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What kind of opposition do citizens want?

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ABSTRACT

Opposition parties play a crucial role in democracies. While scholars have extensively studied opposition behaviour and institutional powers, little is known about what citizens expect from opposition parties and how they evaluate these expectations being met. This study addresses this gap by examining citizens' views on three key opposition roles - oversight, cooperation, and offering alternatives - and their perceived fulfilment across four countries: Canada, Denmark, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom. Based on a citizen survey, this study assesses how individual characteristics (democratic satisfaction, political interest, education) and institutional context are related to these views. Citizens across all four countries value cooperation. Preferences for the 'alternative' role vary between institutional settings. On the individual level, conflict-oriented and dissatisfied citizens value cooperation less, while those with higher education and political interest find oversight and cooperation more important.

KEYWORDS Opposition; opposition party; parliament; citizens; political legitimacy

Opposition parties fulfil a key role in democracies, by holding the government to account, providing an alternative at the next election and occasionally cooperating to achieve policy aims (Dahl 1966; Helms 2008). Researchers have focused on the questions to what extent opposition parties manage to fulfil this democratic role (Andeweg 2013; Dahl 1966; Kirchheimer 1957; Kolinsky 1987), how the variation in formal powers of opposition parties in different political systems can be explained (Garritzmann 2017; Wegmann 2022) and why opposition parties behave in conflictual or consensual ways under various institutional arrangements (De Giorgi and Ilonszki 2018; Louwerse *et al.* 2017; Mújica and Sánchez-Cuenca 2006; Tuttnauer 2018). Recently, the question of how citizens respond to opposition party behaviour has

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received more attention from scholars (Stiers 2023; Tuttnauer 2022; Tuttnauer and Wegmann 2022). Little is known, however, about what citizens *expect* from opposition parties and whether they believe that these expectations are met.

While the importance of opposition for a democracy has been emphasised by many scholars, this may not be self-evident to voters. Research into voters' views on democracy makes only scant reference to opposition parties, let alone the variety of roles of opposition parties (Ferrín and Kriesi 2016). Some research suggests that voters do pay attention to the performance of opposition parties (Plescia and Kritzinger 2017; Stiers 2023; Tuttnauer and Wegmann 2022). These studies provide valuable insights in how citizens' perceptions of opposition party behaviour affect their electoral choices. However, the question of what citizens expect of opposition parties is only indirectly discussed in this literature.

Answering this question is relevant to the scholarly study of opposition parties. Many scholars have aimed to assess the quality of opposition in contemporary democracy, but it remains unclear whether their quality criteria align with citizens' priorities. If we want to understand the impact of opposition behaviour on citizens evaluations of specific opposition parties as well as the voters' perception of the legitimacy of representative democracy, we need to be able to assess their performance in relation to citizens' expectations. Moreover, just as experts have varying assessment of the importance of various roles that opposition parties may play, it is likely that citizens have varying views on the kind of opposition they want. This variety can be the consequence of both individual characteristics and the institutional context. Thus, understanding and explaining this variation serves to better understand how citizens view and (de)legitimize representative democracy.

In order to study these questions, we build on existing literature to develop a framework that distinguishes between three main roles of opposition parties: criticising and monitoring the government (oversight), working with the government to get things done and achieve compromise (cooperation), and developing alternative policies and/or an alternative government at the next elections (alternative). We then describe and explain citizens' views on opposition party roles and their perceived fulfilment. How important is each main opposition party role for democracy in general, according to citizens, how do citizens evaluate the fulfilment of these roles, and how can we explain variation in citizens' attitudes and perceptions?

We expect that expectations and evaluations are associated with both individual-level characteristics and characteristics of the political system that an individual lives in. From the literature on citizens' view of democracy, we extrapolate that citizens will likely also hold differing views regarding the importance of opposition parties' roles,

depending on their overall satisfaction with democracy, conflict orientation, political interest and their level of education. We also expect that citizens who support a party that is currently in opposition hold different views on their roles than citizens who support a current governing party.

The literature on the variety of democratic political institutions generally contrasts a populist-majoritarian model and a liberal/consensual model (Andeweg and Louwerse 2020; Lijphart 2012; Powell 2000). In the populist-majoritarian model the key decision rule is majority rule, which is generally associated with plurality or majority electoral systems, single party majority government, and an opposition that positions itself mainly as an alternative government at the next election. In the liberal/consensual model – and particular in the consensual variety of that model – the key decision rule is unanimity/consensus, associated with proportional representation, power-sharing in broad-based governments and an opposition that is often more fragmented, but also has more opportunities to influence policy. We discuss how the institutional setting is likely to be reflected in citizens' preferences for opposition roles and their evaluation. On the one hand, one may expect that citizens may regard characteristics that are obvious in the system that they experience as more important, while on the other hand, one may also argue that citizens may attach importance to the roles that opposition parties do not generally fulfil well in their country.

We study these questions using a representative citizen survey held in Canada, Denmark, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. These countries present relevant variation in terms of electoral system, and they differ in the frequency of minority government. The dependent variables are how *important* a respondent thought various roles of the opposition are for democracy in general, and their perception of the extent to which each role *applied* in the country context. Using linear regression analysis, we assess the association with various individual-level characteristics as well as the institutional context. In general, we find that satisfaction with democracy, political interest and education are related to the importance and evaluation of opposition party roles. Support for government or opposition is also associated with these attitudes. As for the institutional characteristics, we find that those living in one of the two populist/majoritarian countries in our study (Canada and the United Kingdom) attach more importance to the 'alternative' role, but also to the 'cooperation' role – although they are clearly more negative about the fulfilment of the latter role than respondents in Denmark and the Netherlands. Thus, what is deemed important about opposition party roles seems to reflect both the strengths and the weaknesses of the institutional context.

The roles of opposition parties

As this article aims to grasp how citizens understand and evaluate opposition parties, we need to specify what we mean by this. Our approach is inspired by work on citizens' understanding and evaluation of different dimensions of democracy (Ferrín and Kriesi 2016). In this research, citizens are presented with various statements regarding aspects of democracy and are asked how important each one is for democracy in general. Subsequently, they are asked to what extent each statement applies in their country. This provides an overview of what aspects of democracy are deemed most important and how these are evaluated. While the European Election Survey asks about various elements of democracy, there is only one statement that discusses opposition parties, namely that 'opposition parties are free to criticise the government'. This is understandable from the general focus of the survey. By asking about various aspects of opposition parties, we aim to expand on this line of research and provide a more in-depth picture of how citizens understand and evaluate opposition parties.

When talking about an understanding of opposition parties in democracy, we prefer to use the term 'roles'. This builds on legislative role theory, which discusses how members of parliamentary ought to act and how they act in reality and discusses various roles that MPs can fulfil (Andeweg 2014). Likewise with opposition parties, an understanding of the role they play in democratic politics is normatively contested, and as such the term 'role' seems somewhat more appropriate than 'function', although we do not want to over-emphasise the difference for our purposes. What is important is that we recognise that opposition parties can play different roles or fulfil different functions, and that there can be disagreement about the extent to which they ought to play each of these roles and about the extent to which they do play them.

Then, what are these roles or functions of opposition parties? Various authors have come up with lists of roles or functions that opposition parties fulfil or should fulfil. These inventories are similar but not identical. Helms (2008: 9) argues that most authors identify three tasks of opposition parties: 'criticising the government, scrutinising and checking governmental actions and policies, and representing a credible "alternative government"'. Similarly, Garritzmann (2017: 7) argues that the main functions that have been recognised in the literature are control, critique and alternative (Sternberger 1956: 134). He characterises these three as the 'holy trinity of opposition' and defines (2017: 7) each of the three roles as follows: (1) control, 'closely monitoring government actions', 'controlling governmental power', 'helping to design and shape policies'; (2) critique, 'emphasising [the government's] shortcomings, methods, style, etc.'; (3)

alternative, 'oppositions present alternatives in terms of policy goals, policy means, and personnel, sometimes even by creating a highly visible "shadow cabinet"'. Garritzman argues that critique is not a separate function, but rather a means through which control and alternative are achieved. He therefore suggests leaving only 'control' and 'alternative' as the two main functions of opposition parties.

We suggest that the 'control' function, as discussed by Garritzman, contains two distinct roles: oversight[1] and cooperation. In their oversight role, opposition parties can help to hold the government to account (but without exercising power or authority over the governments' actions). The third item that Garritzman connects to 'control', namely 'helping to design and shape policies' is in our view a substantially different function, namely cooperation. Whereas monitoring means that opposition parties monitor and comment on the government's actions, proposals and policies, actually co-creating policies and legislation seems a more constructive role in which opposition parties cooperate with governing parties and the government (Oberreuter 1975: 20). This cooperative role is generally less visible in the discussion on the opposition, but it does represent an opposition party role that is prevalent in liberal/consensual democracies (Andeweg *et al.* 2008). We might well consider opposition parties that only oversee and never cooperate with the government, or opposition parties that cooperate frequently and put less emphasis on (critical) oversight of the government (Louwerse and Otjes 2019). While cooperation applies to all parliamentary parties and is not uniquely a role of the opposition, it can be argued to be part of what opposition parties should (not) do.

Given this discussion, we arrive at three roles that opposition parties might take on: (1) oversight, (2) cooperation and (3) alternative. The oversight role focuses on critically monitoring the government's actions and policies. The cooperation role focuses on achieving policy aims by working together with the government and/or governing parties. And the alternative role consists of presenting an alternative policy option to the incumbent government at the next elections, and in the most far-reaching form a full-blown 'shadow cabinet'. We acknowledge that some (parts) of these roles are not exclusively the domain of opposition parties: (MPs belonging to) governing parties can also monitor and (sometimes) criticise the government and cooperate with (other) governing parties to achieve policy aims. However, it is important to include these roles in a framework of opposition roles to get a complete picture of the kind of opposition voters would like and how they evaluate this.

We note that two of these roles, oversight and alternative, can be argued to represent the *conflictual* face of opposition while the third refers to the *cooperative* face that opposition parties may show. Because in conceptual terms we think the distinction between oversight and alternative is

relevant, we use the three roles in our analyses rather than only conflict vs. cooperation. In our theoretical discussion regarding the explanations of voters' views on oppositions we will, however, refer to this distinction between conflict and cooperation.[2]

We recognise and emphasise that there is not one 'correct' way to think about opposition roles in conceptual terms. Our approach of distinguishing these three main roles aims to be helpful in assessing how voters view opposition parties' roles. As we will discuss in our operationalisation, we use two survey items to tap into each of the three main roles. This helps us to paint a rich picture of citizens views and evaluations, and allows us to empirically assess to what extent peoples preferences for and evaluations of these roles are consistent with our conceptual framework.

Explaining preferences for oppositional roles

What explains the degree to which individuals think each opposition role is important? We argue that there is a distinction between the more conflictual roles (oversight and alternative) on the one hand, and the cooperative role on the other hand. When conflict is seen as more a more desirable or central aspect of democracy, the oversight and alternative roles are deemed more important. When cooperation is seen as desirable, the cooperation role is more strongly preferred. The extent to which conflict and/or cooperation are seen as important, is argued to be related to both individual-level characteristics, such as satisfaction with democracy, conflict orientation, political interest, level of education, and government party support, as well as the characteristics of the political system.

One way in which this preference for conflict will be visible is through democratic satisfaction. Those who are dissatisfied with the way in which democracy currently works, would likely value the function of alternative and oversight the most. After all, these roles relate most strongly to criticising the current government, which embodies the working of the current democratic system. Cooperation with such a government would be less preferred by dissatisfied citizens. This expectation is consistent with the finding that of all types of democracy, the liberal type, which arguably puts the strongest emphasis on cooperation, is most strongly associated with democratic satisfaction (Ferrín 2016).

Apart from one's overall satisfaction with democracy, character traits may inform which aspects of opposition party behaviour are preferred. Specifically, one's conflict orientation may play an important role here. Conflict orientation captures the degree to which individuals are positively or negatively disposed to conflict. Conflict avoiding individuals view conflict more negatively, while conflict approaching individuals are more positively oriented towards conflict in social interactions (Mutz

2002; Testa *et al.* 2014). We expect that those who embrace conflict in general, would value the oversight and alternative roles of opposition parties, but regard cooperation as less important for democracy.

An interest in politics and the ability to process political information has been shown to relate to many political variables, including preferences about democracy. Those who are interested in politics find all aspects of democracy more important than those who are less interested (Ceka and Magalhães 2016). We expect that this will also hold for people's expectations regarding opposition parties' roles in a democracy. As to cognitive abilities to process political information, which we proxy through the level of education, we expect that higher educated citizens will prefer cooperation more than lower educated individuals, but that this may not necessarily be the case (or at least less strongly so) for the oversight and alternative roles. In line with findings on preferences for direct democracy (Bowler *et al.* 2007) and social justice (Ceka and Magalhães 2016), we expect higher educated voters to prefer opposition roles in which conflict and cooperation are balanced, while lower educated voters are expected to prefer the clarity provided by strong oversight and alternative roles of opposition parties.

A person's political preferences may also affect preferences for opposition roles, particularly whether they are a government or opposition party supporter. Even if one asks people to reflect on the role of opposition parties *in general*, it is likely that supporting a governing party versus an opposition party impacts upon the preferred roles of opposition parties for an individual. For governing party supporters (i.e. those who voted for a governing party in the last election), it is likely that they see less of a need for opposition parties to provide oversight and an alternative, because they are most likely more positive about the current government than opposition party supporters. Reversely, governing party supporters may prefer opposition parties to act more cooperatively to help the government in achieving its policy aims.

In addition to these individual-level factors, institutional factors can affect the public's expectations of the opposition. For instance, previous research has established that systems in which electoral rules allow preferential voting, motivate MPs to increase their legislative activity (Bräuninger *et al.* 2012; Williams and Indridason 2018) and exercise the oversight function by asking parliamentary questions (Bouteca *et al.* 2019; Rasch 2009). Such behaviour is shown to be rewarded by the voters (Bowler 2010; Däubler *et al.* 2016), hence, one can suggest variation in voters' preferences towards MPs roles between party-centred and candidate-centred systems. Here we explore these relationships, but we do recognise that our analysis of four country cases offers a limited basis for inference. Hence, we treat these analyses as exploratory.

We expect that the type of democracy plays an important role in what opposition party roles are deemed important by voters. In majoritarian democracies, the role of the opposition is most closely connected to providing an alternative government (Dahl 1966). The plurality electoral system used in such countries favours single party majority government with usually one major opposition party, although several smaller opposition parties may also exist (Lijphart 2012). In contrast stand countries with proportional electoral systems, especially systems that do not have any form of pre-electoral coalitions or 'bloc politics', because in these countries there will be a weak relationship between the election result and the government formation. As a result, it is difficult to 'kick the rascals out' and government alternation is usually only partial (Lundell 2011; Otjes and Willumsen 2019). These systems favour power-sharing, and thus an opposition party gets and takes the opportunity to cooperate with the government in order to achieve policy goals. Thus, the institutional context of a majoritarian (or *pluralitarian*) electoral system makes the role of 'alternative provider' more plausible, and therefore we expect citizens in systems with a plurality electoral system to rate conflictual roles, such as alternative and oversight, as more important than citizens of countries with a proportional electoral system. As for cooperation, we argue that cooperation between governing parties and opposition parties is more common in proportional electoral systems, especially those with ample experience in minority cabinet governance, and therefore citizens will recognise this as an important part of democracy. In line with our expectation regarding the alternative role of opposition parties (where we expect people living in systems where this is arguably more applicable will find it more important), we expect that people living in proportional electoral systems will find cooperation more important (as this is the system they experience). Table 1 summarises our expectations; as our expectations are consistently in the same direction for oversight and alternative, we have grouped them together.

Explaining perceived fulfilment of opposition roles

For the perceived fulfilment of opposition roles, our expectations are informed both by the expected importance of the various roles for various types of voters and by their overall outlook on politics. Literature on democratic evaluations has found that in high-quality democracies, there is generally a positive relationship between the importance of an aspect of democracy and its evaluation (Kriesi and Saris 2016). This relationship is, however, not always present, and the overall outlook of individual citizens on democracy is likely to affect their evaluations as well.

Table 1. Overview of expectations.

Variable	Level	Views on opposition roles	Perceived fulfilment of opposition roles
Satisfaction with democracy	*Lower satisfaction* is associated with …	+ oversight/alternative − cooperation	− oversight/alternative − cooperation
Conflict orientation	*More* conflict approaching is associated with …	+ oversight/alternative − cooperation	− oversight/alternative − cooperation
Political interest	*Higher interest* is associated with …	+ oversight/alternative + cooperation	+ oversight/alternative + cooperation
Education	*Higher education* is associated with …	0 oversight/alternative + cooperation	+ oversight/alterative + cooperation
Government / Opposition Voter	*Support for a governing party* (instead of an opposition party) is associated with …	− oversight/alternative + cooperation	− oversight/alternative − cooperation
Electoral System	Living in a *PR system* (instead of a majoritarian system) is associated with…	− oversight/alternative + cooperation	− oversight/alternative + cooperation

Note: + = higher preference/perceived fulfilment, − = lower preference/perceived fulfilment, 0 = no association with preference/perceived fulfilment.

For dissatisfied voters, we assume that their dissatisfaction is associated with a more negative perception of fulfilment of all opposition roles than for satisfied voters. Similarly, those who are conflict approaching are expected to be more negative overall, as we might expect that the alternative and oversight roles are not performed up to their standards. As they are likely to dislike cooperation very clearly, we also expect conflict approaching voters to be negative about the fulfilment of the cooperation role. For high political interest and high education, we expect higher perceived fulfilment of all roles: even though they find all roles more important and therefore may have higher expectations, views of these groups on democratic functioning are generally more positive. Government party supporters can also be argued to be generally more positive about the functioning of their democracy as they are the 'winners' (Anderson and Guillory 1997), but in case of an evaluation of the opposition parties, we argue that partisan considerations trump this overall pattern of democratic satisfaction. Governing party supporters are expected to be more negative about the fulfilment of opposition party roles than opposition party supporters. As for the differences between citizens living in countries with different electoral systems, our expectation is that citizens reflect the dominant view of opposition party role in their political system, thus the alternative and oversight role being evaluated higher in countries with a majoritarian electoral system and the cooperation role being evaluated higher in countries with a proportional electoral system.

Data and methods

Our empirical analysis concerns four countries – Canada, Denmark, the Netherlands, and the UK. These represent combinations of institutional

characteristics that are known to relate to the difference in opposition styles (Lijphart 2012). Particularly, two systemic variables are of importance here – type of the electoral system, and, consequently, size of the party system; and prevalence of minority cabinet governance. Canada has a single-member plurality electoral system and regular minority cabinets that depend on cooperation by (or a confidence and supply arrangement with) opposition parties. In Denmark, minority government and similar arrangements are also common, but the country uses a proportional electoral system. In the Netherlands the electoral system is proportional, but minority government is exceptional, while in the United Kingdom, there is a single-member plurality electoral system, and also limited experience with minority government.

In each of the four countries, a sample of adults took part in an online survey administered in the corresponding national language. The selection of respondents and the execution of the survey was done in cooperation with two professional polling companies: Netquest (together with CINT survey panel) and Leger. The four samples were composed to be representative in respect to people's age, sex, education, and region of residence through quota sampling[3]. The fieldwork was conducted between May 26th and June 30th, 2023. The number of responses per survey exceeds 1200. Full survey questions that are used in our analysis are included in Online Appendix E.

Statements presented to the respondents for the importance and evaluation of the opposition roles are the following:

Oversight:
a. An opposition party criticises the government.
b. An opposition party monitors the government's actions.

Cooperation:
a. An opposition party works together with the government to get things done.
b. An opposition party works together with the government to achieve compromise.

Alternative:
a. An opposition party offers an alternative policy program at the next elections.
b. An opposition party offers an alternative government at the next elections.

Survey-takers were asked to rate each of the statements twice on the scale from 0 to 10 – first, in the block of questions related to the importance of dimensions of democracy, and second, in the block on perceived fulfilment of opposition roles. This way, the low end of the scale indicated

a statement being 'not at all important for democracy in general' and 'not applying at all' to the country's context, and the high end – 'extremely important for democracy in general' and 'applying completely' to the country's context.

Each of the three roles we theorise about is represented by two statements. This allows us to capture multiple aspects of each of the opposition roles. In Online Appendix A we report the details of a confirmatory factor analysis between the six statements. The proposed three-dimensional solution is acceptable (Comparative Fix Index is 0.985 for the importance and 0.981 for the evaluation), but we note that the two statements related to oversight show a lower correlation than the other pairs. Therefore, we replicated our descriptive and inferential analyses on the statement level in Online Appendix C.

We use this survey data to describe citizens' understanding and evaluation of opposition parties in established representative democracies. Subsequently, we run regression models testing the explanatory power of the key hypothesised independent variables: satisfaction with democracy, conflict orientation, political interest, education, and government/opposition voter status. For the dependent variables, we use average scores for two statements per dimension per respondent. Descriptive statistics for all variables included in models are presented in Online Appendix B.

We present linear regression analysis of the pooled data, using country fixed effects and clustered standard errors. Given the fact that we have four countries, we adopted this approach over multilevel modelling. From the country fixed effects we can observe the differences between the four country cases. As control variables we include a dummy for gender, a dummy for the self-reported social class, and variables for age and self-placement on the left-right ideology scale.

Results: importance and evaluations of opposition roles

A large share of voters finds the items in all three dimensions of opposition roles at least somewhat important to democracy in general (see Figure 1). Scores of 4 or under on the scale ranging from 0 (Not at all important) to 10 (Extremely important) are given by 10 per cent or fewer of respondents[4]. Options 7 and 8 are most extensively used, but also the most extreme option (10) is used relatively often, which indicates that respondents find these characteristics quite to very important for democracy. We observe this pattern across the three dimensions, although the top scores (9 and 10) are somewhat less frequently used for the statements that represent the 'alternative' role, while the scores of 7 and above are frequently used for the statements that reflect 'cooperation'.

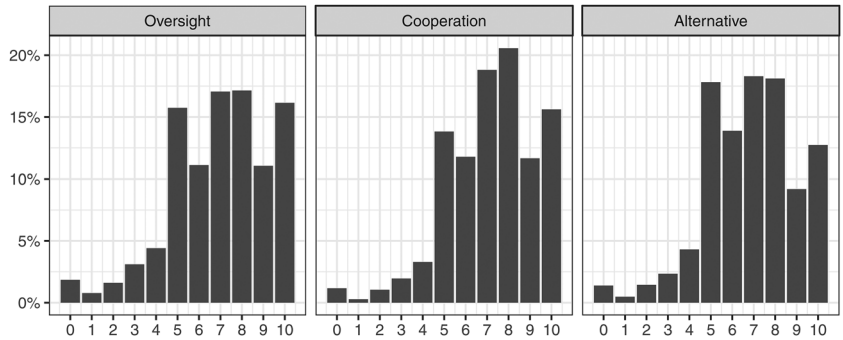

Figure 1. Importance of opposition party roles.
Note: Percentage of weighted non-missing answers across all respondents, for the two statements belonging to each dimension.

Importance of opposition roles across countries

When zooming in on the mean scores per dimension and splitting these for the four countries in our study, the variation in scores become clearer (see Figure 2). In terms of the importance attached to the three dimensions, the 'cooperation' dimension receives the highest scores in Canada and Denmark, while in the United Kingdom the 'alternative' dimension is rated the highest, and in the Netherlands 'oversight'. While the oversight dimension receives moderate to high importance scores in all countries, there is a difference between the two statements included in this dimension, with 'criticism' deemed of lower importance than 'oversight' in Canada, UK and Denmark, but not the Netherlands (see Table C.1 in the Online Appendices). Cooperation is highly rated in all countries, also in countries where there is no practise of opposition cooperation with the government.

The 'alternative' dimension is rated as very important by UK respondents, but somewhat less so in Canada and Denmark, and certainly in the Netherlands. If we split out the two items in this dimension, the 'alternative government' receives by far the lowest score in the Netherlands (see Table C.2 in the Online Appendices). This reflects the democratic traditions in these countries. In the Westminster system of the United Kingdom, indeed, the status of the Official Opposition as an alternative government has always been quite prominent. Canada with its experience of minority government and a more diverse opposition, in part due to the regional appeal of the Bloc Québécois, has had at least four different parties forming the Official Opposition at some point since 1993. Denmark has a proportional electoral system, but due to the system of bloc politics, has frequently seen a wholesale alternation of power, in which the opposition bloc replaced the bloc of governing parties. In the Netherlands, however, the alternation of power has always been (at most) partial, and

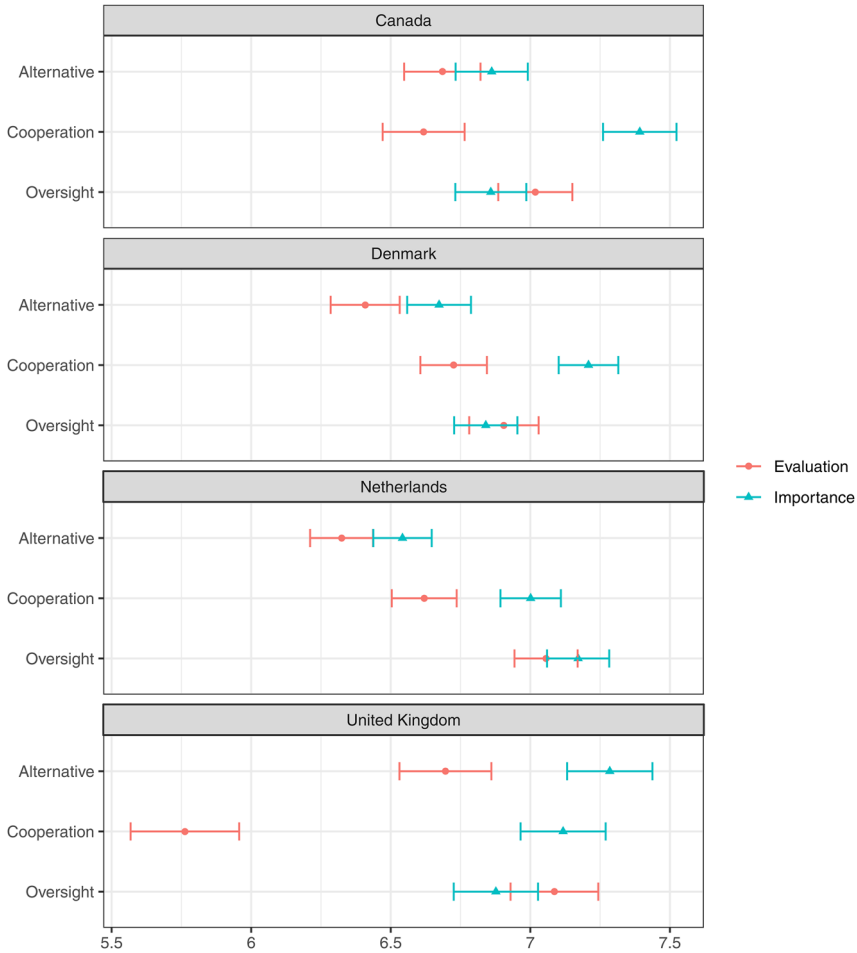

Figure 2. Importance and evaluation of opposition party roles by voters.
Note: (Weighted) mean and 95% confidence interval.

therefore Dutch respondents may not view this as an integral part of democracy as frequently as those in the other countries.

Evaluations of opposition roles across countries

As to the evaluation of the statements, the respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they thought each of the statements applied in their country, where answers measured from 0 (Does not apply at all) to 10 (Applies completely). As these questions were asked immediately after the questions on the importance, under the assumption that respondents used both scales similarly, we can compare the importance and evaluation of each statement.

Most evaluation scores are (somewhat) lower than the importance score, except for the 'oversight' dimension. There are particularly large differences between the evaluation and importance scores in the United Kingdom on cooperation and alternative. For the cooperation role, the United Kingdom clearly is evaluated lower than the other three countries. Indeed, many observers would agree that cooperation is not associated with opposition in the UK, and this is reflected in citizens evaluations. Interestingly, however, also the alternative role also receives only moderate evaluations in the United Kingdom. In Canada, the alternative role is evaluated about as high as in the UK, but the importance attached to it was lower. In Denmark and the Netherlands, the alternative role is evaluated lower than in the other two countries. Overall, we observe evaluations that are more or less in line with the relative strengths that were expected for each country, based on the electoral system and the incidence of minority government.

Results: explaining citizens' views on importance and evaluations of opposition roles

Both sets of expectations addressing respondents' attitudes towards opposition roles as democratic functions and perceptions of their fulfilment were analysed in regression analyses. Table 2 presents the results regarding the importance respondents attach to the three roles, while Table 3 analyses explanations for respondents' evaluations of the fulfilment of these roles in their country. Both tables show three pooled models – one for each dimension of opposition roles. For clarity, Table 4 presents the overview of our empirical findings.

Explaining the importance of opposition roles

Regarding respondents' democratic satisfaction and conflict orientation, we find a clear association with the importance they attach to the cooperation role, but not the other two roles. Dissatisfied respondents find cooperation less important than satisfied respondents, but we do not find a significant association for oversight and alternative. More conflict approaching individuals rate the cooperation role of opposition as less important for democracy in general than individuals that are more conflict avoidant. Going from the most conflict avoidant to the most conflict approaching position, this amounts to a difference of approximately 1 point on a scale from 0 to 10 ($p < 0.001$). We do not find a significant association for the other two roles, i.e. dissatisfied and conflict-approaching individuals do not rate the importance of these roles higher. This can, at least partially, be explained by their

Table 2. Linear regression models explaining citizens' views on importance of opposition roles.

	Oversight	Cooperation	Alternative
(Intercept)	4.63***	6.96***	5.41***
	(0.17)	(0.16)	(0.15)
Dissatisfaction	0.12+	−0.22***	0.08
	(0.07)	(0.04)	(0.05)
Conflict orientation	−0.08	−0.54***	−0.19
	(0.12)	(0.16)	(0.12)
Political interest	0.42***	0.10*	0.35***
	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.03)
Education: high	0.34***	0.13*	0.20
	(0.05)	(0.06)	(0.13)
Government supporter	−0.44***	0.27***	−0.29***
	(0.08)	(0.02)	(0.04)
County (Ref: Canada)			
Denmark	−0.02	−0.44***	−0.20***
	(0.02)	(0.01)	(0.02)
Netherlands	0.10***	−0.45***	−0.57***
	(0.01)	(0.02)	(0.01)
United Kingdom	−0.05	−0.35***	0.52***
	(0.05)	(0.02)	(0.01)
Gender: male	0.20+	−0.14**	0.10
	(0.12)	(0.04)	(0.09)
Age	0.02***	0.01***	0.01***
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
Class: middle	−0.15+	0.02	−0.11
	(0.08)	(0.07)	(0.08)
Left-right position	−0.04	0.01	−0.04
	(0.02)	(0.03)	(0.02)
Num. obs.	3396	3395	3396
R2	0.139	0.058	0.112
R2 Adj.	0.136	0.055	0.109
AIC	13204.3	13267.2	13316.3
BIC	13290.1	13353.0	13402.1

Linear regression coefficients with clustered standard errors in parentheses.
$^{+}p < 0.1$.
$^{*}p < 0.05$.
$^{**}p < 0.01$.
$^{***}p < 0.001$.

lower importance scores across the board: when using the *relative* importance of the dimensions as the dependent variable, we find that dissatisfied and conflict oriented respondents give relatively higher scores to oversight and alternative items (Table D.5 in the Online Appendices).

Higher political interest is positively related to preferences for all opposition roles, in line with our expectations. We find the strongest associations for the oversight and alternative roles: while political interest is associated with overall higher importance, the difference between high and low interest respondents is clearly somewhat smaller on the cooperation role than on the oversight and alternative roles. We also find support for the expectation that individuals with higher education prefer cooperation more than individuals with lower education levels. Where we

expected no relationship for oversight and alternative, we found a positive association for oversight. Indeed, if we look at the six statements separately, we find that higher educated respondents attached higher importance to all items except for 'alternative government'. So rather than a preference for cooperation, education seems to be related with higher importance scores across the board. And similar to political interest, the relationship between high education and importance of cooperation is weaker (rather than stronger) than for the other dimensions.

Individuals' political preferences, such as government supporter status, affect views on opposition roles in the expected direction. Government supporters are unsurprisingly negative towards being criticised and monitored by the opposition, as well as being presented with a clear alternative to their preferred party. At the same time, these respondents are more in favour of opposition parties working together with the government.

Finally, looking at how the institutional setting is related to individuals' views on opposition roles, we see relevant differences between the two countries with a proportional electoral system (Denmark and the Netherlands) and the two countries with a plurality electoral system (Canada and the United Kingdom). On the alternative role of the opposition the results are the clearest: individuals in majoritarian democracies are more in favour of opposition providing an alternative than those in countries with proportional representation. For oversight, the picture is less clear: in terms of preferences for the oversight role, differences are small and the only significant effect is in a direction that we did not expect (positive for the Netherlands). We find that the overall null result is determined by the contrasting effect of criticism and monitoring roles, the two statements that compromise this dimension (see Table D.1 in the Online Appendices). Respondents in PR systems attach higher importance to criticism, whereas respondents in the majoritarian systems are much more in favour of monitoring. On the role of cooperation we find, unexpectedly, that respondents in the Netherlands and Denmark attach lower importance to this in comparison to respondents from the United Kingdom and (especially) Canada. This is in line with the descriptive analysis of means displayed in Figure 2. One potential explanation is that in Denmark and the Netherlands respondents may not primarily think about the most cooperative opposition parties – formal or informal support parties – when being asked about the role of the 'opposition' (Hjermitslev 2024; Thürk and Klüver 2025).[5] Tromborg *et al.* (2019) find that a majority Dutch voters regarded the PVV as a cabinet party during the first Rutte cabinet (2010-2012), and a sizeable minority of Danish voters regarded support parties as cabinet parties rather than opposition parties in 2014-2015. An argument against this interpretation, however, is that Canada had also had formal and informal cooperation between the

government and part of the opposition. And the Netherlands did not have a formal support party nor an informal coalition of support parties at the time of the survey, although there was ad-hoc cooperation with opposition parties to secure a majority in the Senate (Otjes and Louwerse 2024). An alternative interpretation is that the preference for cooperation is not particularly low in Denmark and the Netherlands, but perhaps higher than expected in Canada and the United Kingdom, also in comparison to the other roles included in our survey.

Explaining perceived fulfilment of opposition roles

In general, the patterns regarding the evaluation of roles are similar to those regarding the importance of opposition roles. This is not surprising

Table 3. Linear regression models explaining citizens' perceptions of opposition role fulfilment.

	Oversight	Cooperation	Alternative
(Intercept)	5.17***	6.93***	6.06***
	(0.22)	(0.66)	(0.37)
Dissatisfaction	−0.10	−0.39***	−0.24*
	(0.08)	(0.10)	(0.11)
Conflict orientation	−0.31***	−0.13	−0.10
	(0.07)	(0.39)	(0.23)
Political interest	0.32***	0.14***	0.33***
	(0.06)	(0.03)	(0.05)
Education: high	0.23***	−0.19+	−0.02
	(0.04)	(0.10)	(0.10)
Government supporter	−0.19***	−0.04	−0.47*
	(0.05)	(0.17)	(0.18)
Country (Ref: Canada)			
Denmark	−0.26***	−0.15**	−0.36***
	(0.02)	(0.05)	(0.04)
Netherlands	−0.07***	−0.03	−0.49***
	(0.02)	(0.04)	(0.03)
United Kingdom	0.01	−1.26***	−0.04
	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.03)
Gender: male	0.17*	−0.20***	0.00
	(0.08)	(0.06)	(0.06)
Age	0.03***	0.01**	0.01***
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
Class: middle	−0.13+	−0.04	−0.17*
	(0.07)	(0.09)	(0.07)
Left-right position	−0.01+	0.00	−0.01
	(0.00)	(0.04)	(0.03)
Num. obs.	3395	3395	3395
R2	0.103	0.088	0.062
R2 Adj.	0.100	0.085	0.059
AIC	13595.8	14819.0	14346.7
BIC	13681.6	14904.8	14432.6

Linear regression coefficients with clustered standard errors in parentheses.
+$p < 0.1$.
*$p < 0.05$.
**$p < 0.01$.
***$p < 0.001$.

in light of the positive correlations between the importance and evaluation scores of respondents on each of the three dimensions: oversight ($r = 0.63$), cooperation ($r = 0.44$) and alternative ($r = 0.55$). If a respondent rated the importance of a dimension higher, they were generally also more positive about its fulfilment.

When asked about the extent to which the opposition roles apply in their national contexts, the more dissatisfied respondents are – the lower they rate dimensions' fulfilment in relation to opposition providing an alternative and being cooperative. The coefficient relating to oversight is in the expected direction, but not statistically significant. Conflict orientation is related to perceived fulfilment of the oversight role in the expected negative direction. The other coefficients are in the expected direction, but not statistically significant.

Higher political interest is related to higher evaluation scores on all dimensions. The difference between high and low interest respondents is clearly somewhat smaller on the cooperation role than on the oversight and alternative roles. We observed this pattern also in terms of the importance of these roles. Education is only positively associated with the oversight role (*ceteris paribus*). The coefficient for cooperation is negative, but only significant at the $p < 0.1$ level. Analysis split by electoral system shows that this finding significant in the two countries with a majoritarian system, but insignificant and much smaller in the two systems with proportional representation (see Table D.4 in Online Appendix D).

Partisan considerations also matter for the evaluation of opposition roles' fulfilment. Those who voted for governing parties at previous elections are generally more negative about the extent to which the opposition performs in their countries in comparison to supporters of opposition. Both oversight and alternative are evaluated more negatively by government supporters than by opposition supporters, but for cooperation there is no significant difference.

Regarding the differences between the institutional settings in our four country cases, we see that the evaluation scores on the alternative and oversight dimension are lower in the two proportional electoral systems (Denmark and the Netherlands) than in the two majoritarian democracies (Canada and the United Kingdom). Regarding the fulfilment of the cooperation function, we do not find a clear split between the two electoral systems, but rather a difference between the United Kingdom on the one hand and the other three country cases on the other hand. The fact that the Canadian government that was in office at the time of the survey relied on a confidence and supply agreement with one of the opposition parties, may explain why Canadian voters rate cooperation in their country more in line with the two PR systems than the other plurality system in our analysis. With the exception on Canada on cooperation, however,

Table 4. Overview of empirical findings.

Variable	Level	Views on opposition roles	Perceived fulfilment of opposition roles
Satisfaction with democracy	*Lower satisfaction* is associated with …	+ oversight/alternative **O** − cooperation ✓	− oversight **O**/alternative ✓ − cooperation ✓
Conflict orientation	*More* conflict approaching is associated with …	+ oversight/alternative **O** − cooperation ✓	− oversight ✓/alternative **O** − cooperation **O**
Political interest	*Higher interest* is associated with …	+ oversight/alternative ✓ + cooperation ✓	+ oversight/alternative ✓ + cooperation ✓
Education	*Higher education* is associated with …	0 oversight ✗/alternative ✓ + cooperation ✓	+ oversight ✓/alternative **O** + cooperation **O**
Government / Opposition Voter	*Support for a governing party* (instead of an opposition party) is associated with …	− oversight/alternative ✓ + cooperation ✓	− oversight/alternative ✓ − cooperation **O**
Electoral System	Living in a *PR system* (instead of a majoritarian system) is associated with…	− oversight **O**/alternative ✓ + cooperation ✗	− oversight/alternative ✓ + cooperation **O**

Note: + = higher preference/perceived fulfilment, − = lower preference/perceived fulfilment, 0 = no association with preference/perceived fulfilment, ✓ = expectation confirmed, ✗ = expectation not confirmed, **O** *= result not statistically significant.*

these findings are generally in line with our expectation that voters evaluate higher the roles that are traditionally associated with the strengths of the political system in their country.

Discussion and conclusion

What roles of opposition parties do citizens find important, how do they evaluate these and how can we explain variation therein? We surveyed the literature on opposition parties' roles and functions and arrived at a framework of three main opposition roles – (1) oversight, (2) cooperation, and (3) alternative. The first one concerns holding government to account by criticism and monitoring of its policies and actions; the second one suggests working together with governing parties to achieve compromise and get things done; and finally, the third one focuses on providing voters with alternative, both in form of policies different from the ones proposed by the incumbent government, but also in form of an alternative cabinet at the next elections. We ran a representative citizen survey in Canada, Denmark, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom to gauge views on importance of these opposition roles among respondents and to record their evaluations of opposition functions' fulfilment in these countries. Lastly, we examined explanations of variation in citizens' preferences and perceptions.

We expected individual level factors as well as the institutional context to be associated with citizens' views on the importance and their evaluation of opposition roles. We expected these associations to be similar for

oversight and alternative: dissatisfied, conflict oriented, politically interested voters, and opposition supporters were expected to prefer both of these roles. However, this pattern was only observed for the last two variables. Preferences for (or against) cooperation follow our expectation consistently: respondents who are more satisfied with democracy, conflict avoidant, politically interested, higher educated and government supporter attach higher importance to cooperation. In terms of the fulfilment of the various opposition roles, the findings were somewhat mixed: while in general political interest, opposition support and democratic satisfaction are positively related to the evaluation of opposition roles, we found less clear effects for education and conflict orientation. On the system level, we found quite clearly higher preference for and evaluation of the alternative role in the two countries with a plurality electoral system.

We observe that individuals living in a country with a proportional electoral system attached lower importance to cooperation as an opposition party role than individuals living in a country with a majoritarian electoral system, whereas we had expected the opposite to hold. We pointed out that our expectations about the cooperation hypothesis in various electoral systems are in line with people's experiences of living in consensus or majoritarian democracies. We suggested that respondents in countries with proportional representation are more used to cooperation between government parties and opposition parties, and, thus, would be more likely to view cooperation as important for democracy in general. We find, however, that contrary to our expectation, citizens of majoritarian democracies view cooperation between government and opposition somewhat more important than citizens in liberal/consensual countries. Ample new research suggests that people value compromise in politics both in principle and in practice (De Giorgi and Ilonszki 2018; Green-Pedersen and Hjermitslev 2023; Harbridge *et al.* 2014; Van der Velden 2023; Wolak 2020), therefore one possible explanation for our finding is that citizens in majoritarian democracies might have grown tired of the general absence of consensus in these systems. At the same time, the alternative role of the opposition is deemed even more important by respondents in majoritarian systems in comparison to those in PR systems. It is thus not simply a matter of voters longing for something that their system does not offer (i.e. cooperation in majoritarian systems and a clear alternative in consensus systems). And we should also not exaggerate the mean difference between electoral systems on the importance for cooperation of 0.27 points on a scale that runs from 0 to 10. It is more relevant that we find that opposition cooperation is deemed quite important by voters across democracies.

This study comes with two main limitations. First, in our survey we have opted for three categories of opposition roles operationalised through

two statements. It is plausible, however, that research that chooses to present different categories of roles to respondents, for example along Helms (2008) or Garritzman's (2017) definition of opposition functions, would come across different outcomes. Moreover we observe that our two statements that were intended to capture oversight, monitoring and criticism, show lower correlations than the other pairs of items in our analysis. Thus, future work might be able to tease out the difference aspects of the 'oversight' role of opposition parties in a better way, for example by including an item on 'holding the government to account' or by including open questions to capture voters' perspectives in their own words.

Second, as our analysis is limited to four established democracies, we can expect more variation in findings if this phenomenon is studied in more countries. Indeed, our findings on the differences between the four countries should only be taken as indicative given the limited number of countries. On a positive note, we believe our analysis shows that there potentially relevant differences between countries, but also similarities in ways that are not consistent with how opposition roles are viewed typically in majoritarian and consensus democracies. This suggests that we should not take these ideal-types of democracies as proxies of how citizens view the role of opposition parties.

Further research into opposition roles and citizens' evaluations of their importance and fulfilment will therefore be very relevant. Even though opposition parties do not receive as much scholarly and media attention as the government, people formulate and express a variety of opinions towards opposition parties' roles. We argue that these are important for our understanding of citizens' beliefs on how parties are ought to act in democracies, as well as which political processes contribute to democratic legitimacy. Finally, such views and evaluations should not be ignored as in the long-term they may inform voters' behaviour at polling stations. Future analyses can explore these relationships and replicate our research in other countries.

Notes

1. We prefer the term 'oversight' over 'control'. The English term control has the primary meaning 'to exercise power or authority over', while the French 'contrôler' more frequently takes on the meaning 'to monitor' or 'to check'. The difference is apparent in the difference between 'closely monitoring government actions' and 'controlling governmental power', in which the latter would mean that parliament exercises power over the government's actions. In parliamentary systems that is not a fair characterization of the relationship between parliament and government, let alone the relationship between opposition parties in parliament and the government.
2. We thank an anonymous reviewer for this suggestion.

3. The samples are sufficiently balanced. We employ post-stratification weights to ensure the robustness of our descriptive analyses. Descriptive statistics are available in Online Appendix B.
4. About 6 percent of respondents did not give an answer per statement, which indicates that people were able to provide an answer to the statement. Based on figure 1, the middle answer category seems to be over-used somewhat, as it consistently scores higher than both adjacent scores, but this pattern is not excessive.
5. We thank one of the anonymous reviewers for offering this suggestion.

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Data availability statement

Replication data and code can be found at Harvard Dataverse: https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/BVASRP

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