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Timing in Opposition Party Support under Minority Government

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Opposition parties under minority governments find themselves in a fundamental dilemma. They are competing with other parties, including the government, for electoral support while also having a common responsibility to make stable government work. This dilemma is especially pronounced for opposition parties signing support agreements with the government. While not formally in a coalition, they nonetheless publicly commit to supporting a government. They may thus be concerned about losing distinctiveness and have an interest in strategically timing cooperation with the minority government. The present paper tests whether this is the case using data on opposition party voting on committee proposals from 23 years of Swedish minority governments between 1991 and 2018. The findings indicate that support parties are less likely to support the government towards the beginning and end of the election cycle, that is, when public attention is intense – a pattern that is not observable for other opposition parties.

Introduction

In political systems with frequent minority government formation, opposition parties and the minority government commonly conclude a binding support agreement. These agreements are made in the long term and address a range of policy areas, thus allowing opposition parties to influence policies based on formal cooperation and to present themselves as reliable partners (Bale & Bergman 2006a, 206). Supporting a minority government based on a formal agreement may thus appear very similar to acting as a coalition partner. Yet, this constellation also differs from coalitions in several important respects. On the one hand, support parties are often essential to the stability of a minority government (Christiansen & Pedersen 2014), which lends those opposition parties considerable bargaining power

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(Bale & Bergman 2006b, 440). On the other hand, they are more independent from the government as they do not share in the rewards of ministries or cabinet seats and are less likely to be associated with government policy outputs (Bale & Dann 2002; Christiansen & Seeberg 2016).

Compared to a formal coalition partner, being a support party thus implies a more flexible relationship vis-à-vis the government in which they can influence policies while sitting on the opposition bench. However, this situation is likely to accentuate a strategic challenge that opposition parties face: They have a responsibility to make a minority government work, but they also face strong incentives to pursue their own party goals to meet supporters' expectations (Bale & Bergman 2006b, 440). More so than a formal coalition partner, support parties are in direct competition with the government party while also having a special responsibility to support it. How do support parties manage this challenge and double role?

The present paper addresses this question by looking at the role of timing as a way to manage competing expectations – in this case supporting the government vs. catering to supporters and increasing voter support. For formal coalition governments, it has been shown that they strategically time when they signal cooperation. Sagarzazu and Klüver (2017) find that coalition governments, in their political communication, stress cooperation the most in the middle of the government term and less close to election dates. The authors argue that in this way, the coalition partners cope with the challenge of having to work together while also maintaining their distinctiveness in the eyes of the voters, especially in the time close to elections.

These considerations can also be applied to support parties as these can be presumed to have a general interest in remaining distinct from the government. Even though they are not part of the cabinet and remain without government offices and responsibilities, signing a support agreement makes support parties at least accountable for the agreed policies. However, given their more flexible arrangement with the minority government, they could also find themselves less constrained by a need to signal distinctiveness compared to coalition partners. It is thus an open question whether support parties show behaviour similar to formal coalition parties and exhibit a strategic timing in their cooperation with the government. To date, there is no systematic evidence on this question. Previous work has extensively covered opposition party voting behaviour with regard to the role of the party goals, policy and ideology motives, and the institutional context of the political system (Otjes & Louwerse 2014; Hix & Noury 2016; Thesen 2016; Louwerse et al. 2017; De Giorgi & Ilonszki 2018). Missing from the literature is a systematic investigation of the dynamic nature of such opposition party support of minority governments.

The main contribution of the present study, therefore, lies in addressing this gap in the literature by analysing how support party cooperation

with minority governments varies over time and how this compares to the behaviour of other opposition parties. We shed light on this aspect of party competition and contribute to the literature on government-opposition dynamics with an empirical analysis of opposition party support of Swedish minority governments in the period between 1991 and 2018. We use an original dataset on party voting behaviour in committees of the Swedish Riksdag during the overall 23 years of minority governments. These data on legislative activity allow us to analyse how the cooperation of opposition parties with the minority government varies over the legislative period. We use it to probe the timing of voting with the government for support parties in comparison to other opposition parties. As a further test of the argument that parties are concerned about distinctiveness from the government, we also probe whether a pattern of strategic timing is more pronounced on issues that are particularly important for opposition parties, that is, for which signalling distinctiveness might matter more.

The findings from our empirical analysis suggest that support parties try to distinguish themselves from the government by timing their support – unlike other opposition parties, which frequently cooperate with the government as well. Altogether, our analysis of a comprehensive dataset on the legislative behaviour of opposition parties suggests strong parallels between support parties and formal coalition partners. The findings also offer insights regarding when it will be more difficult for minority governments to pass legislation – and on whom they can count at which time during the legislative period.

Theoretical Assumptions and Hypotheses

The Dilemma of Opposition Parties under Minority Governments

Under a minority government, opposition parties are supposed to present themselves as an alternative to the government and compete for electoral support, but they also have a responsibility to maintain government stability and make the political and legislative process work. This altogether makes realizing and aligning their policy and their office motives (Müller & Strøm 1999) difficult. While opposition parties generally strive for replacing the government, they are not per se intent on taking a minority government down before the next election (Strøm 1986, 599). Often, they will have an incentive to vote together and may even collaborate with the minority government, not just to contribute to a stable government but also as a way to further their own policy goals (Otjes & Louwerse 2014; Hix & Noury 2016; Louwerse et al. 2017; De Giorgi & Ilonszki 2018).

While such collaboration can be selective and concern only single issues and bills, oppositional support can also be institutionalized and explicit and may even be based on a written agreement (Bale & Bergman 2006a). In these cases, a support agreement 'is negotiated prior to the formation of the government, and […] takes the form of an explicit, comprehensive, and more than short-term commitment to the policies as well as the survival of the government' (Strøm 1984, 204).

For a minority government, a support agreement bears the advantage of a more secure bargaining situation but it also reduces its influence over policy (Strøm 1990, 108–9). An opposition party that has signed a support agreement, in turn, receives pay-offs and furthers the party's goals (Strøm 1990, 41; Anghel & Thürk 2021). Support parties can also present themselves as reliable cooperation partners, which may pave the way to even deeper cooperation and thus more policy influence in the future (Bale & Bergman 2006a, 206).

The possibility of getting policy influence without formal cabinet responsibility seems to make support party status a strategically valuable position (Bale & Bergman 2006a). Indeed, as the findings by Thesen (2016) suggest, support parties enjoy the advantage of engaging in agenda-setting efforts and politicizing their own issues while being able to avoid the cost of ruling typical of government parties. This is remarkable because junior partners in formal coalitions have been shown to suffer from the cost-of-ruling effect (Bale 2012; Klüver & Spoon 2020).

While there seem to be certain perks to being a support party, it also matters whether a support agreement is sufficient for a parliamentary majority. In contrast to 'substantive minority governments', 'formal minority governments' achieve a parliamentary majority based on support agreements with opposition parties (Strøm 1990). Substantive minority governments must also negotiate with other opposition parties besides support parties, which reduces the influence of the latter. Since formal minority governments do not need to further bargain with other opposition parties, support parties have a stronger influence on government activities but are also more likely to be held accountable for government actions (Christiansen & Pedersen 2014, 943).

The strategic dilemma described further above is particularly acute for support parties: They have committed to supporting the minority government in exchange for some policy influence while still competing against the government for votes. These two roles can come into direct conflict with each other because supporting the government may impair a support party's efforts to attract electoral support. The reason for this possible dilemma lies in the fact that although support parties are not formally in government and less likely to be held responsible (Thesen et al. 2017), their greater cooperation with the minority government may lead to a loss of distinctiveness

from the government party. Opposition parties worry about being perceived as too close to the minority government when being part of a legislative agreement (Christiansen & Seeberg 2016). Support parties in their legislative behaviour may, therefore, also be constrained by an imperative to keep a certain distance from the government.

Previous research indicates that distinctiveness generally forms a highly important motive in party politics. A distinctive ideology and clear differentiation from competitors are valuable for parties as these serve as a powerful heuristic for voters and electoral competition (Downs 1957; Kitschelt 1994, 118). A perceived increasing similarity has been shown to translate into a loss of electoral support for parties (Lupu 2013; Fortunato 2019). Upholding a distinct profile and an identifiable party brand is therefore important for competitiveness (see e.g., Winther Nielsen and Vinæs Larsen 2014) and parties choose issues and positions that allow for differentiation from their competitors (Green & Hobolt 2008; Bäck et al. 2011; Wagner 2012). Dealing with the same general dilemma in party cooperation, Sagarzazu and Klüver (2017) have shown that partners in coalition governments resolve the tension between unity and distinctiveness by signalling a cooperative stance in their political communication mostly in the middle of the legislative period. This allows them to avoid appearing as too close to each other at election dates when public attention is greatest.

The next section builds on this literature on party strategies to maintain distinctiveness and formulate theoretical expectations about the behaviour of opposition parties, and specifically support parties, under minority governments. We posit that timing can be an important instrument for strategically dealing with the conflicting motives experienced especially by support parties.

Expectations about Strategic Timing in Opposition Party Support

Timing has been acknowledged as an important instrument to exploit dynamics in public attention to politics and policy action (e.g., Becher & Christiansen 2015; Strobl et al. 2019; Wenzelburger et al. 2020). On the level of legislative action, parties could time cooperative behaviour in such a way that voters are less likely to perceive parties as too close. Following the argument by Sagarzazu and Klüver (2017) about formal coalition partners, one would expect parties to show less cooperative behaviour when the attention of the electorate is greatest – and thus more likely to form lasting perceptions. While they develop their arguments regarding (a) formal coalitions and (b) look at cooperative signals in government communication, the strategic considerations they refer to can also be applied to opposition parties' legislative behaviour under minority governments. Opposition parties might generally want to engage in the shared task of making stable

government work, especially when they have signed a support agreement with the minority government.

However, while it is common practice that opposition parties cooperate with minority governments, this practice also differs in important respects from cooperation in formal coalitions. Opposition parties that have not signed a support agreement with the minority government have no firm obligation to support and are flexible in their cooperation with the government in legislation. It also means that they have no strong reasons to fear losing distinctiveness from the government. However, while support parties are not formally part of a coalition, they nonetheless have publicly committed to supporting the government and can be held accountable. Support parties are thus likely to receive media attention and coverage that places them closer to the government than other opposition parties which could increase the fear of losing distinctiveness in the eyes of their voters. We thus expect that support parties have incentives to use strategic timing in their legislative cooperation with the minority government.

One can presume support parties' readiness to support the government to be highest in the middle of the legislative period as elections are still distant and media and public attention is comparatively low – as are distinctiveness concerns. Media attention is heavily intensified in the run-up to and after elections, when the amount of political news is much higher compared to the period between election dates (van Aelst & De Swert 2009). Consequently, incentives to signal distinctiveness should be especially strong towards the end of the government term, when media and public attention are highest and voters' formed perceptions about parties arguably matter the most. Keeping a clear profile for electoral gains then requires deemphasizing cooperation (see also Sagarzazu & Klüver 2017, 338).

At the beginning of the government term, in turn, subsequent elections are distant and voter perceptions formed at that time may hardly seem relevant. However, shifting into clear cooperation mode, in the beginning, would mean a strong break after election campaigns that require parties to take an adversarial stance and to highlight their distinct party brand. This may invite a disconfirmation of previously evoked expectations (Darke et al. 2010) and thus has the potential to create negative reactions that harm the party brand and that may be hard to correct afterward (see also Lupu 2013). Hence, very cooperative support parties at the beginning of the government term run the risk of a credibility loss. Furthermore, initial cooperation may also be hindered through parties having to get used to and coordinate with a coalition partner (Sagarzazu & Klüver 2017, 337).

Whether such timing of support – similar as for coalition parties – indeed occurs is an open question. After all, support parties still differ from a formal coalition partner as they have no formal government responsibility and are thus less likely to be associated with government policies they support

in parliament. The incentive to keep a distinct profile may thus not be strong enough to induce a clear pattern of strategic timing in the cooperation with the government. We thus test the following hypothesis.

> Hypothesis 1: Opposition parties that have signed support agreements are more likely to support a minority government in the middle of a legislative period as compared to the endpoints of that period.

It is conceivable that the pattern of strategic timing posited in the preceding hypothesis is not a general one, but only shows where it matters most for opposition parties to maintain distinctiveness, that is, on the party's core issues. These issues are characteristics of their issue profile and thus especially important for distinguishing themselves from their competitors and for attracting their supporter bases (Budge 2015). Accordingly, strategic timing is likely to be even more important for support parties regarding those issues that are most salient for them. A pattern of strategic timing would then be most likely to be observable for issues that are most important for a support party. Put simply, to the extent that support parties do vote with the government on issues that are highly important to them at all, we expect this agreement to be concentrated towards the middle of the legislative term.

Data and Method

Case Selection and Data

To test the role of timing on opposition party voting under a minority government, we draw on data from Sweden. The Swedish case is suitable for several reasons. While Scandinavian countries have a tradition of minority governments, Sweden stands out as having the most powerful opposition (Garritzmann 2017, 12). This also means that opposition parties there have a comparatively strong responsibility to make government work, and the tension between supporting the government and keeping a distinct profile as a competitor can thus be presumed to be even more intense. As Loxbo and Sjölin (2017) show based on data about policy counter-proposals from 1970 to 2014, the Swedish opposition parties make ample use of this instrument and have become more confrontational over time. Yet, cooperation is also highly common as Swedish opposition parties frequently vote with the government and make minority government work (Louwerse et al. 2017).

The Swedish case is thus particularly instructive for studying opposition party behaviour under minority governments and for the strategic dilemma this involves. Findings from Swedish government-opposition dynamics can, however, also shed light on the workings of minority governments at least in

Scandinavian countries more generally. As these have comparable institutional settings, one can expect to see similar mechanisms at work, albeit in a less pronounced fashion than in Sweden. At the same time, as our argument builds on official support agreements under minority cabinets, the results from our analysis do not allow for making any statements about the role of inofficial and informal agreements between an opposition party and the minority government. Nor can we make any claims that the findings can be generalized to majority cabinets in Scandinavian countries.

The analysis builds on a novel dataset that contains the votes of all opposition parties on committee proposals for which the minority government voted. While this legislative activity is not generally very visible to the average voter, politicians still have to expect being watched, including by the media. Importantly, their voting behaviour is not merely talking but the very actions for which they can be held accountable. Ilonszki and de Giorgi (2020, 4) argue that legislative voting shows whether or not opposition parties 'are relentless challengers of the government, and sends a clear message to their potential constituency'. Parties therefore must expect that their plenary voting behaviour has a signalling function, especially to their electorate (Williams 2016). Analysing opposition party voting behaviour is thus suitable for examining how opposition parties deal with the dilemma described above.

The observation period ranges over 23 years and includes six legislative periods of minority governments in the time between 1991 and 2018 (the period 2006–2010 is excluded as there was no minority government). The result is a dataset with altogether 86,420 cases (opposition party voting behaviour on committee voting proposals supported by the government). The data of the legislative years 2002–2018 was gathered from the Online Service of the Swedish Riksdag and the data of the legislative years 1991–2002 were manually coded from the plenary reports.

As government formation will influence legislative activity, the analysis will only include voting proposals that were introduced after the government formed (which in our dataset is never longer than 5 weeks after election day). Moreover, since there were no early elections the endpoint of a legislative period is always defined as the last month before the next election. The length of the legislative period expected by parliamentary actors thus corresponds to the actual length of the legislative period. This is important to be able to presume that the conditions for strategic timing were comparable over all included legislative periods.

Both formal and substantive minority governments (Strøm 1990, 62) are covered in the sample. Table 1 shows that the dataset includes two centre-right minority governments and four centre-left minority governments. The former is built on broad coalition governments that comprise four

Table 1. Overview of the Swedish Minority Governments (1991–2018)

Legislature	Years	Government	Opposition	Type
Bildt	1991–1994	M, L, C, KD	SAP, V, NYD	substantive
Carlsson III/ Persson I	1994–1998	SAP	M, L, C*, KD, V*, MP	formal
Persson II	1998–2002	SAP	M, L, C, KD, V*, MP*	formal
Persson III	2002–2006	SAP	M, L, C, KD, V*, MP*	formal
Reinfeldt II	2010–2014	M, L, C, KD	SAP, V, MP, SD	substantive
Löfven I	2014–2018	SAP, MP	M, L, C, KD, V*, SD	substantive

Notes: * = opposition party that has signed a support agreement; SAP (Social Democrats), M (Moderates), L (Liberal Party), C (Centre Party), KD (Christian Democrats), V (Left Party), MP (Green Party), NYD (New Democracy), SD (Sweden Democrats); formal = 'formal minority government'; substantive= 'substantive minority government' (Strøm 1990, 62).

parties. Three of the latter are single-party governments and one is a two-party coalition, all supported by opposition parties.

Measures and Method

Opposition party voting behaviour is a binary variable measuring agreement with the government. As our dataset contains all committee proposals on which the government votes yes, the value 1 represents 'agree' (opposition party and government vote yes), 0 stands for no agreement with the government.

To measure our main independent variable, timing, we split the legislative period into five equally large parts based on the percentage of time passed (counted after completion of government formation). The resulting variable ranges from 1 (beginning of the period) to 5 (end of the legislative term). For example, committee proposals that are voted on in the first twenty percent of a legislative period are coded with 1 and so forth. Five categories are fine-grained enough to see differences over time but also guarantee that we have a large enough number of votes in the various periods for each legislative term that we can use in the statistical analysis. This categorical coding allows us to flexibly model a nonlinear effect of time and, importantly, to also interact the time variable with support party status. We can then directly see whether the probability of a support party agreeing with the government is higher towards the middle of the legislative term (especially category 3) and whether this differs from other opposition parties. This offers a more intuitive interpretation that estimates the interaction based on the common way of modelling a U-shape which we also use in an alternative model specification: by including two predictors, the variable together with the squared form of this variable.

Since the level of agreement of opposition parties may differ between legislative periods as well as between parties, it is important to include several control variables. One way to control for these different levels would be to use fixed effects for all government-opposition-party combinations to isolate the variation over time. This would mean, however, that variables describing these government-opposition-party dyads – such as their ideological difference and party issue saliency– could not be entered into the analysis as the fixed effects would absorb their variance. As we are also interested in the effects of such substantive variables, we opt for an alternative approach that introduces variables that characterize those various dyads. At the same time, to make sure that the main findings for the role of timing are robust, we also test whether the results are the same with the fixed-effects model specification.[1]

Support party status is measured as a binary variable (1 = support agreement exists, 0 = no support agreement exists). As argued above, support agreements do vary in their scope as well as their form which can influence a support party's possibilities to confront the minority government. Looking at the Swedish case, Bäck and Bergman (2016, 214) indicate that only under the legislative period Carlsson III/Persson I, support agreements were not written down, but were nonetheless explicit. In our sample, support parties therefore always publicly announced their support of the minority government, making themselves accountable to their promises. Given this similarity in the studied agreements, these will thus be treated equally in the empirical analysis.

Issue saliency is based on the party-specific scores from the Comparative Manifesto Project (Volkens et al. 2017) and is matched to the committee proposals in the dataset using the issue domain of the committee in which it was dealt with.[2] This variable thus reflects how much a party emphasizes an issue field in which a vote has taken place.[3] Alternatively, we also used the running average between two elections as this may better reflect a change in issue importance for a party over time. As an alternative measure, the citizens' perceived issue ownership based on the Swedish Election Study (SND 2020) is included. While this data source is available only for the years 1991–2010 and the items are not perfectly consistent over time, it does allow for an additional test.

Accounting for differences in opposition party behaviour, we furthermore include the largest opposition party status as well as the overall ideological distance between opposition parties and the government. The ideological distance is based on the left-right indicator from the CMP (Volkens et al. 2017) and measures the difference between the left-right position of an opposition party to the seat share weighted position of the government.[4] Furthermore, the number of proposals introduced in a month is included as

an indicator of the legislative activity that might influence the propensity of opposition parties to agree with the government.

We also control for the policy field of the committees (fixed-effects), the electorate saliency of issues (based on the National SOM Survey; University of Gothenburg 2019), and the economic pressure. This latter variable serves as a proxy for a need for unpopular cuts that may affect opposition parties' propensity to cooperate with the government. It is based on yearly scores for the budget deficit, the unemployment rate, and the real GDP growth rates[5], based on the Comparative Political Data Set (Armingeon et al. 2019).

As the dependent variable is a binary measure, we employ a logistic regression to estimate the hypothesized effects. The following section will first present descriptive statistics that offer an overview of opposition party behaviour in the Swedish Riksdag, followed by the main models from our analysis. Further analyses and robustness checks can be inspected in the online annex.

Results

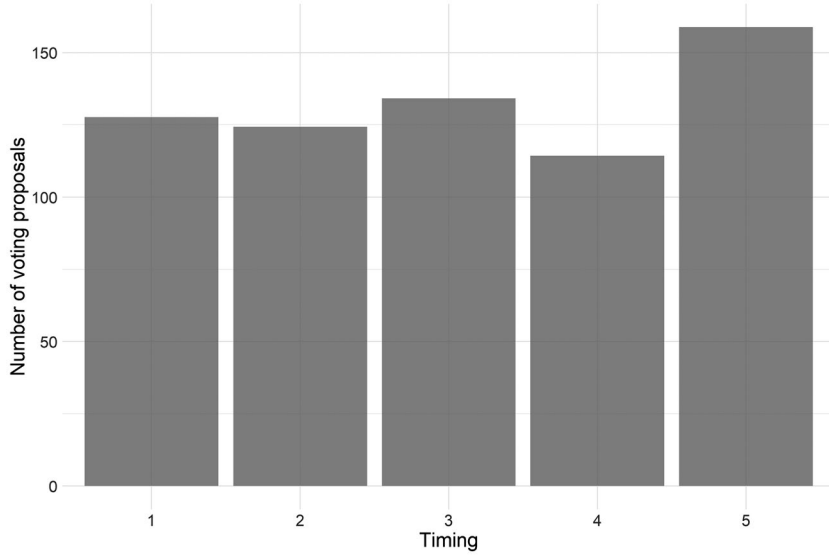
Descriptive Statistics

We first inspect two descriptive statistics that give an impression of opposition party behaviour and cooperation under Swedish minority governments in the period from 1991 to 2018: (1) the frequency of committee proposals to be voted on as a function of time passed in the legislature period (averaged over the six periods) and (2) opposition parties' agreement ratios for the six legislative terms. Figure 1 depicts the distribution for the first of these two variables and indicates that there is considerable legislative activity in terms of votes on committee proposals throughout the entire legislative term, with increased legislative activity at the end of the term.

Figure 2 additionally indicates how much the minority government support varies by opposition party for each legislative period. Besides the percentage score for the agreement with the government, the figure also contains information about the presence of a support agreement (highlighted in grey). The first insight from this graph is that the average level of agreement with the government is quite high – which underscores the strong consensus culture in Swedish politics. Second, there is also a notable variation between parties, with a difference between the highest and lowest agreement scores in a legislative period of at least 20 percentage points. Third, parties with a support agreement cooperate generally more with the minority government, as one would expect.

Figure 3 shows how this cooperation with the government is spread out over the legislative term and how this differs between support parties and

Figure 1. Distribution of Committee Voting Proposals Over the Legislative Period (Average for all Six Governments).

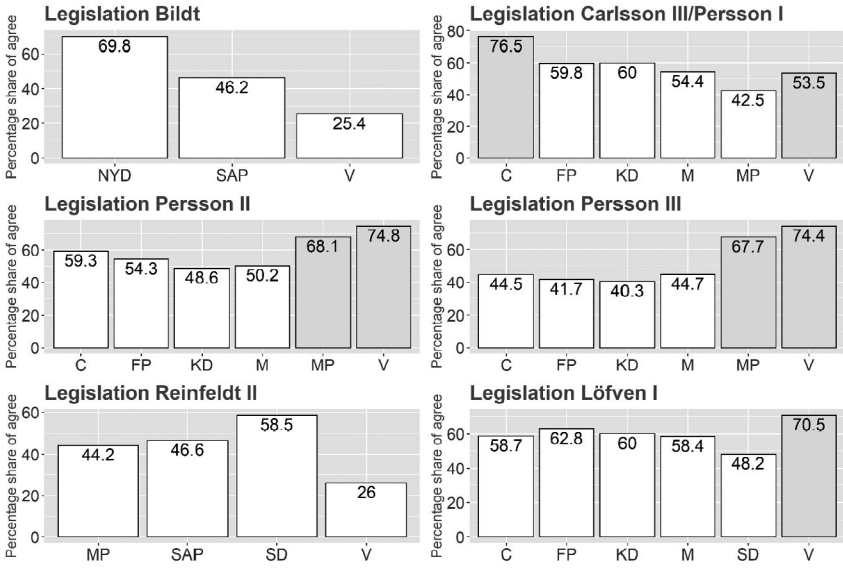


Notes: The values on the *x*-axis are the percent of the legislative period passed when a vote on a proposal took place. The percentage of scores have been re-scaled into five equally large steps. The number of proposals is averaged over all six governments for each of these steps on the *x*-axis.

other opposition parties. The figure contrasts the average agreement of the support and other opposition parties at five equal stages of the legislative period. Regarding the legislative periods Carlsson III/Persson I, Persson II, and Persson III, support parties show higher levels of support for a minority government in the middle of a legislative period. Although this pattern does not emerge for Löfven I it should be noted that *in relation* to the other opposition parties, support parties show a higher level of agreement in the middle of the legislative period.

A possible explanation for the overall higher levels of minority government support for ordinary opposition parties at the beginning of the legislative period Löfven I is the conclusion of the December agreements in which six of eight parliamentary parties agreed on supporting the social democratic prime minister Stefan Löfven and the government's budget proposal (SVT 2015). The agreement was dissolved when the Christian Democrats decided against its continuation, less than 1 year after its initial conclusion.[6] Moreover, for these other opposition parties, we do not find a pattern indicating that they would similarly show higher support of the

Figure 2. Agreement Rate of Opposition Parties on Committee Proposals by Legislative Period.



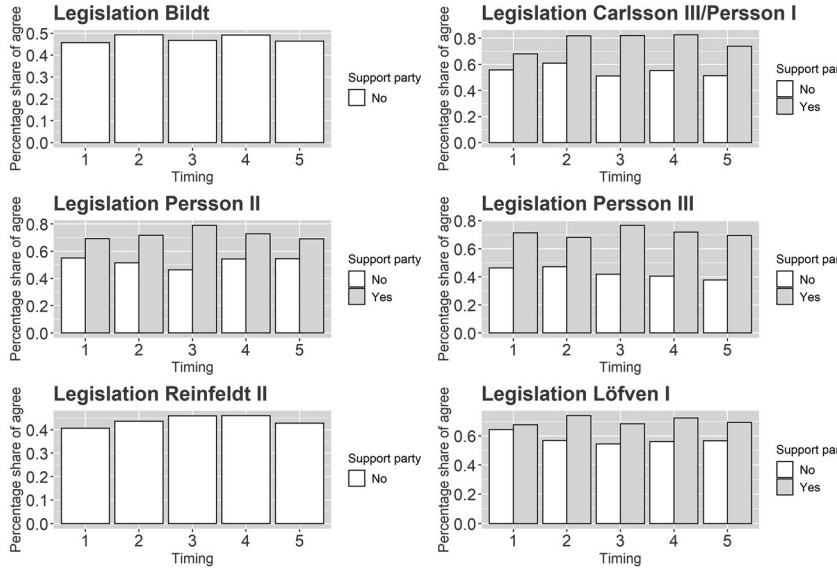
Note: Grey represents an opposition party that has signed a support agreement with the government.

minority government in the middle of the government terms as compared to the endpoints. Support parties thus seem to behave differently. Whether this also holds when statistically controlling for various relevant predictors can be assessed through multivariate analysis.

Multivariate Analysis

The results from the regression analysis are shown in Table 2. Starting with a baseline model (Model 1) that contains the unconditional effect of timing on opposition party behaviour – i.e., without distinguishing the timing of support parties from that of other opposition parties – there is no clear pattern of time-varying cooperation with the government during the legislative period. We only find that the overall likelihood of opposition parties to agree with the government is significantly lower in the last fifth of the legislature compared to the first fifth. It seems that all opposition parties are on average less likely to cooperate with the government as the next election comes closer. Model 1 in Table 2, however, also shows that support parties have a markedly higher likelihood to agree with the government – which

Figure 3. Agreement Rate of Support and No Support Parties on Committee Proposals on Different Timing Points of a Legislative Period.



already indicates that support parties behave differently from opposition parties.

Indeed, this difference extends beyond merely the level of their support of the minority government over time. As the interaction effect in Model 2 of Table 2 shows, support parties time their support of the minority government differently from other opposition parties. This can be read from the coefficients of the interaction terms together with the effect of the time variable. Modelling the interaction with a support party as a binary moderator means the direct coefficients of the time variable represent the effect of this variable for those parties that are no support parties (Brambor et al. 2005). These show a lower likelihood of agreeing with the government in the middle and at the end of the legislative term.

For support parties, in contrast, this likelihood increases towards the middle of the term and then decreases again. Additional estimates (not tabled) with different reference categories for the timing variable show statistically significant contrasts that are in line with an inverse U-shape. The mid-category (timing variable value of 3) has a significant and positive effect (on logged odds) compared to all other categories. The effect of the second timing category is significant and positive compared to the first category, whereas the fourth category exhibits a significant and positive contrast to

Table 2. Results from Logistic Regression Analyses

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Intercept	0.52***	0.56***	1.04***	0.73***	0.55***
	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.10)	(0.06)	(0.06)
Timing (2)	0.01	−0.01			−0.03
	(0.02)	(0.03)			(0.04)
Timing (3)	−0.03	−0.12***			−0.07
	(0.03)	(0.03)			(0.04)
Timing (4)	−0.02	−0.07*			−0.05
	(0.03)	(0.03)			(0.04)
Timing (5)	−0.11***	−0.14***			−0.13***
	(0.02)	(0.02)			(0.03)
Support party	0.87***	0.71***			0.78***
	(0.02)	(0.04)			(0.06)
Ideological distance to government	−0.82***	−0.80***	0.16	−0.96***	−0.80***
	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.35)	(0.06)	(0.05)
Issue salience	−1.28***	−1.29***	−0.67*	−1.10***	−1.11***
	(0.11)	(0.11)	(0.28)	(0.12)	(0.22)
No. of laws per month	−0.00***	−0.00***	0.00	−0.00***	−0.00***
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
Largest opposition party	0.08***	0.08***		0.09***	0.08***
	(0.02)	(0.02)		(0.02)	(0.02)
Economic pressure	0.04	0.01	−0.18*	0.03	0.01
	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.09)	(0.04)	(0.04)
Electorate saliency	−0.00	−0.00	0.61*	−0.02	−0.00
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.30)	(0.10)	(0.00)
Timing (2) * Support party		0.10			0.02
		(0.06)			(0.08)
Timing (3) * Support party		0.53***			0.41***
		(0.07)			(0.10)
Timing (4) * Support party		0.22***			0.23**
		(0.06)			(0.08)
Timing (5) * Support party		0.12*			0.04
		(0.05)			(0.08)
Timing (linear)			0.10	−0.19***	
			(0.07)	(0.03)	
Timing (centred and squared)			−0.42***	0.010	
			(0.07)	(0.03)	
Timing (2) * Issue salience					0.17
					(0.31)
Timing (3) * Issue salience					−0.51
					(0.29)
Timing (4) * Issue salience					−0.26
					(0.30)
Timing (5) * Issue salience					−0.03
					(0.27)
Support party * Issue salience					−0.84
					(0.43)
Timing (2) * Support party * Issue salience					0.88
					(0.65)
Timing (3) * Support party * Issue salience					1.27
					(0.68)

(Continues)

Table 2. (Continued)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Timing (4) * Support party * Issue salience					–0.03 (0.64)
Timing (5) * Support party * Issue salience					0.88 (0.58)
Fixed effects for legislative periods	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Fixed effects for policy fields	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Nagelkerke's Pseudo-R^2	7.147	7.251	4.606	4.426	7.274
BIC	114,663.00	114,637.60	19,973.14	94,011.04	114,724.10
Num. obs.	86,420	86,420	17,157	69,263	86,420

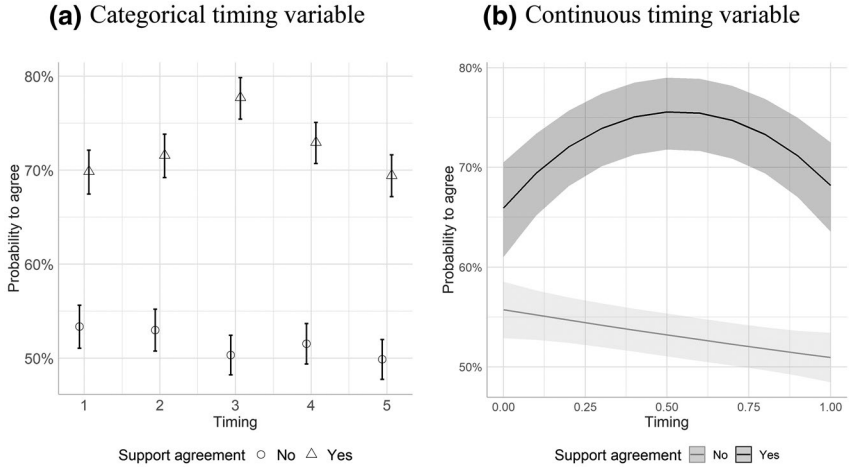
Notes: The categorical time variables split the time passed into five equally large periods (counting begins after completion of government formation), the reference value is the first 20 percent of the legislative period. Model 3 and Model 4 use a metric timing variable to model a nonlinear effect and are estimated for support parties and other opposition parties, respectively.
***$p < .001$; **$p < .01$; *$p < .05$.

both the first and the last categories. When looking not at the effects on the logged odds but the predicted probabilities based on the calculation of average marginal effects, we arrive at similar conclusions: The fourth, but not the second timing category forms a highly significant positive contrast to both the first and the last categories, and the effect of the mid-category is positive and highly significant in relation to all other categories.[7]

This shape of the effect of time also emerges when modelling the nonlinear effect of time by including a metric instead of a categorical time variable (measuring the percent of time passed in the legislative term) together with the squared form of this variable. As the findings from this additional analysis underscore, only for the support parties do the coefficients of the time variables (primarily the negative effect of the squared term) indicate an inverse U-shape in their inclination to vote with the government during the legislative term (Model 3). This is not the case for the other opposition parties (Model 4). We plot these conditional effects of timing by visualizing the predicted probabilities (in the following, for these predictions, the legislation variable is always set to 'Bildt', the first government in the observation period): Figure 4a,b shows the predicted probabilities for the categorical and the metric time variable, respectively. The estimation, using the continuous measure, leads to a smooth curve, but the categorical measure additionally shows that a cooperative stance by support parties is particularly pronounced in the middle of the legislative period.

In any case, the figures illustrate the clear difference in timing of cooperation with the government between support parties and other opposition parties. While support parties show a clearly visible inverse U-shape in the

Figure 4. Relationship between Electoral Cycle and Opposition Party Behaviour by Support Party. (a) Categorical Timing Variable. (b) Continuous Timing Variable.

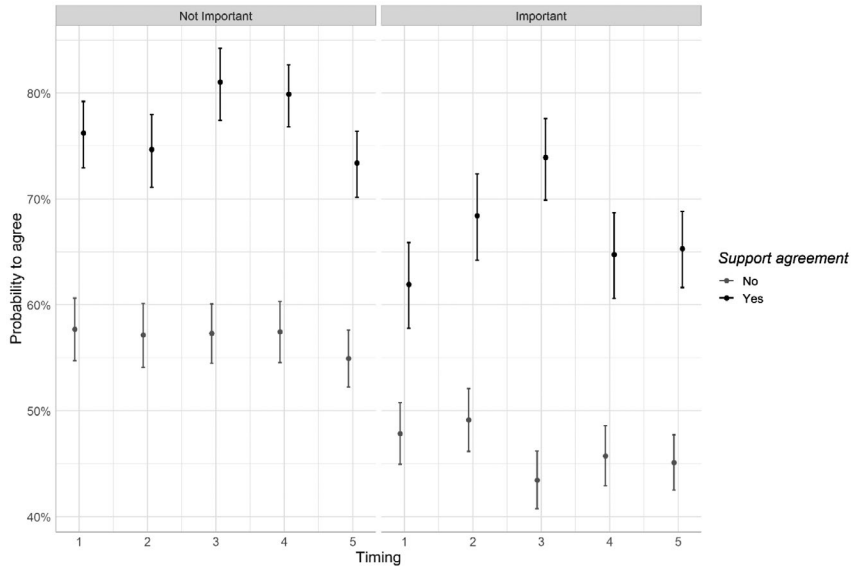


probability of agreeing with the minority government, there is not even a hint of such a pattern for the other opposition parties. In substantive terms, the predicted probability to agree with the government in the middle of the legislative period is seven percentage points higher than at the beginning and eight percentage points higher than in the final stage. The findings are thus in line with hypothesis 1 and consistent with the idea that support parties are driven by concerns about distinctiveness and a recognizable party profile when voter's attention is intensified, whereas other opposition parties are not.

Furthermore, we have argued that concerns for distinctiveness and thus a pattern of strategic timing might show only or especially for an opposition party's core issues. It might be the case that the registered moderated effect in line with strategic timing emerges even more clearly for issues that are salient for a support party. Figure 5 (based on Model 5 of Table 2) suggests that there are some discernible differences but no completely different patterns of strategic timing for important and non-important issues. For a more direct interpretation of the interaction effects, we have performed the analysis with support parties alone (i.e., leaving other opposition parties out of the analysis) and using the simpler two-way interaction between the time variable and issue saliency, which does not lead to significant interaction terms.[8]

One does see, however, that support parties' agreement with the government is particularly high in the middle of the term in comparison to the other periods for issues that are important to a support party (right-hand panel of Figure 5). The difference between the first and the third timing

Figure 5. Relationship between Electoral Cycle and Opposition Party Behaviour by Support Party and Important Issues.



categories (middle of the legislature) is five percentage points for issues with low saliency, whereas it is more than twice as much for issues of high importance to a party. Also, while the predicted probabilities for the mid-category are significantly higher than those for the fourth category of timing in the right-hand panel, this is not the case in the left-hand panel (based on the estimation of average marginal effects). This overall pattern is even more pronounced when using a running average of the issue saliency of an election (time t and time $t + 1$), for which the interaction terms with the third timing category and support parties are also significant (see Online Annex A4, Table 4 and Figure 1).[9] Hence, there is at least tentative evidence that timing in support party cooperation with the minority government is more distinct with issues that are important to those parties.

It is also notable that when looking at issues of high importance for a support party, the predicted probabilities in the last fifth of the legislative period should be the lowest according to our expectations. Yet, they are not significantly different from the fourth category (right-hand panel of Figure 5). One explanation for this finding could be that support parties get the chance to implement important issues at the end of the legislative period. Implementing policies and selling these policy gains when media coverage and the electorate's attention are high (Green-Pedersen & Krogstrup 2008;

Thesen et al. 2017) could be behind the observed higher levels of minority government support at the end of the legislative period.

In sum, the findings from the analysis suggest that parties with a support agreement back the government more overall but are discernibly more inclined to do so in the middle of a legislative period, that is, when media and voter attention is comparatively lower. These results are stable over a variety of different models that use other estimation strategies, alternative predictor variables, and involve a jackknife analysis. In all further analyses and robustness checks, the results are consistent and not driven by one of the governments or use of certain indicators (see the Online Annex for details).

Finally, some control variables showed significant effects. First, ideological distance has a negative effect on the probability of agreeing with the government. Second, the more bills are voted on in a month, the less likely are opposition parties to agree with the government. Third, the largest opposition party, which is traditionally the government in waiting, is overall more likely to agree with the government. Compared to the other opposition parties, especially smaller and ideologically more peripheral parties, the largest opposition party might be less confrontational because it has a greater responsibility to make minority government work. Fourth, economic pressures and electorate issue saliency do not show any significant effect on an opposition party's voting behaviour.

Conclusion

The timing of policy action plays a central role in political actors' efforts to evoke a positive image in the eyes of the voters. Based on the analysis presented above, it seems that considerations of strategic timing also manifest in opposition party legislative behaviour under conditions of a minority government. We have investigated how the electoral cycle affects the legislative behaviour of opposition parties and specifically those who have signed a support agreement with the government. These support parties can be presumed to more acutely experience a fundamental tension – that between a responsibility to contribute to government and legislation, on the one hand, and maximizing their own electoral success, on the other hand. While support parties are not formally part of the government and have less reason to fear being associated with government policy, they may nonetheless worry about their distinctiveness from the government. Perceived closeness might alienate their voters and frustrate their electoral ambitions. These parties may thus have an incentive to strategically time their cooperation with the government when public attention is comparatively lower.

Having analysed parliamentary votes on all committee proposals from 23 years of minority governments in Sweden, our findings suggest that

support parties, but not other opposition parties, show a pattern of timing in their support of the minority government that fits the motive of distinctiveness and strategically exploiting cycles of public attention. Opposition parties that have signed a support agreement generally show a higher probability of voting with the government. However, their likelihood of cooperating with the government is lower in the time closer to elections, that is, at the beginning and the end of the legislative term, and highest in the middle of the term, when media and voter attention is generally lower.

We have furthermore tested the argument that distinctiveness and strategic timing are especially relevant for support parties concerning those issues that are most important to them. The evidence from the Swedish case offers some, but overall only tentative support for the idea that issue saliency has this additional moderating effect. All in all, our findings on opposition party behaviour under minority governments parallel results from Sagarzazu and Klüver's (2017). Whereas they find a relatively stronger tendency of coalition partners to signal cooperation through their political communication in the middle of the government term we find a similar pattern, but with regard to the actual legislative behaviour and for a certain kind of opposition parties: It seems that parties that sign support agreements under minority governments face incentives to engage in strategic timing that is comparable to parties in majority cabinets with formal coalition status.

The insights from our analysis have important ramifications as they imply that minority governments can expect to get more support from opposition parties with support agreements, but that this support will be more variable during the legislative term. The findings also point to possible future research. Given that support agreements play an important role as they determine the dynamics of legislation under minority governments, more research is needed on what determines the existence and especially the content of support agreements (see e.g., Christiansen & Damgaard 2008; Christiansen & Pedersen 2014). Regarding the tentative evidence that strategic timing in a support party cooperation with the minority government is especially distinct with the party's core issues, further testing with alternative measures could establish a more solid empirical basis.

In a similar vein, further research on the exact policies that are adopted in the middle of the legislative term could shed light on a support party's strategic calculus and its bargaining with the minority government. If a support party backs the minority government on policies that it agrees with anyway, this would hint at the support party primarily striving for policy influence but fearing that cooperation may hurt its party brand. If, in contrast, support parties cooperate with the government in the middle of the term on policies on which they in general disagree, this would be an indication that they care about their promise to keep the government in office. Studies along these lines could further contribute to an emerging body of work on timing as an

instrument for managing the collaboration between parties and the strategic challenges this involves.

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NOTES

1. As a further robustness check, we have also tested whether a multilevel model (based on the main model in Table 2) that nests the party votes within dyads of all legislature-opposition party combinations as the higher-level unit leads to similar findings (intra-class correlation for the null model is 0.083). Indeed, the results (see Online Annex A2) show almost identical coefficients as in the models reported in the main tables below.
2. It should be noted that party-specific issue salience also potentially explains variance in opposition voting behaviour over time because proposals of a certain issue domain might systematically appear more at a certain stage of the legislative period.
3. The assignment of the CMP variables is largely based on Bäck et al. (2011, 454–55). For a few policy fields that were not included in Bäck et al. (2011), the assignment relies on the variable description given in the codebook of the CMP Dataset (for details, see Online Annex A1).
4. Since the measure for party-specific issue saliency as well as ideological distance are both based on the CMP, we calculated the correlation coefficient to check for multicollinearity. The correlation is –0.01.
5. We use an index from these three variables after *z*-standardizing each over the observation period.
6. When controlling for the December agreement with a dummy variable, this variable has clear statistically significant positive effect, the main findings do not change substantively (see Online Annex A4, Table 5, Model 6).
7. For details, see Online Annex 4, Table 6.
8. The interaction terms also remain insignificant when using electorate saliency – which is not party-specific, however – or perceived issue ownership based on the available measures from the Swedish Election Study (SND 2020) as alternative issue importance variables (see additional models in Online Annex A4, Table 4 for details).
9. When measuring issue importance not with the CMP issue saliency but instead with the electorate saliency variable – which is, it should be noted, not party-specific – the interaction effect is not significant either (see Online Annex A4, Table 4, Model 3).

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher's web site:

Annex A1. Operationalization
Table 1. Assignment of CMP variables to Committees in the Swedish Riksdag
Annex A2. Test of Alternative Model Specification
Table 2. Multilevel Model with Votes on Committee Proposals Nested in Government-Opposition Party Dyads
Annex A3. Jackknife Analysis