)	-0.028	(0.021)
Party RE (reference category)			0.000	(.)	0.000	(.)	0.000	(.)
EKRE			-0.163	(0.360)	-0.118	(0.378)	-0.194	(0.669)
EVE			0.197	(0.369)			0.235	(0.585)
I			-0.430*	(0.20)	-0.325	(0.28)	-0.220	(0.36)
K			0.206	(0.16)	-0.086	(0.20)	0.351	(0.27)
S			-0.368	(0.26)	-0.313	(0.34)	-0.394	(0.39)
Constant	0.369	(0.79)	0.222	(0.81)	0.201	(1.03)	-0.516	(1.34)
Observations	544		544		309		235	
AIC	4141.24		3992.66		2106.02		1889.303	
Log likelihood	-2058.602		-1974.308		-1033.041		-923.516	

Note: *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$. Logged length of *Riigikogu* membership during an episode used as the offset variable. Robust standard errors clustered on MP in parentheses. Episode fixed effects omitted.

Figure 3: Speeches during an episode - negative binomial model coefficients



Note: Based on Model 2 in Table 4; episode and party dummies omitted.

The results in Table 4 and Figure 3 emphasize the importance of MP's government or opposition status on their speechmaking. This is the only statistically significant factor in the model with MP-specific variables only. In models that pool all MPs (1 and 2 in Table 4), opposition MPs are expected to be twice as active as governing party MPs – giving 59 and 31 speeches, respectively, during the equivalent of a full term.[18]

Party size has a mildly negative impact on debate activism in contrast to evidence of a positive impact in existing literature (Bäck & Debus 2019). This could reflect the equal (rather than proportional) floor access enjoyed by Estonian parties, an opportunity not missed by smaller parties. In a model without party dummies, the effect increases and acquires statistical

[18] For all predicted values cited below, we have set the other predictors as follows (unless otherwise specified): age 50, seniority 3, party size 25, gender male.

significance for opposition parties. Seniority, gender and age show no clear effects on speech activism in Model 1; the variables achieve some statistical significance by turns in other models, but the magnitude and statistical significance of the effect always remain meagre. Importantly, the nominal and quadratic terms cancel each other out – i.e. activism is not significantly raised or lowered at any level of age or seniority.

The impact of party group and committee leadership on speechmaking is manifest in Model 2. A governing party group chair is expected to give 72 speeches during a full parliamentary term in contrast to 31 by government backbenchers; the effect is even stronger for committee chairs (89 speeches). Committee deputy chairs are more active than regular MPs – captured by the variable committee leadership – but the effect is negligible for party group deputy chairs. Many speeches are held during the readings of bills and, as mentioned above, chairs often use their prerogative to present them. However, some standing committees lead on considerably more bills than others; therefore, in "Prominence matters: additional determinants of speech activism" below, we propose a way to incorporate the effect of committee activism.

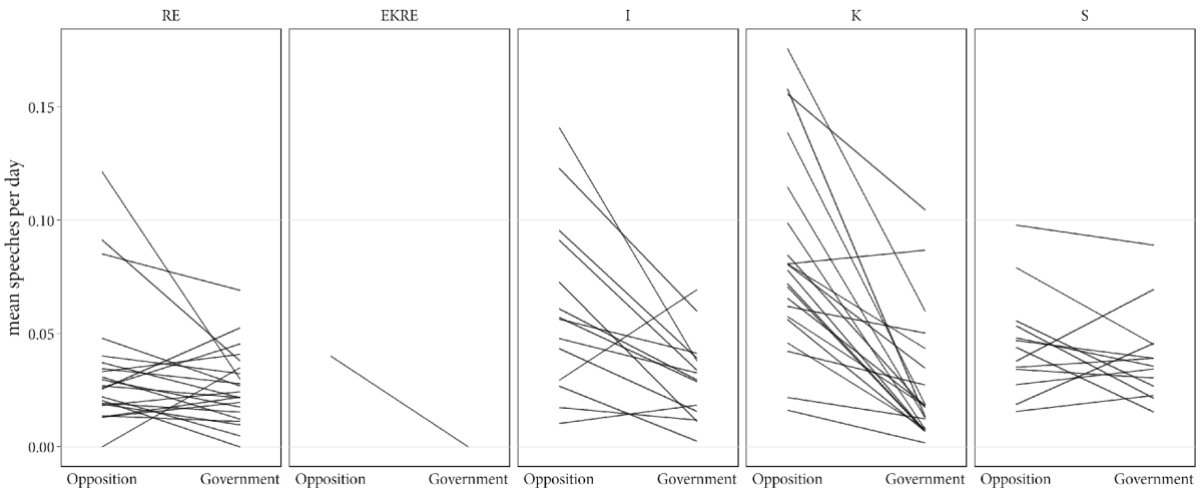
Governing party MPs are clearly less active than those from the opposition benches. However, the effect of other factors could be contingent on the MP's government/opposition status – as suggested earlier, coalition and opposition MPs can react differently to the holding of parliamentary offices. To study the differential effects on the behavior of MPs, we ran models separately for government and opposition MPs (Models 3 and 4 in Table 4).

Among *governing party* MPs, the chairs/deputy chairs of committees are most vocal; party group leaders considerably less so. That is because committee chairs can present prominent bills themselves if they so wish. Governing party backbenchers are expected to give only 27 speeches over a full term, this increases to 80 for committee chairs. Chairing a party group increases the expected number of speeches to 50. Remarkably, female MPs from governing parties are less engaged in debates than their male desk mates (Estonian MPs sit

behind desks in pairs) – with 25 versus 33 predicted speeches for backbenchers over the full term; no such difference is present among opposition MPs. The patterns are very different for *opposition parties*. Opposition backbenchers and party group chairs are expected to give twice as many speeches than their governing party counterparts (56 and 161, respectively). Very few opposition MPs chaired parliamentary committees but those who did held a very low profile compared to all other groups apart from regular government MPs. However, oppositional committee deputy chairs are more active than ordinary MPs. Deputy chairs lack a formal role and active MPs could be rewarded with the positions or they strive to justify their selection by being active.

One of the reasons why government MPs appear less active is that governing party leaders snatch up ministerial portfolios and must relinquish their parliamentary seats. However, this is only part of the story. Most backbenchers were less active when their parties were in government than in opposition (Figure 4); the difference is especially pronounced for the most vocal MPs whose activism died down when no longer in opposition.

Figure 4: Speech activism in opposition and government



Note: mean number of speeches per day for individual regular MPs

Prominence matters: additional determinants of speech activism

In this section, we analyze the impact of three country-specific variables joined by a common denominator of "prominence". Firstly, we investigate the prominence of committees in terms of their bill workload. Secondly, we analyze the impact of MPs' membership in the coveted EU Affairs Committee. Thirdly, we take stock of the individual prominence of MPs based on their success in winning personal preference votes in elections. We also discuss some interesting outliers emerging from the final analysis.

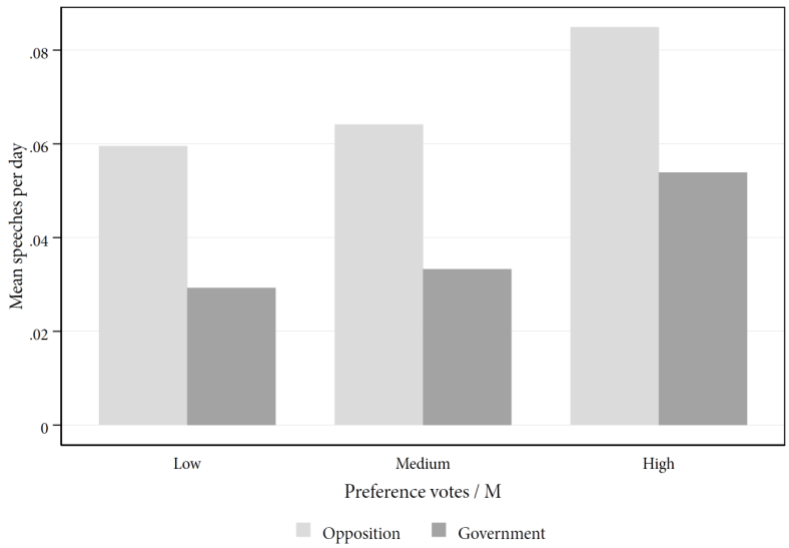
We have already demonstrated the strong effect of committee leadership on MPs' speechmaking, particularly among governing party representatives. This can mostly be attributed to the role committee chairs hold during the readings of legislative bills. Yet, some committees process more bills than others. In the parliament elected in 2015, the Constitutional Committee was the lead committee for 22 percent of draft laws and the Finance Committee for 16 percent. The least active were the Cultural Affairs Committee (7 percent), the Foreign Affairs Committee (5 percent) and the Rural Affairs Committee (only 3 percent, *XIII Riigikogu eelnõud*, nd). To account for this variation, we constructed a measure that factors in the prominence of committees in legislative proceedings. *Committee chair [prominence]* is the product of the committee's share of bills, rescaled so that the most active committee has the score of 1, and the share of time an MP chaired the committee during an episode. *Committee leadership [prominence]* adds together the spells as chairs and deputy chairs. For example, the score for Rait Maruste, the chair of the Constitutional Committee throughout two episodes is 1; Tarmo Tamm, his deputy for 57 days during episode 1 (7.5 percent of the episode), scored 0.075 for the episode. Those without any committee roles scored 0.

In addition to the regular standing committees, *Riigikogu* has a special standing committee dedicated to the European Union Affairs (ELAK) that monitors government's EU policies and forms opinions on EU draft legislation. ELAK membership is complementary to

ordinary standing committee membership and it attracts senior MPs who usually hold no other parliamentary offices; one can expect them to be more active debaters than other ordinary MPs.

Finally, in open list proportional representation systems, the personal popularity of MPs can affect their engagement in parliamentary debates. Estonia uses "compulsory" preference votes – i.e. votes are cast for candidates in party lists rather than parties; not indicating a preference is impossible. The personal vote shares of MPs vary greatly as many are elected on the tailcoats of popular candidates; others enter from national lists that requires passing a low personal support threshold. As district magnitude varies considerably[19] we adjusted the number of preference votes by district magnitude. Figure 5 suggests that MPs with higher shares of preference votes tend to be more avid speakers.

Figure 5: Distribution of speeches per day, by preference votes and government status



In models with the three additional variables, the committee chairs stand out even more clearly than before (Model 5 in Table 5). The predicted number of speeches for a full-term

[19] 5 <= M <= 15, candidates would need to win all votes in the smallest district in order to reach the levels of preference votes of top vote magnets in the largest districts. We also log the ratio as it is severely skewed.

chair of the most active committee from a governing party is 169 in contrast to just 38 for party group chairs and 21 for ordinary members.[20] Amongst opposition MPs, committee chairs are the least active – with only 5 predicted speeches for a full term even for the most active committee. This increases to 53 for ordinary opposition MPs and 103 for party group chairs – both are clearly more active than their governing party counterparts. This stands in stark contrast to the effect for committee chairs who provide the most active MPs when from government and the least active MPs when from opposition. ELAK members appear more active than other MPs, making about 28 percent more speeches (39 percent more in government MPs-only model). Membership in the important committee can increase involvement with parliamentary work but parties may also pick ELAK members in recognition to their devotion or expect activism in return to this prestigious nomination (akin to the reasoning about the committee deputy chairs above).[21]

Higher personal profile reflected in the share of preference votes fails to increase debating activity of governing party MPs but does so among opposition MPs.[22] The asymmetry partly stems from censoring in data for governing parties, whose vote magnets enter the government and are replaced by less popular substitute members. The same caveat applies for seniority – more experienced politicians from government benches tend to snap up cabinet portfolios.

[20] Not members in ELAK, preference votes / M = 200 (approximate median); same levels for controls as above for other variables.

[21] The data suggests that members with spells in and out of ELAK mostly did not increase their speech activity – hence, it is more likely that active MPs are rewarded with seats in the committee rather than joining the committee increasing the activism.

[22] Both authors have worked for the Chancellery of the *Riigikogu* and have come across suggestions that MPs who show initiative by giving speeches or proposing bills are (at least in some parties) awarded by higher positions in national party lists.

However, the effect of seniority is ambiguous even for opposition parties – the effect of seniority and its quadratic term cancel each other out in Model 8.

Table 5: Negative binomial regression models enhanced with country-specific variables

	Model 5		Model 6		Model 7 (Government MPs)		Model 8 (Opposition MPs)	
Government party	-0.622***	(0.083)	-0.592***	(0.075)				
Party group leadership			0.213	(0.125)	0.271	(0.159)	0.098	(0.176)
Party group chair			0.485**	(0.161)	0.330	(0.214)	0.566*	(0.224)
Committee leadership [prominence]			0.542**	(0.185)	1.539*	(0.775)	0.722***	(0.209)
Committee chair [prominence]			1.465***	(0.287)	0.552	(0.787)	3.102***	(0.838)
EU Affairs Committee			0.250*	(0.098)	0.332**	(0.110)	0.172	(0.131)
Female	-0.088	(0.107)	-0.116	(0.087)	-0.240*	(0.115)	0.012	(0.118)
$\log_{10}$Seniority	-0.657	(0.562)	-0.580	(0.448)	0.291	(0.550)	-1.490*	(0.718)
$(\log_{10}\text{Seniority})^2$	1.452	(1.007)	1.206	(0.821)	-0.056	(0.971)	2.628*	(1.274)
Age	0.016	(0.033)	0.051	(0.029)	-0.001	(0.033)	0.092*	(0.039)
Age^2	-0.000	(0.000)	-0.001	(0.000)	0.000	(0.000)	-0.001*	(0.000)
$\log_{10}$(Preference votes / M)	0.595***	(0.146)	0.400***	(0.116)	0.148	(0.123)	0.671***	(0.192)
Party size			-0.034**	(0.012)	-0.016	(0.016)	-0.039	(0.022)
Party:								
RE (reference category)			0.000	(.)	0.000	(.)	0.000	(.)
EKRE			-0.238	(0.306)	-0.149	(0.310)	-0.403	(0.700)
EVE			0.235	(0.347)			0.086	(0.624)
I			-0.401*	(0.188)	-0.112	(0.236)	-0.273	(0.385)
K			0.268	(0.155)	0.036	(0.195)	0.394	(0.287)
S			-0.322	(0.235)	-0.026	(0.300)	-0.512	(0.408)
Constant	-0.741	(0.823)	-0.417	(0.867)	-0.171	(0.991)	-1.628	(1.458)
Observations	544		544		309		235	
AIC	4111.604		3946.933		2079.696		1869.902	
Log likelihood	-2042.802		-1949.467		-1017.848		-911.951	

Note: *** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05. Logged length of *Riigikogu* membership during an episode used as the offset variable. Robust standard errors clustered on MP in parentheses. Episode fixed effects omitted.

While some clear patterns emerge from the analysis, considerable unexplained variance remains. Residual analysis reveals that our models severely underestimate Mihhail

Stalnuhhin's (the most active MP overall) debating activity in four out of the five episodes – he is clearly an idiosyncratic case. We might expect ethnic minorities to be more hesitant to rise to the podium as all proceedings in the parliament are conducted in Estonian. Data on ethnicity is not available and it would be difficult to pin down in many cases.[23] Interestingly, MPs who identify as representatives of ethnic minorities feature both among the most underestimated (Stalnuhhin) and the most overestimated (Igor Kravtšenko, Valeri Korb, Vladimir Velman).

The speech activism of several former ministers is overestimated, possibly because they sat out their terms before anticipated moves to the EU institutions. These include Foreign Ministers Marina Kaljurand and Sven Mikser, both immediately before being elected to the European Parliament, and ministers with economy portfolios (Kadri Simson before joining the European Commission, and Anne Sulling). A smaller number of former leading ministers have been active speakers (Finance Ministers Aivar Sõerd and Jürgen Ligi). Interestingly, the long-term (2005-2014) Prime Minister Andrus Ansip was very active during his three months as an MP before moving on to the European Commission. He may have sought to make most out of the opportunity as he never properly sat in the parliament before or since.[24]

[23] MPs like Igor Gräzin (RE) and Viktor Vassiljev (K) might be classified as members of minority groups but this should not be expected to affect their speech activities as they worked, respectively, as a lawyer and a TV doctor, before entering politics. Indeed, Vassiljev comes across as an ultra-loyalist who is underpredicted while his party has been in opposition and overpredicted while in government. Gräzin has also alternated in being over- and underestimated.

[24] Ansip was a parliamentary candidate in four elections between 1999 and 2011. On two occasions, he ran while the mayor of Tartu and immediately gave up his seat (as one cannot serve as an MP and Mayor at the same time). On two occasions, he gave up a seat shortly once sworn in as the Prime Minister.

Conclusions

The patterns of speechmaking in the Estonian parliament generally squares with the expectations outlined by Slapin and Proksch (this volume). The Estonian electoral system provides medium personal vote-seeking incentives, and this is reflected in the mixed nature of floor access. Much of the floor access is controlled by political parties as only committee and party group representatives can rise to the rostrum during the first and third readings of bills. This clearly explains why standing committee chairs – nearly always MPs from governing parties – are the most active speakers. The chairs have a first pick of bills to present at the plenaries; the more bills a committee leads on, the more active its chair. Hence, the governing coalitions – that carefully allocate the positions of committee chairs between coalition partners – effectively play an even bigger role in controlling floor access than individual parties. Committee deputy chairs – who nearly always represent opposition – are also somewhat more active than backbenchers. However, no formal responsibilities come with the position – we contend that these can be rewarded for MPs' activism or, once deputy chairs, MPs can become more active in return for being entrusted with the high-ranking position. This can also explain why the prestigious EU Affairs Committee membership encourages speechmaking among governing party MPs and why opposition party group leaders speak more than their backbenchers.

Even though much of the floor access is controlled by party groups and the governing coalition, backbenchers do have significant floor access during some parts of the debate such as the second readings, interpellations and the (infrequently used) "free microphone" sessions. Speechmaking gives voice to those deprived of political power and seeking to make gains in future – all else being equal, opposition MPs tend to speak more than governing party MPs. Not only is this confirmed by regression analysis, but individual MPs on the back benches

throughout the period of analysis were regularly more active when their party was in opposition. Our analysis suggests that representatives of smaller opposition parties and those with a stronger personal mandate are more active speakers. We found no clear evidence on the impact of age or seniority. We did find very limited effect of gender – remarkably female MPs of governing parties (but not opposition ones) are quieter than their male counterparts.

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