

# Party Conflict and Coalition Control in Parliament\*

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## Abstract

Conflict in parliament between opposition and government is a well-known phenomenon. But a large part of the literature on individual and party behavior in parliaments measure conflict with the underlying assumption that engaging in parliamentary activities in itself is a sign of conflict. In this paper, we illustrate how a low-level parliamentary institution – written questions – is used, not only to pressure the current government, but also for genuine information gathering, policy position signaling, or constituency representation. We do this in two steps. First, we find counter intuitive results in mapping the effect of MP-minister relations (opposition, coalition partner, or same party) with the degree of positive or negative sentiment of the questions asked; the opposition is found to be more positive than coalition partners and MPs from the same party as the minister. Second, and building on the first point, we delve into what the sentiment measure(s) itself actually measure in this context and find that it is mainly driven by topical connotations and not necessarily to a positive or negative attitude from the MP towards the minister or government. More specifically, we (currently think we) find that positive and negative sentiment in written questions are strongly tied to the topical connotations of the question in that, for instance, a question about crime will have strong negative topical words tied to it, while topics such as research have strong positive connotations. The implication of our findings, that sentiment in written questions are largely driven by topic, is that the incentives for participating in the institution of written questions is a lot more complex than assumed in behavioral studies utilizing these type of data.

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\*Very early draft. It's so early it's more like an idea than a draft, really. Do not redistribute.

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# Introduction

A common conception about politicians is that they bicker over meaningless issues or only discuss politics as opposed to policy. Conflict between politicians and, especially, political parties is a cornerstone in parliamentary democracies; opinions are divided, and the electorate gets to choose the parties or politicians they sympathize with the most in elections. In proportional electoral systems, however, elections often do not result in clear winners; the resulting government might be reliant or consist of several parties in order to secure majority in parliament. This gives room for more dimensions of conflict: between the opposition and government, within parties, and between coalition partners. Studies have shown that politicians respond strategically to these conflicts dynamics. It is well-established that the opposition use the various institutional tools of parliament to keep tabs on the government, but these tools can also be used by coalition partner MPs, or even within party monitoring of the government. Further, the opposition has been shown to strategically use some parliamentary arenas to pressure coalitions on issues the parties within the coalition is divided on (Whitaker and Martin 2021). A growing body within this field use parliamentary questions to explore dynamics between government and opposition, coalition partners, and within parties. Generally, however, these studies ignore the content of the questions, and instead analyze the amount of questions (Martin 2011b, 2011a; Rasch 2011; Russo 2011; Whitaker and Martin 2021; Bailer 2011; Borghetto, Santana-Pereira, and Freire 2020). Though this has lead to a large amount of interesting findings on MP behavior in non-legislative activities, we can supplement and test some of these findings by looking at the content of the questions.

In this paper, we study the conflict (positive versus negative sentiment) of written parliamentary questions in Norway. Specifically, we hypothesize that opposition MPs will be more negative to the government than the MPs from the parties occupying seats in the cabinet. Further, we also hypothesize that MPs from coalition partners – questions to ministers not from the same party but from a fellow party in cabinet – are used as a coalition control mechanism.

Our findings find little or no evidence of more conflict between coalition partners and between government and opposition in written questions. We attribute this partly to the consensual politics in the Norwegian case, and partly to MPs being more prone to use the question arena to ask about policies they individually care about rather than use the arena as a tool for political games or politics in general. Indeed, the questions coming from MPs of the same party as the minister is found to have the most negative sentiment.

## MP to minister relations and conflict

In multi-party parliamentary systems, coalition governments are a common phenomenon. This gives rise to some dynamics not present in majoritarian electoral systems where we usually see two main parties. In addition to the usual government versus opposition dynamic, coalition governments also have the dynamic between coalition partners.

A myriad of studies have analyzed various types of coalition dynamics, from cabinet seat allocation [Bäck, Debus, and Dumont (2011); Bucur (2018); ...], oversight mechanisms [Strøm, Müller, and Smith (2010); ...], the effect of coalition governments on the structures of the electoral system [(**Brockington2004?**); André, Depauw, and Martin (2016); ...], and many more. Most relevant for this paper, several studies have seen on the effects of the existence of coalition governments on parliamentary questions. Höhmann and Sieberer (2020) show that, when there is large ideological distances and gaps in issue salience between coalition partners, German MPs ask a lot more questions to their coalition partners than when the distances are small. They argue that this indicates an additional monitor instrument for government parties in order to avoid agency loss; parliamentary questions can be an important arena for keeping tabs on coalition partners. In the same line, Martin and Whitaker (2019) show that divisive policies lead to more questions in the British case. Whitaker and Martin (2021) appends this by exploring how the opposition strategically exploit policy gaps within coalitions to apply more pressure on those issues: opposition MPs ask a significant higher amount of questions on policy dimensions where there is tensions between coalition partners. in addition to the classic government to opposition oversight mechanism of parliamentary questions.

It is a well-known and well-tested theory that all politicians have different preferences over all issues, even within parties. However, we often assume party unity; a useful, but strong, assumption to make. This is an issue in many studies of various parliamentary activities. For example, all studies mentioned in this section use some form of number of questions as their dependent variable; a proxy for conflict between MPs and ministers. This implicitly assumes that all written questions bring conflict to the table, where the degree of conflict is determined by the amount of issue tension between parties as measured by manifesto policy positions (Volkens et al. 2016). Again, a useful, but strong assumption, which ignores individual MP policy position differences within parties.

Based on the discussion above, we aim at expanding the current literature on conflict between opposition and coalition partners by digging deeper in the actual content of the questions. Our main hypothesis is that the conflict levels in questions are higher between opposition and government, than between coalition partners or politicians of the same party. And, instead of counting questions, we estimate the positive and negative sentiment of the questions as our dependent variable; if sentiment is positive, we assume this indicate less

conflict; if sentiment is negative, we assume this indicate more conflict.

## Written questions

Most parliamentary systems have a form of written questions, where MPs can ask ministers about issues they are concerned about. There is a quite large literature using various forms empirical analysis methods to test theories about political behavior:

1. Kellermann (2016)
2. Höhmann and Sieberer (2020)
3. Martin (2011b)
4. Martin (2011a)
5. Proksch and Slapin (2010)
6. Rasch (2011)
7. Rozenberg and Martin (2011)
8. Russo (2011)
9. Soontjens (2021)
10. Whitaker and Martin (2021)
11. Bailer (2011)
12. Borghetto, Santana-Pereira, and Freire (2020)

[...]

Written questions have several advantages over other types of parliamentary activities in studies of MP behavior. First, written questions “enables individual [MPs] to become active without constraints from the political group” (Proksch and Slapin 2010, 59). Second, written questions are quite unrestricted (see below) in the amount MPs can ask. Third, the short format of written questions makes the topic of the question quite easy to identify as the question has to be concise enough for the minister to also answer concisely.

## Norway

There are four types of question types in the Norwegian parliament: question hour, question time, interpellations, and written questions. The latter one is the odd one out, because it is the only question type not presented in the plenary.

Written questions were introduced in the 1996-1997 session of *Stortinget* as a way to decrease the time pressure on the ever expanding use of question time. The formal limitation of written questions in the

Norwegian case is that MPs can ask two written questions per week. This is a fairly lenient rule, in comparison to the other question types, where the amount of questions is limited by the available time in the plenary. Written questions are a short-form question type, where MPs can include an optional justification for the question of maximum one A4 page. The Presidency can reject questions that fall outside of the government’s jurisdiction, or do not comply with the general rules of parliamentary language (Stortingets forretningsorden 2018, 45–46). The questions have a deadline of six workdays for the minister to answer in written form (also maximum one A4 page). However, the minister can refuse to answer the question, if she provides an explanation.

## Data and methods

In the following section, we give a brief description of our data and the methods we use to analyze conflict between MPs and ministers.

### Data

Table 1: Descriptive stats for variables used in the analyses

	Min	Mean	Max	Sd
$\pi_i$ (Grimmer et.al (2022))	-0.24	0.02	0.19	0.04
$\pi_i$ (Lowe et al. (2011))	-3.14	0.49	4.11	0.84
Opposition	0.00	0.95	1.00	
Same party	0.00	0.02	1.00	
Coalition partner	0.00	0.03	1.00	
Question gender (male)	0.00	0.61	1.00	
Answer gender (male)	0.00	0.57	1.00	
Age	20.83	46.59	77.81	10.70

Our analyses draw on a self-constructed data set of all written questions between MPs and ministers in Norway between 1998 and 2021, combined with meta data on the MPs and ministers, and automatically tagged question texts. The majority of the data was gathered with the *stortingscrape* package for R (Søyland 2021). The data consist of 36532 written questions with meta data and their corresponding Oslo-Bergen-Tagger (OBT) tagged texts. We also supplement our data with meta data on governments from Rasch (2004) and Søyland (2017).

The descriptive statistics for the data used in our analysis is shown in Table 1. Note that there is a large difference in how many questions are asked by the opposition, compared to coalition partner and within party questions [we will take measures].

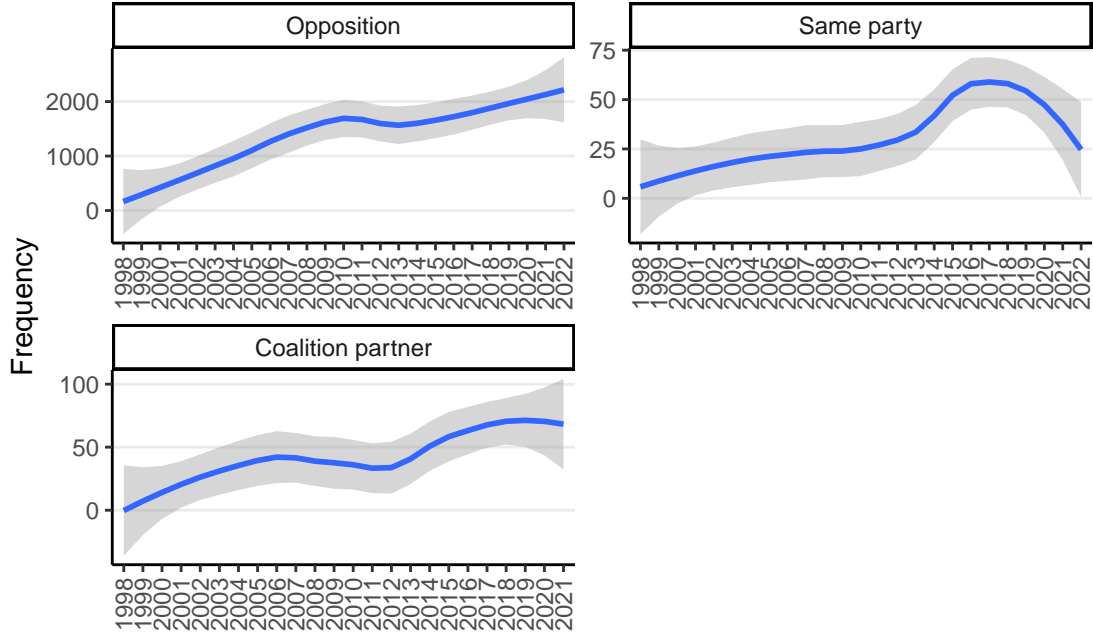


Figure 1: Trend in amount of questions over MP-minister relations.

## Text preprocessing

Our main way of text preprocessing is running the texts in our data through the Oslo-Bergen-tagger, a morphological and syntactic tagger for Norwegian texts (Johannessen et al. 2011). The output from the tagger comes in a .xml-like format:

```
## <word>Statkraft</word>
## "<statkraft>"
##      "Statkraft" subst prop
## <word>har</word>
## "<har>"
##      "ha" verb pres <aux1/perf_part>
## <word>satt</word>
## "<satt>"
##      "sette" verb perf-part
## <word>i</word>
## "<i>"
##      "i" prep
## <word>gang</word>
## "<gang>"
##      "gang" subst appell mask ub ent
## <word>anleggsarbeidet</word>
## "<anleggsarbeidet>"
##      "anleggsarbeid" subst appell nøyt be ent samset-leks <+arbeidet>
```

Because this format is not very R-friendly, we wrangle this to work better with R-style data frames. The

result is a long format data frame for each speech, where the rows are words and columns are the original form of the word, tokenized form, lemmatized form, parts-of-speech, and morphological tags for the word:

```
##          word          token      lemma  pos          morph
## 1      Statkraft      statkraft  Statkraft subst          prop
## 2          har          har        ha  verb      pres <aux1/perf_part>
## 3          satt          satt      sette  verb          perf-part
## 4           i           i          i  prep
## 5         gang         gang        gang subst      appell mask ub ent
## 6 anleggsarbeidet anleggsarbeidet anleggsarbeid subst appell n yt be ent sa ...
```

The result is 36532 (one per speech) long format datasets, where we match each row with our sentiment dictionaries (see below). For our sentiment scoring, described below, there is no other preprocessing necessary because we only cross-reference each token with our sentiment dictionary.

## Sentiment analysis

Sentiment analysis has been widely used in NLP over the last few decades (see Pang, Lee, et al. 2008 for an overview). Sentiment is a powerful feature of language, where we look at the emotions expressed in text. For our application, we draw on the difference between positive and negative sentiment. This is, of course, a coarse categorization of emotions, but serves our application well. We want to tap into the concept of conflict between MP and minister, and thus assume that negative sentiment will be associated with more conflict. Further, we use the only available sentiment dictionary for Norwegian (that also has a satisfying level of precision) provided through the Barnes et al. (2019) study. The underlying method for producing the sentiment dictionary by Barnes et al. (2019) is based on a semi-automatically created lexicon of customer reviews in English (Hu and Liu 2004), translated to Norwegian, and corrected manually for the Norwegian context. The resulting dictionary is binary in nature; tokens are either categorized as negative or positive (with no scaling between more or less negative or positive tokens).

There are some drawbacks with this approach. First, the sentiment dictionary being translated from English can in itself lead to misclassifications. Second, seeing as the dictionary is based on customer reviews, the context in which the data was generated is very different from parliamentary questions. Consequently, there might be some instances where positive words in customer reviews is negative in parliamentary questions or vice versa.

## Sentiment scoring

Our sentiment scoring scheme is quite simple. We use two different methods for calculating sentiment scores. First, we follow Lowe et al. (2011) by calculating the log of the ratio between positive and negative sentiment

counts for each text:

$$\pi_i = \log \frac{pos + 0.5}{neg + 0.5}$$

Second, we use the formula from Grimmer, Roberts, and Stewart (2022, 181), where we cross-reference each individual token  $W_{ij}$  in our documents with the positive and negative tokens in our lemma sentiment dictionary, and summarize scores for positive (+1) and negative (-1) tokens  $\mu_j$  within each document. Then, we divide the sum by the total amount of tokens in the document  $M_i$ :

$$\pi_i = \sum_{j=1}^J \frac{\mu_j W_{ij}}{M_i}$$

Both methods give us a sentiment score for each document  $\pi_i$  where negative scores indicate more negative sentiment and positive scores more positive sentiments, whereas a score of 0 is neutral. Figure 2 shows a map of both sentiment scores on our data. As is evident, most parliamentary questions are grouped on the slightly above zero on both axes, but also that there is a great deal of variation in both measures. The Lowe et al. (2011) way of measuring sentiment is, however, a bit more crude in that a lot of questions get the same score when we do not weigh the measure on number of tokens.

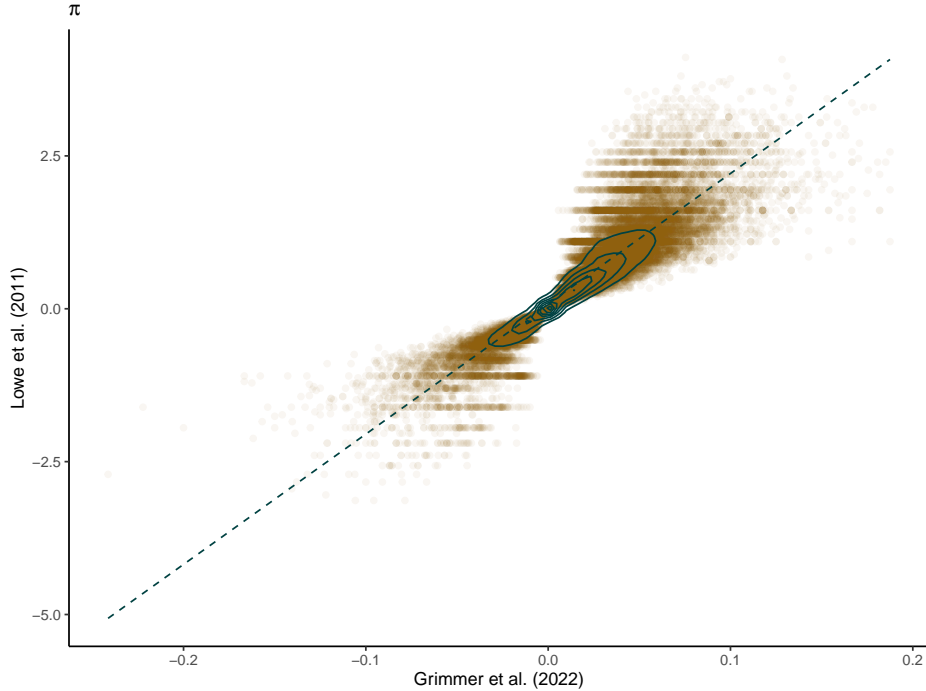


Figure 2: 2D density plot of sentiment scores. Points indicate individual written questions, and the dashed line the linear fit between the two scores



Because some documents might have a lot of sentiment in general – both positive and negative – these scoring methods can be somewhat misleading in certain contexts. Further, matching lemma tokens completely disregards the context of a token. Consider, for example, the sentences “It was a very bad dialogue” and “It was a very good dialogue”:

##	english	n_tokens	positive	negative	sent	lowe_pi	grimmer_pi
##	It was a very bad dialogue	6	1	-1	0	0.00	0.00
##	It was a very good dialogue	6	2	0	2	1.61	0.33

The token very (*veldig* in our Norwegian dictionary) will count as a positive context together with “good” (*bra* in Norwegian), whereas “bad” (*dårlig*) is scored as negative. The summarized sentiment sum and  $\pi$  will therefore be 0 (neutral) for the first sentence and 2 (positive) and  $\pi$  of 1.61 (Lowe et al. 2011) and 0.33 (Grimmer, Roberts, and Stewart 2022) for the second. The observant reader will notice that “very” is a modifier for the following adjective (“good”/“bad”); it is more good or bad than just good or bad. The correct score for document 1 should therefore be -2, instead of 0. To remedy this, we supplement our analysis with some contextual rules based on the OBT-tagged versions of our documents [this is work in progress]. Nevertheless, the correlation between negative and positive token counts is quite strong and negative ( $-0.62$ ); the more positive tokens a question has, the less negative tokens it also has.

## Analysis

Table 2 shows the temporary results for the analyses. What sticks out from the results, is that there is little to no effects from the party role of the MP asking a question. Indeed, if anything, being from the same party as the minister the question was answered by, increases negativity in the question.

Further, we see that question to male ministers are generally more negative than those asked to female ministers. The gender of the MP asking the question seems to have no effect. Age also has a very marginal and statistical nonsignificant effect on sentiment.

As for specific parties, the two wing parties – Socialist Left Party (SV) and Progress Party (FrP) – are, unsurprisingly the most negative question posers, together with (more surprisingly) the Christian Democrats (KrF). The two biggest parties – Labor (A, reference category) and Conservatives (H) – seems to be the most positive in question asking.

Table 2: Linear regression with sentiment score as dependent variable.

	$\pi$			
	Lowe et al. (2011)		Grimmer, et al. (2022)	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Coalition partner	−0.004 (0.027)	−0.018 (0.011)	−0.0004 (0.001)	−0.001** (0.0005)
Same party	−0.045 (0.031)	−0.044*** (0.012)	−0.003** (0.001)	−0.003*** (0.0005)
Questioner gender (male)	−0.004 (0.010)	−0.014 (0.010)	−0.001 (0.0004)	−0.002*** (0.0004)
Aswer gender (male)	−0.026*** (0.009)	−0.069*** (0.010)	−0.001*** (0.0004)	−0.002*** (0.0004)
Age	−0.0003 (0.0004)	−0.001* (0.0004)	−0.00000 (0.00002)	−0.00000 (0.00002)
FrP	−0.062*** (0.014)	0.006 (0.013)	−0.002*** (0.001)	0.001** (0.001)
H	0.009 (0.016)	0.161*** (0.015)	0.001 (0.001)	0.008*** (0.001)
KrF	−0.069*** (0.019)	−0.038* (0.022)	−0.002*** (0.001)	−0.003*** (0.001)
Sp	−0.025 (0.016)	0.035* (0.021)	−0.003*** (0.001)	−0.001 (0.001)
SV	−0.158*** (0.016)	−0.034* (0.018)	−0.006*** (0.001)	−0.0003 (0.001)
V	−0.007 (0.021)	0.072*** (0.021)	−0.001 (0.001)	0.004*** (0.001)
Constant	0.574*** (0.024)	0.560*** (0.024)	0.022*** (0.001)	0.021*** (0.001)
Weights	no	yes	no	yes
Observations	35,241	35,241	35,241	35,241
R <sup>2</sup>	0.004	0.007	0.004	0.009

Note:

\*p&lt;0.1; \*\*p&lt;0.05; \*\*\*p&lt;0.01

## Discussion

In this paper, we have analyzed the conflict levels in written parliamentary questions between opposition, coalition partners, and within parties. Our results show that there is little difference in conflict over the different relationships between MPs and ministers. Consequently, we argue that written parliamentary questions are used in a very different manner than previously assumed. Where most previous studies have concluded that questions are used as a control mechanism, we propose that MP's motivations for asking written questions are genuine policy issue concerns. This also fits with findings from studies looking at individual MP responsiveness in questions (Martin 2011b; Søyland 2022)

Our findings also, sort of, feed into the “Awareness Paradox” described by Soontjens (2021): politicians overestimate citizen’s awareness of parliamentary questions. Because policy seems to be the main driver for written question and citizens are mostly found to not pay much attention to these questions, we speculate that politicians in the Norwegian case also overestimate citizen awareness. However, an alternative explanation might be that, as crazy as it sounds, MPs actually cares about the policies they ask about in written questions and are genuinely interested in the answer they get. We would, nevertheless, need to study this further if we want to unveil the incentives behind our findings.

In our third approach, we estimate a word2vec model (Mikolov et al. 2013) on our question corpus and give a sentiment score to each word in the corpus based on the average sentiment of the five closest neighboring words in the word2vec model. More specifically, we estimate the word2vec model on all questions in our corpus using lemmatized tokens from OBT. Then we check all unique lemmatized tokens in our corpus against the word2vec model, extract the 5 nearest neighbors for that word, map these 5 words against the NorSentLex dictionary, and multiply the sentiment score (1/0/-1) with the closeness score from the word2vec model. Finally, we average the sentiment across these five near neighbors.

As an example, take the word “happily” (*gjerne*) . . .

Figure 3b shows the 20 most positive (panel 3a) and 20 most negative (panel 3b) tokens in our corpus based on this method. At face value, these seem quite reasonable with words such as “happily” (*gjerne*), significant (*betydelig*), and “reasonable” (*fornuftig*) being the most positive words, whereas “worry” (*bekymring*), “insecurity” (*usikkerhet*), and “unreasonable” (*urimelig*) are the most negative.



Figure 3: The top 20 positive and negative words using the word2vec sentiment scheme. The words have been translated from Norwegian to English by the authors.

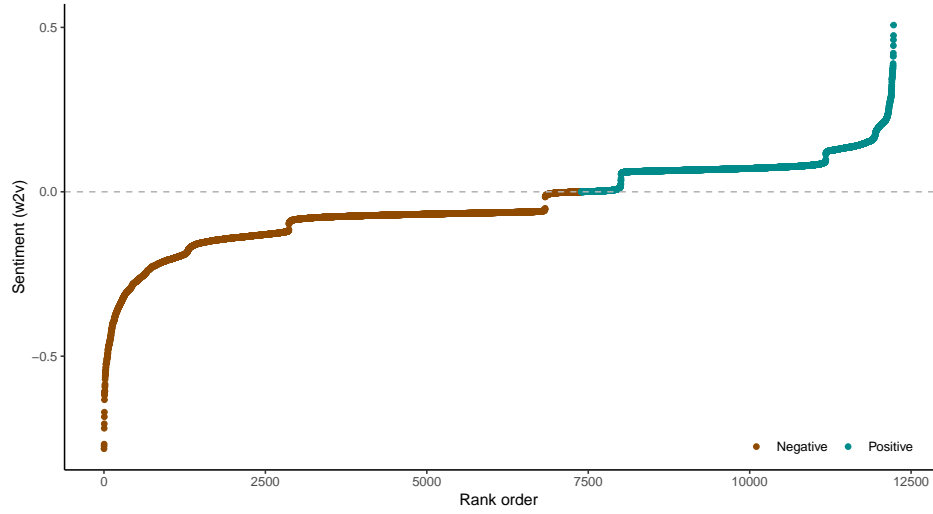


Figure 4: Word2Vec sentiment dictionary ranks, excluding non-sentiment words ( $y = 0$ ).

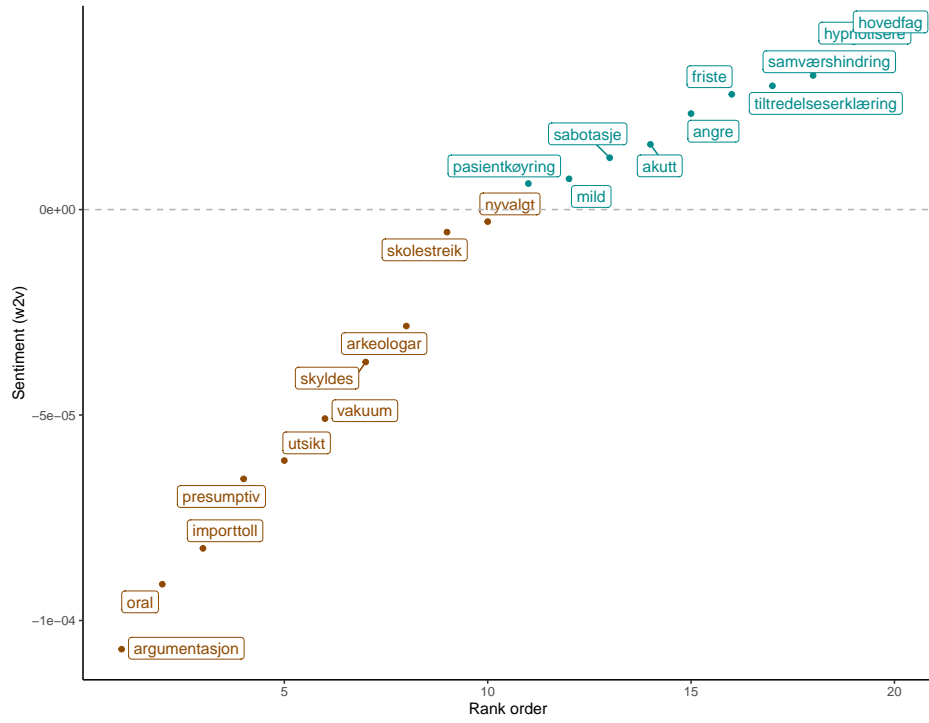


Figure 5: Word2Vec sentiment dictionary ranks for the 20 tokens closest to zero (excluding tokens where sentiment equals zero).

## Appendix

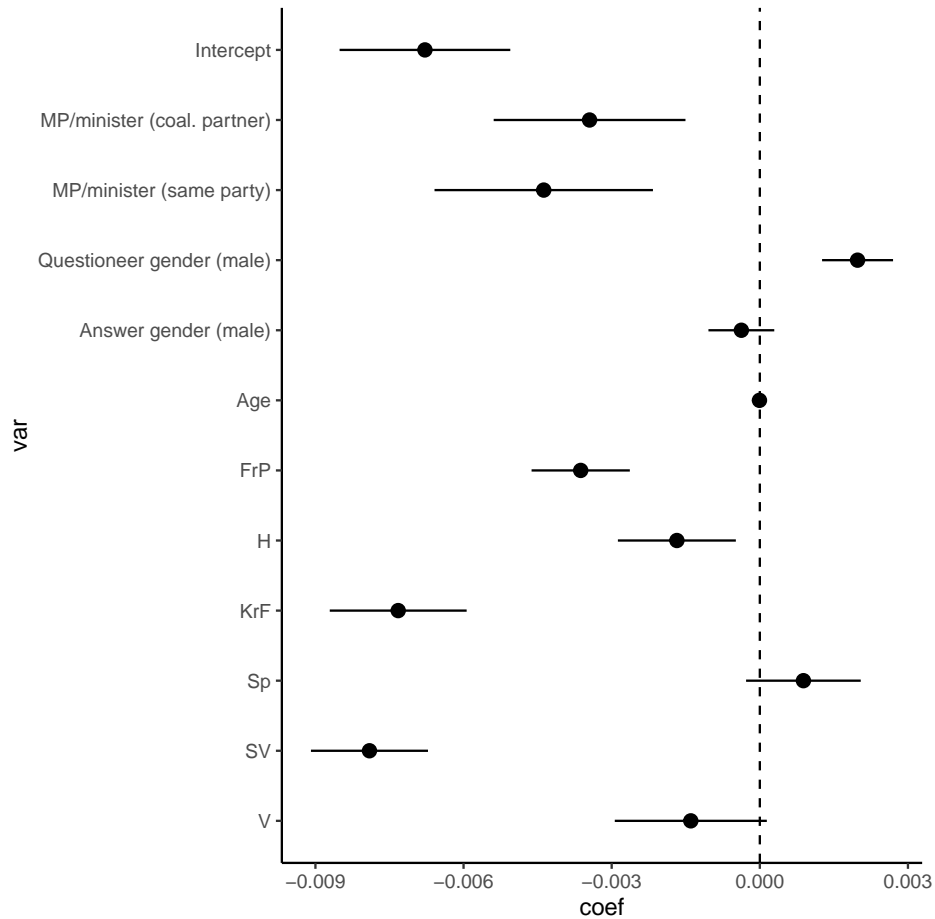


Figure 6: Word2vec regression coef plot.

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	A	FrP	H	KrF	Sp	SV	V	Sum
1997-2001	219	160	350	98	63	318	70	1278
2001-2005	948	640	0	0	415	1020	0	3023
2005-2009	3	2671	1422	763	0	2	677	5538
2009-2013	0	4250	1804	896	0	0	372	7322
2013-2017	2348	2	0	614	1288	679	561	5492
2017-2021	3439	1126	0	157	2718	1886	30	9356
2021-2025	0	701	357	76	3	244	191	1572
Sum	6957	9550	3933	2604	4487	4149	1901	33581

Table 3: Number of questions asked to a minister by an opposition MP

	A	FrP	H	KrF	Sp	SV	V	Sum
1997-2001	46	0	0	0	2	0	3	51
2001-2005	1	0	29	13	0	0	1	44
2005-2009	84	0	0	0	9	21	0	114
2009-2013	94	0	0	0	5	2	0	101
2013-2017	1	137	51	0	0	0	0	189
2017-2021	0	133	132	3	0	0	18	286
2021-2025	5	0	0	0	2	0	1	8
Sum	231	270	212	16	18	23	23	793

Table 4: Number of questions asked to a minister of the same party as the MP asking the question

[//aclanthology.org/W19-6119](https://aclanthology.org/W19-6119).

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	A	FrP	H	KrF	Sp	SV	V	Sum
1997-2001	0	0	0	3	15	0	10	28
2001-2005	0	0	38	52	0	0	11	101
2005-2009	73	0	0	0	23	114	0	210
2009-2013	63	0	0	0	10	32	0	105
2013-2017	0	145	90	0	0	0	0	235
2017-2021	0	150	90	20	0	0	90	350
2021-2025	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	2
Sum	136	295	218	75	49	146	112	1031

Table 5: Number of questions asked to a minister by an MP from a coalition partner party

from Coded Political Texts.” *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 36 (1): 123–55. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1939-9162.2010.00006.x>.

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