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A historic agreement? Debating the EU Recovery Plan in the German and Dutch plenaries

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Citation

Eumann, E. (2022). *A historic agreement? Debating the EU Recovery Plan in the German and Dutch plenaries.*

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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A historic agreement? Debating the EU Recovery Plan in the German and Dutch plenaries

An analysis into whether national parties formulate credible alternatives to EU policies.



by

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Vaclav Havel Joint Master Programme:
European Politics and Society

This thesis is submitted for the degree of
MA European Politics and Society

EPS { European
Politics
and Society

Supervisor:
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Word count: 20533

University of Leiden
June 15, 2022

Do national parties formulate credible alternatives to EU policies?

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr Maxine David, for her support and valuable feedback, Katrin Auel and Ralf Drachenberg for their input into my topic, and my family for all their support and hours they put into proofreading this thesis.

I would also like to thank the EPS Consortium for supporting me with a scholarship during my Master's Programme and the writing of this thesis.

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Summary

This thesis will analyse whether national parties formulate credible alternatives to EU policies. According to the literature, national parties have the important function of making political choices and political alternatives visible. Nevertheless, much of the literature has failed to empirically investigate the extent to which national parties actually propose alternatives and how credible these alternatives are. Empirically investigating whether parties do propose credible alternatives is important, because only then they manage to introduce choice into EU politics. This is the gap that this thesis will address.

In order to answer the research question, this thesis analyses how the EU's recovery plan for the Covid-19 pandemic has been debated in the German and Dutch national parliamentary debates and whether German and Dutch parties manage to present credible policy alternatives to the recovery plan. Focusing on two case studies allows for a sufficiently detailed discussion while also providing the benefit of comparison. The recovery plan has been chosen because it is identified as an important issue for voters in both countries. The coding-scheme from Karlsson and Persson (2018) is applied to code all statements made by Members of Parliament (MPs) about the recovery plan between April 2020 and December 2021. As the analysis is focused on policy proposals, credibility is explored in four different aspects: (1) Type of opposition, (2) Object of opposition, (3) Internal credibility and (4) Coherence.

My results point to a mixed picture. In both Germany and the Netherlands proposing critique is much more common than proposing alternatives. While some parties in Germany and the Netherlands perform well on all aspects of credibility, the majority of parties fall short on either one or more of them. I identified several factors that constrain parties from proposing credible alternatives. These are the presence of one (or several) hard Eurosceptic parties in parliament, a lack of capacity and fragmentation, the latter two particularly in the Netherlands. However, the ability of parties to present credible alternatives also depends on their understanding of what it means to engage in oppositional behaviour. Here many parties chose to focus on scrutinising behaviour rather than making a contribution to develop the recovery fund. Other parties engaged in passive opposition focusing on neither scrutinising nor policy-making behaviour. Nevertheless, different ideas about the future of European integration, in particular the financing of the recovery fund, become apparent, especially between the (centre-) left and (centre-) right parties. Examples like Die Grünen in Germany show that proposing credible alternatives is possible, but this needs to be a priority for parties.

Keywords: Covid-19, Recovery Plan, National Parliaments, Credibility, Euroscepticism

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The parties in the German House of Representatives, the Bundestag

Name	Abbreviation	English name	Political group in the European Parliament
Christlich-Demokratische Union Deutschland/ Christlich- Soziale Union in Bayern	CDU/CSU	Christian Democratic Union in Germany/ Christian Social Union in Bavaria	Group of the European People's Party (EPP)
Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands	SPD	Social Democratic Party Germany	Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament (S&D)
Alternative für Deutschland	AfD	Alternative for Germany	Identity and Democracy Group (ID)
Freie Demokratische Partei	FDP	Free Democratic Party	Renew Europe Group
Die Linke	-	The Left	The Left in the European Parliament (GUE/NGL)
Bündnis '90/Die Grünen	Die Grünen	Alliance '90/The Greens	Group of the Greens/ European Free Alliance (The Greens/EFA)

The parties in the Dutch House of Representatives, the Tweede Kamer

Name	Abbreviation	English name	Political group in the European Parliament
Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie	VVD	People's Party for Freedom & Democracy	Renew Europe Group
Democraten 66	D66	Democrats 66	Renew Europe Group
Partij voor de Vrijheid	PVV	Party for Freedom	Currently not represented, formerly Identity and Democracy Group (ID)
Christen-Democratisch Appèl	CDA	Christian Democratic Appeal	Group of the European People's Party (EPP)
Socialistische Partij	SP	Socialist Party	Currently not represented, formerly The Left in the European

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			Parliament (GUE/NGL)
GroenLinks	-	GreenLeft	Group of the Greens/ European Free Alliance (The Greens/EFA)
Partij voor de Arbeid	PvdA	Labour Party	Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament (S&D)
Partij voor der Dieren	PvdD	Party for the Animals	The Left in the European Parliament (GUE/NGL)
ChristenUnie	-	ChristianUnion	Group of the European People's Party (EPP)
Forum voor Democratie	FvD	Forum for Democracy	Identity and Democracy Group (ID), formerly European Conservatives and Reformists Group (ECR)
Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij	SGP	Political Reformed Party	European Conservatives and Reformists Group (ECR)
DENK	-	translated: Think	Currently not represented
50PLUS	50+	Pensioner's party 50PLUS	Currently not represented, formerly Group of the European People's Party (EPP)
Volt	-	-	Dutch Volt currently not represented, representation via Damian Boeselager (DE), Group of the Greens/ European Free Alliance (The Greens/EFA)
Juiste Antwoord 21	JA21	Right Answer 21	European Conservatives and Reformists Group (ECR)

Chapter One: Introduction

In recent years national parliaments have gained several new rights and powers in the European infrastructure: they are gatekeepers (of subsidiarity¹), networkers (with other national parliaments and the European parliament), scrutinisers of European Union (EU) legislation, and communicators of EU politics. They also play an important role as transposers of national legislation (Kinski 2021, 720). This gives rise to the two important questions: whether national parliaments actually engage in EU policy making, and, if so, how? (Gheyle 2019, 227). As communicators of EU politics, they are one of easiest channels for voters to receive information about EU politics, thus making political choices and political alternatives visible to the citizens. While there are also other channels to make political choices visible, national parliaments and in particular national parties are a valuable channel, because they allow voters to process information about EU politics through the ideologies they are already familiar with.

Both scholars and national parliamentarians have identified the strengthening of national parliaments as a solution to a (perceived) lack of democratic legitimacy of EU policy making (Sprungk 2013, 548, Barret 2018, 82-83, Kinski 2021, 735, Tweede Kamer 2020e, pos 553). In order to justify a stronger role in the European infrastructure, it is important to evaluate whether national parties in the national parliaments fulfil their role at making political choice within the European system possible. Only if they do so can they help address some of the challenges the EU faces when it comes to democratic legitimacy and allow for opposition within the system. In order to make political choice within the European system possible, the political alternatives in EU politics presented by national parties must be visible and credible, that is coherent with one another and over time. After all, it is easy to see how national parties can propose all sorts of policies in the plenary but these might be unattainable or incoherent. To give an example, a party could advocate for leaving the EU but also demand increased EU funding for the Netherlands. These two alternatives would not be coherent with one another, and thus lacking in credibility. Credibility is therefore key to assess whether the political choices national parties offer to voters are believable.

While there are many scholars writing about the role of national parliaments in making political choices visible (see *inter alia* Auel *et al* 2018, Barret 2018, Kröger & Bellamy 2016) much of the literature fails to empirically investigate whether national parties present policy alternatives and whether these policies are credible. Empirically investigating whether parties do propose

¹ Subsidiarity is one of the main principles of the EU. It is meant to ensure that problems/issues are addressed on the most appropriate level, whether that be local, regional, national or European level.

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credible alternatives is important, because parties will only manage to introduce choice into EU politics if they do so. This is the gap that this thesis will address. The research question for this thesis will therefore be: **Do national parties formulate credible alternatives to EU policies?** Further sub-questions that will be explored are: What are the policy alternatives about? What factors impact the ability of parties to formulate credible alternatives?

In order to answer the research question, this thesis analyses how the EU's recovery plan is debated in the German and Dutch national parliaments and whether German and Dutch parties manage to present credible policy alternatives to it. This thesis will focus specifically on the recovery plan, because the Covid-19 pandemic arguably presents one of the largest crises the European Union and its Member States have faced. Calculations by the International Monetary Fund suggested that the EU was faced with the largest economic downturn since the great depression in the 1930s (Ladi and Tsarouhas 2020, 1041). Unlike earlier crises, while the Covid-19 crisis did impact member states differently, all member states were affected by a record-high loss in GDP and a rise in unemployment (Ladi and Tsarouhas 2020, 1042). The EU recovery plan "Next Generation EU" was set up as a temporary recovery instrument to repair the more immediate economic and social damage of the Covid-19 pandemic. Together with the Multi-Financial Framework (MFF), Next Generation EU is meant to provide the money deemed necessary to rebuild the European economy. The recovery plan may be primarily about economic recovery, but it also touches upon wider issues about how we imagine recovery to take place: should funds be invested only into the health sector or also into innovation, climate adaptation and digitalization? What reforms do countries have to make to be able to receive the recovery fund? How should the recovery fund be financed? This means that there are a wide range of areas where parties can present alternatives and develop competing ideas on this policy. The multifaceted and salient nature of the European recovery plan make this policy relevant to study, because it gives parties an incentive to propose policy alternatives and engage in EU policy making. Although this thesis is focused on one specific policy, wider conclusions can be drawn about the role of national parties and parliaments in EU policy making. This thesis will also provide researchers with some potential tools to investigate the behavior of national parties in greater depth.

The structure of this thesis will be as follows. In the literature review (Chapter 2), I will assess the previous scholarship on the role of national parliaments, in particular the factors which make it harder or easier for national parties to engage in presenting policy alternatives. Special

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attention will also be paid to the role of Eurosceptic parties, as these have been identified in the literature as relevant factors impacting the ability of parties to present alternatives. Chapter 3 will explain the research method, including the research design, data and coding scheme. The third chapter also develops a workable understanding of credibility. The following two chapters (Chapter 4 and Chapter 5) will analyse how the recovery fund is debated in the German and Dutch national parliament respectively. They will seek to identify whether German and Dutch parties are able to present credible policy alternatives to EU policies. Credibility will be explored in four different aspects: (1) Type of opposition, (2) Object of opposition, (3) Internal credibility and (4) Coherence. In the chapters, I will also assess whether the positions taken by the national parties match those of their respective political groups in the European Parliament. In Chapter 6 the findings will be brought together in a comparison, followed by some concluding remarks.

Chapter Two: Literature review

In order to answer the research question at hand, this literature review will first delve deeper into the scholarly debate on the role of national parliaments, followed by the incentives and disincentives Members of Parliaments (MPs) have for engaging in EU issues. Special attention will be paid to the role of Eurosceptic parties in debates on EU issues in national parliaments. It will then identify the gaps that this thesis aims to fill. I will also identify key concepts that play a role in this thesis: credibility, Euroscepticism and politicisation.

2.1 The role of national parliaments in the EU

European integration and especially the continuous strengthening of the institutions of the EU have constituted a challenge to national parliaments (Raunio 2011, 304). However, while initially considered the “losers of integration” (Maurer & Wessels 2001), national parliaments have been given several new rights and powers since the 1990s (Sprungk 2013, 548). The role of national parliaments was institutionalised in a new article in the Lisbon Treaty (Art 114 now Art 12 TEU). Why should national parliaments play such a significant role in EU politics?

The strengthening of national parliaments is considered an important remedy for the democratic deficit² (Sprungk 2013, 548), that the European Union is often diagnosed with (Eriksen &

² The EU is usually diagnosed with a democratic deficit because it lacks the characteristics of an ideal democracy, in particular relating to a lack of sufficient democratic control and citizen participation (de

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Fossum, 2002; Bellamy & Castiglione, 2003; Bowman, 2006; Weiler, 2012; Theuns, 2016). As communicators of EU politics national parliaments bring the EU “closer to its citizens”³ (Barret 2018, 83) by making political choices and political alternatives in EU politics visible to citizens (Auel *et al* 2018, 14). Plenary⁴ debates, but also transparency in parliamentary committees, parliamentary questions, informing the electorate through press statements and media coverage, are means through which parliamentarians can inform the public and allow them to exercise democratic control over the EU (Auel *et al* 2018, 14). This serves not only to allow the voters to make better decisions but also instil them with a sense of ownership over EU politics and the EU more generally (Auel *et al* 2018, 14). Furthermore, national parliaments allow for “a *normalisation* of EU politics” (emphasis in original, Kröger & Bellamy 2016, 131). By normalising EU politics, debates about EU affairs are linked to national debates about the advantages and disadvantages of certain policies (Kröger & Bellamy 2016, 139). This makes it easier for voters to form opinions about EU affairs.

However, in order to ensure that voters have a choice, I would argue that the political alternatives in EU politics presented must not only be visible but also credible. In the most basic sense, credibility is understood as the expectation of stakeholders⁵ that an announced policy will be carried out. This is also the definition of standard models of credibility from economic policy (Drazen & Masson 1994; Dornbusch, 1991). Following Elgstrom, credibility is a subjective quality awarded to an actor, depending on perceptions of resource availability, (dis)unity and (in)coherence (2015, 3). Similarly, Hauner *et al* argue that for policies to be credible, policy targets must be compatible with one another, show consistency over time (meaning that the policy will be sustained under nearly all circumstances and will not be changed opportunistically) (2007, 4). Additionally, policy makers must have enough

Jongh & Theuns 2017, 1285). Both of these could potentially be addressed by a strengthening of national parliaments.

³ Pippa Norris (1997) distinguishes between three principal channels in the EU through which citizens delegate power to various representatives, who then delegate power to governments and agencies (274). Citizens can directly elect Members of the European Parliament, who act as co-legislators and hold the European Commission accountable (Norris 1997, 274). A second channel is representation through civil society organisations, which citizens can join or donate to, that have the possibility to lobby European institutions or organise citizen initiatives (Norris 1997, 274). Citizens are also represented via a third channel, their national governments, which are held accountable by the national parliaments elected by citizens (Norris 1997, 274). Following Rauh and de Wilde, this is the most important channel for the wider citizenry, because this is the channel where citizens and the public media direct most of their demands towards (2018, 3). The focus on the third, the ‘national’, channel can also be partly explained by the alleged failure of the European Parliament to fulfil a similar role at the European level, given the low and decreasing participation in EU politics (de Jongh & Theuns 2017, 1286).

⁴ I am using the term ‘plenary’ rather than parliamentary to indicate that I am focusing on the plenary sessions rather than any discussions that take place in the respective committees.

⁵ These can be voters, but in the case of monetary policy also for example the market.

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information available and policies must be monitored (Hauner *et al* 2007, 4). For Falkner “credibility implies that the EU’s policies need to be effective, even if each and every detail of all policies ever adopted may not always be implemented” (2013, 15). Credibility is thus key to assess whether the political choices national parties offer to voters are believable. In spite of this, credibility remains underexplored in literature focusing on the role of national parliaments in EU politics.

National parliaments are one of the easiest channels for voters to receive information about EU politics because they allow them to process information through the parties and ideologies that they are already familiar with. However, national parties can serve to introduce choice into politics not only through making political alternatives visible, but also by highlighting credible alternatives.

Although national parliaments are considered important remedies for the democratic deficit, there is disagreement in the literature as to the extent to which ‘mainstream’⁶ (that is not hard Eurosceptic) domestic parties manage to develop distinct policy alternatives. Kröger and Bellamy (2016, 131) and Grzymala-Busse (2019, 35) have argued that ‘mainstream’ domestic parties – in particular the Social Democrats on the centre-left and the Christian Democrats on the centre-right – have failed to develop competing EU policies that reflect their core ideology and the core ideology of their voters. However, in neither article do the authors empirically investigate whether mainstream parties are actually proposing alternatives to EU policies and how coherent these alternatives are with their ideology. Their findings are contested by Karlsson and Persson who have looked at the number of alternatives proposed with regard to critique and support (2018, 900). The authors have found that mainstream parties do engage in opposition to the EU/EU policies and also presented alternatives rather than just criticism (900). The national parliamentary arena thus seems to harbour more organised opposition (Karlsson & Persson 2018, 901). However, Karlsson and Persson do not qualitatively evaluate the proposed alternatives to see whether these are credible and coherent with the parties’ profiles. By focusing on the case of the Swedish European Affairs Committee (EAC) they are also unable to compare the debate in Sweden with those of other countries.

⁶ For a discussion of ‘mainstream’ parties see page 14-15.

2.2. Incentives and Disincentives for engaging in EU issues

MPs face several incentives (as well as some disincentives) to engage in EU affairs publicly. Müller and Strøm (1999) have developed a theory of three different motivations for MPs for voting/engaging in plenary discussions publicly: policy-seeking, office-seeking and vote-seeking. The salience of EU issues as well as a more critical public opinion of the EU can be an important motivating factor, as EU politics often have an electoral impact (Auel & Raunio 2014, 6). MPs are also more likely to engage publicly if they expect to be able to influence and control their government's negotiation position. If parliamentary resolutions are made public, then it is much harder for governments to retreat from that position in later negotiations (Auel & Raunio 2014, 6). Yet, as Auel and Christiansen point out, in many national parliaments, MPs also engage in EU affairs without expecting any gain either in terms of office, votes, or policy impact (2015, 270). Therefore, this suggests that MPs also have other motivations for engaging in EU policies. For example, in his analysis of the Brexit vote, Moore has highlighted the influence of personal ideology (2017, 2). Especially for MPs of governing parties there are also several disincentives for engaging publicly, because they do not want to damage their cabinet's reputation and prefer to monitor the government behind closed doors (Auel & Raunio 2014, 7). Additionally, engaging in EU affairs publicly can have divisive consequences for their respective parties if support for European integration is not widely shared, or negative consequences at the polls if European integration is not supported by the voters of that party (Auel & Raunio 2014, 7). Furthermore, as Rauh and de Wilde point out, a vote-seeking government party has more to lose from highlighting EU issues, as voters of mainstream parties often tend to be more critical of European integration than the parties themselves (2018, 199). Thus, engaging in EU issues publicly in favour of more European integration could negatively impact their election result. The extent to which this is the case depends on the country; for example, as Miklin has pointed out these differences between voters and mainstream parties are much larger in Austria than in Germany (2014, 1202). Government parties also have to make more compromises, making them less likely to be able to follow through with their electoral promises on EU affairs (Rauh & de Wilde 2018, 199). Thus, it seems likely that opposition parties will drive the debate on the EU and Europe in plenary debates, especially Eurosceptic parties.

Another important aspect is to understand how (opposition) parties view their role in the plenary. Louwse and Otjes (2018) have developed a very useful typology to better understand the different roles opposition parties can occupy in the plenary system. The authors distinguish

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between two dimensions of opposition: *scrutiny* and *policy-making* (Louwerse & Otjes 2018, 481). Those parties engaging in scrutinising behaviour will voice their opposition to unpopular policies, but will rarely try to make contributions to the policies (critical opposition). Opposition parties can also focus on policy-making to find new majorities in the policy system and propose policy alternatives (constructive opposition) (Louwerse & Otjes 2018, 481). Scrutiny and policy-making are not mutually exclusive, as parties may choose to engage actively in scrutiny and policy-making (active opposition) or in neither (passive opposition) (Louwerse & Otjes 2018, 481). This typology is useful to understand why parties may choose to present policy alternatives (or not) as this also depends on how they understand their role in opposition. For the sake of introducing choice into opposition behaviour, engaging in constructive or active opposition is crucial.

2.3 *The role of Eurosceptic parties*

One of the most important factor for mainstream parties to discuss policy alternatives publicly in the plenary seems to be the presence of openly hard Eurosceptic parties in parliament. Miklin has argued that with a significant Eurosceptic party in parliament, mainstream parties lack the incentive to discuss their views publicly (2014, 1204-5). The term ‘Eurosceptic’ can be traced back to the 1980s in the UK and following Brack and Startin refers in its simplest form to someone who opposes the powers of the European Union (2015, 239). Notorious for its vagueness, Leruth, Startin and Usherwood criticise Euroscepticism as a concept for not saying “anything about why that opposition exists, what form it should take, to what it should apply, nor to what end” (2018, 4). De Wilde and Trenz argue that the defining feature of Euroscepticism is *polity* opposition rather than *policy* opposition (my emphasis) (2012, 540). Euroscepticism is thus defined by opposition to the polity, that is the competencies and institutional set-up of the EU, rather than the policies, that is the content of the actions of EU (de Wilde & Trenz 2012, 540). Eurosceptic parties in the authors’ understanding thus target the institutional set-up of the EU and/or oppose further European integration (de Wilde & Trenz 540). In the most radical sense, Eurosceptic parties may choose to opt-out completely by leaving the EU (de Wilde & Trenz 540). While de Wilde and Trenz recognise that the distinction between the policy contestation and polity contestation is thin line (2012, 540), their view of Euroscepticism is a static view, which fails to acknowledge the ‘mainstreaming’ of Euroscepticism (Brack & Startin 2015, 239). In particular since the Eurozone crisis, Euroscepticism has become more and more embedded in the national party systems (Brack & Startin 2015, 239). Startin and Usherwood have also highlighted that the distinction between

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‘mainstream’ parties on the one hand and ‘Eurosceptic’ parties on the other hand is a thin one (2013, 7). The authors distinguish between four different types of Eurosceptic parties: (1) single-issue pro-sovereignty parties, (2) Radical Right parties and (3) left-wing parties beyond the ‘mainstream’ left, which are opposed to the neo-liberal direction in which they see European integration progressing (Startin & Usherwood 2013, 6-7). A fourth type are mainstream parties, especially on the right of the political spectrum, that have started adopting ‘soft’ Eurosceptic discourses on issues like the EU budget for example (Startin & Usherwood 2013, 7). Particularly through the latter, Euroscepticism has become a persistent phenomenon that is present in all national parliamentary system and even some governments (Startin & Usherwood 2013, 14).

The question of conceptualising parties based on their ‘level’ of Euroscepticism has resulted in the development of many competing conceptualisations over the past two decades (see Kopecký & Mudde 2002; Taggart & Szczerbiak 2002; Flood & Usherwood 2005; Szczerbiak & Taggart 2008; Vasilopoulou 2011; Leruth 2015). Most prevalent is the distinction of ‘hard’ vs ‘soft’ Euroscepticism, which has in turn also been the subject of many discussions (for a review see Leconte 2015). In particular, the difficulty to place radical left parties into these categories has caused criticism of this binary opposition (Charalambous 2011). However, I would agree with Baloge who argues that rather than comparing Euroscepticism and Eurosceptic parties in different European countries, it should always be treated *relatively and relationally* (emphasis in original), that is in relation to the positions of other parties in parliament (2021, 554). In countries like Germany, where only very mild forms of Euroscepticism had been present before the rise of the AfD, different statements would be considered ‘Eurosceptic’ than in the Netherlands, which has had parties in parliament opposed to supranational European integration since its beginning (albeit in much smaller numbers than today) (Baloge 2021, 554, Otjes & Voerman 2016, 186). Otjes and Voerman have identified four different ‘flavours’ of Euroscepticism in the Netherlands: (1) the resistance to European supra-nationalism by strict Protestant communities, (2) anti-capitalist Eurosceptic parties on the left, (3) radical right-wing populist parties and (4) green Euro-critical parties (2016, 185). In particular, the existence of Eurosceptic Protestant parties is not usually included in conceptualisations of Eurosceptic parties. This categorization does not yet include the development of ‘soft’ Eurosceptic discourses within mainstream parties like the VVD and the CDA. This shows that the distinction between ‘mainstream’ parties traditionally in favour of European integration and parties beyond the ‘mainstream’ are country-dependent. Despite many flaws, the concept of mainstream parties in relation to parties beyond the ‘mainstream’

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remains a useful one to characterise how accepted certain party positions are by the rest of the parliament. Nevertheless, this distinction should be made on a country-to-country-basis rather than between different countries.

One important reason to keep distinguishing between ‘mainstream’ and ‘Eurosceptic’ parties is, that debates in the national parliament about European issues seem to be politicised along what Hooghe and Marks (2008) have termed the ‘GAL-TAN’ dimension, that is between Green/alternative/liberal parties on the one hand arguing for further European integration and traditional/authoritarian/nationalist parties on the other hand arguing against further European integration (Miklin 2014, 1199). Politicisation is defined by Schmidt as the “process through which European integration has become the subject of public discussion, debate, and contestation” (2019, 1018). These discussions can be concerned both with the institutional set-up of the EU (the polity) or the actions of the EU (the policies). The EU may have been increasingly politicised over time (Schmidt 2019, 1018); what has, however, been lacking from national parliamentary debates is a discussion between (centre-)right and (centre-)left parties about their competing views on EU policies (Miklin 2014, 1200; Kröger & Bellamy 2016, 134). Even if those differences exist, Miklin has shown that these are likely to be pushed into the shadows in favour of the conflict between mainstream parties and their Eurosceptic competitors (2014, 1204-1205). While I do not think that a left-right politicisation would reduce the polarisation between pro-EU and anti-EU parties, it could – as Miklin points – serve to reduce this conflict between pro- and anti-EU parties to one conflict among many (2014, 1200). This would help provide citizens with more electoral choices within the political system of the EU rather than having to opt out of it completely (Miklin 2014, 1200).

Hix (2008) and Zürn (2013) argue that a crisis could represent such a ‘critical juncture’, where mainstream parties will be forced to discuss their different views along a right-left polarisation, thus allowing mainstream parties to “regain lost ground in the battle over European integration” (Börzel & Risse 2009, 220). Nevertheless, despite the many crises the EU has faced since, the differences between left and right tend to be subjugated to the need to present a super-majority against the Eurosceptic (often populist right-wing) party or parties in parliament (Miklin 2014, 1200). Ladi and Tsarouhas have argued that the Covid-19 pandemic represents a critical juncture for the EU, because of its exceptional impact on both the social and economic situation (2020, 1041). Additionally, the pandemic impacted all of the member states – although not equally (Ladi and Tsarouhas 2020, 1042). The pandemic and the recovery fund designed to reduce its impacts could thus result in a debate between the (centre-)left and (centre-)right

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parties over *how* to best rebuild after this crisis rather than between the pro-EU and anti-EU parties on *whether* to rebuild.

2.4 Conclusions from the literature review

National parties in theory have the important function of making political choices and political alternatives visible. However, as pointed out in this literature review, several scholars argue that in particular mainstream parties on the centre-left and centre-right have failed to develop competing, distinct and credible alternatives – or if they have developed them, fail to discuss them publicly in the plenary. One of the reasons for this seems to be the presence of openly Eurosceptic parties in parliament. Miklin (2014) suggest that this is because mainstream parties feel the need to form a super-majority against those openly (populist right-wing) Eurosceptic parties rather than highlight the differences between each other. This is contested by Karlsson and Persson (2018) who in their empirical investigation found that mainstream parties do engage in oppositional behaviour to the EU and develop alternatives to EU policies. Following the findings in the literature, I am expecting there to be mixed results whether mainstream parties (in government and opposition) are able to present credible policy alternatives to EU policies. This will be particularly influenced by the strength and presence of the hard Eurosceptic parties in parliament.

In order to justify a stronger role for national parties in the European infrastructure, it is important to evaluate whether they fulfil their role of proposing credible policy alternatives to EU policies. Only if they do so, can they help address some of the challenges the EU faces when it comes to democratic legitimacy and allow for opposition within the system. In spite of this, much of the literature fails to empirically investigate whether parties (both on the mainstream and beyond) actually present policy alternatives and how credible these policies are in relation to the party's profile and with one another and over time. This is the gap that this thesis will address. In the following section, I will explain the methodology I have developed to answer my research question, based on the findings in the literature.

Chapter Three: Research Design, Data and Coding

3.1 Research Design

Following Karlsson and Persson, the focus of my research will be on actual oppositional behaviour rather than institutional structures, which could include the possibility to ask questions or the resources which make opposition possible (2018, 894). This is because, as Karlsson and Persson highlight, without knowing whether there is an opposition deficit exemplified by the actual behaviour of MPs, explorations of the institutional structures of opposition make less sense (2018, 894).

While Karlsson and Persson focus on the oppositional behaviour within the Swedish European Affairs Committee (EAC), this thesis focuses on plenary debates for two reasons. Unlike EACs, plenary debates are transparent, public and easily accessible to citizens. This is especially the case for the policy area I am looking at (the recovery fund) as it will be discussed not only in the EAC but also, in the German case, in the sub-committees of the Budget Committee, which are often closed sessions (Deutscher Bundestag (n.d.)). As Karlsson and Persson have pointed out, transparency is not equal to publicity (2018, 894). Despite this, Auel *et al* have found that plenary debates in parliament receive routine coverage by broadsheet media (2018, 13). This means that plenary debates are the most likely arena for citizens to find out about the stance of the opposition towards the EU, its policies and procedures.

Plenary debates are also limited by a number of important restrictions. In Germany, speech time is allocated depending on the size of the party group (Deutscher Bundestag 2020w). Additionally, not every MP is free to participate in the debate, but often only the spokesperson of a party on a certain issue. However, given that plenary debates are the most public (and publicised) sphere in which national parliaments can discuss EU politics, the benefits of focussing on plenary debates outweigh the drawbacks.

This thesis focuses on two parliaments: the German *Bundestag* and the Dutch *Tweede Kamer*. According to Tarrow (2010) studying two cases allows for an in-depth discussion while also having the added value of comparison. Both the Netherlands and Germany are consensus democracies rather than majoritarian systems. This means that opposition and government parties have the same tools available to make policy proposals and scrutinise the government (Louwertje & Otjes 2018, 5-6). In particular in the Netherlands, as Andeweg *et al* (2008) attest, expertise counts as much as political affiliation (101). As I am interested in the impact of Eurosceptic parties on the plenary discussion, the Netherlands and Germany are also interesting examples. The Netherlands has had strong Eurosceptic parties in parliament since the 2000s –

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both on the right and left side of the political spectrum – whereas for Germany 2017 was the first time that an openly Eurosceptic party (the AfD) entered the parliament since the signing of the Maastricht Treaty (Otjes & Voerman 2016, 188; Baloge 2021, 552). This opens up the question as to what extent the ‘normalisation’ of Eurosceptic parties impacts the debate on European issues in the plenary.

Given the limited time and resources at hand, this thesis will focus on the financial Covid-19 recovery measures proposed by the EU, in particular the recovery fund, an important issue for voters in both countries. In the Summer 2020 Eurobarometer, Dutch citizens identified the economic situation, the condition of member states’ public finances and health as three of the four most important issues facing the EU (European Commission 2020b, 2).⁷ German citizens identified the economic situation and the conditions of member states’ public finances as the two most important issues (European Commission 2020a, 2). In their paper, Kuhn *et al* show that ‘Eurobonds’ – one of the potential ways to finance the recovery fund – was very salient in both Germany and the Netherlands (2021, 11). The financial Covid-19 recovery measures proposed by the EU, in particular the recovery fund and especially discussions of how to finance it, also received a lot of media coverage. De Wilde argues that through the ‘mediatization’ of democracy, also national parliamentarians have become more sensitive to mass media informing their actions (2011, 677). Auel and Raunio point out that MPs are more likely to engage in EU affairs, if these are considered salient by voters (2014, 6). The recovery fund and other financial support measures are important issues and one can thus expect high engagements from parliamentarians. Germany and the Netherlands are also interesting examples because of the roles they played in making the recovery fund happen. While Germany, together with France, was one of the initiators of the recovery fund, the Netherlands, as the leader of the ‘frugal four’ has been blamed for slowing and watering down the recovery measures (Erlanger 2020, Reuters 2020). The recovery fund is first of all about economic recovery, but also touches upon wider issues about how we imagine recovery to take place.

Focusing on a specific European policy allows one to clearly distinguish between opposition towards the policy, procedural opposition and opposition to the polity as well as between opposition as critique and opposition as alternative.

⁷ The third issue was climate change and the environment.

3.2 Data

As I am only looking at a specific policy I have used the search function of the parliamentary databases of both countries to find the necessary documents. For the Netherlands, the search term used was *herstelfonds*⁸ and the time period was limited from 2020 to 2022, which has resulted in stenographic notes of 54 plenary sessions from the 22nd April 2020 to the 14th December 2021. Only those plenary sessions were included in which a debate within the parliament took place. Those with only motions or votes on motions were excluded, which resulted in a total 35 debates. This is because German parliamentary debates do not function in a similar way. Additionally, the motions were often just a repetition of earlier positions. Rather than coding the whole debate, only the statements about the recovery fund were coded. This left me with a total of 718 statements about the recovery fund (35605 words).

For Germany, I searched for the words *Wiederaufbaufonds*⁹, *Next Generation EU*, *Recovery Fund* und *Aufbaufonds*¹⁰. The search time was widened because different terms for the recovery fund were used over time. This resulted in a total of 32 plenary sessions in the same time range. All plenary debates where the recovery fund is only mentioned by representatives of government, were excluded, which left 30 in total. Statements given by parliamentarians after a vote were also excluded because there is no equivalent in the Dutch parliament. Furthermore, these statements were made after the vote on the recovery plan on March 25, 2021, and only included statements by parliamentarians who voted against their party line. Using those statements would have skewed the results to parties with more internal disagreement on the policy. This resulted in a total of 337 statements about the recovery fund (23500 words).

It must be noted that because the German parliament understands itself as a ‘working parliament’¹¹, the number of plenary speeches is considerably lower than in the Dutch parliament. This is only partly offset by the longer speeches of parliamentarians. In the Dutch parliament, because of the large number of parties, speech time is much lower (Rauh & de Wilde 2018, 201). Additionally, the debate culture in the Netherlands is marked by a greater amount of interruptions – mostly in the form of questions – than the German one, leading to a larger overall number of statements.

⁸ Translated into English as Recovery fund

⁹ Translated into English as Recovery fund/ Reconstruction fund

¹⁰ Translated into English as Recovery fund/ Reconstruction fund

¹¹ A ‘working’ parliament as opposed to a ‘talking’ or ‘debating’ parliament focuses on ‘parliamentary work’ (i.e. legislative work) rather than ‘parliamentary debates’ (i.e. representation of voters, communicating politics to voters) (Lord 2018, 35).

3.3 Coding

The coding-scheme from Karlsson and Persson is applied to classify the types of statements made in the plenary sessions into four different categories: (1) Support, (2) Critique, (3) Alternatives, and (4) Other. This final category contains all neutral statements made by MPs, such as questions or requests for clarifications directed at the government representative (2018, 895). If a speech or intervention by an MP consisted of several types of statements then these were coded differently. These statements were then also coded depending on whether they were about the political system, its institutional and constitutional set-up (*polity*), about the recovery fund specifically (*policy*) or about the conduct of politics (*procedure*). The latter can vary from asking the government for more parliamentary involvement to criticism of the behaviour of government or EU officials.

I also decided to introduce a second level to my analysis, namely the grounds upon which the recovery fund is opposed. These can be (1) Totality, (2) Financial matters, (3) Conditions, (4) Values, (5) Content, (6) Implementation, including longevity, and (7) other. Totality is concerned with the recovery fund as such. Financial matters relate to the financing of the fund as well as the nature of the fund (e.g., loans vs subsidies). Conditions are about the conditions attached to receiving money from the recovery fund. These are often attached to Values, which should be respected or promoted through the fund. Content are statements about what the money from the recovery fund should be spent on. Implementation deals with execution of the fund, with a special focus on whether this fund should be temporary or made more permanent.

Statements will be classified both as coming from individual parties and whether that party is in opposition or government. However, as I am concerned with oppositional behaviour towards the EU, government and opposition parties can both engage in oppositional behaviour (proposing critiques and alternatives). Statements from non-attached MPs were not coded. In addition, the object of opposition will be coded: (1) Government, (2) European Union (EU), (3) Government and EU and (4) Other, which contains statements directed at other parties and MPs. These parties and MPs can be both (from) governing and opposition parties. The statements can also be directed at other member states' governments.

3.4 Measuring credibility

Given the findings in the literature and the fact that the analysis here is focused on looking at policy proposals rather than their execution, credibility is explored in four different aspects of

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those proposals: (1) Type of opposition, (2) Object of opposition, (3) Internal credibility and (4) Coherence. The first is concerned with the question of passive, active, constructive and critical opposition and looks in particular at the relation between critique and alternatives presented as well as the number of statements. Another important aspect of credibility is whether oppositional behaviour is directed at the EU rather than a situation where opposition and/or government parties use the plenary to express criticism or support of the government (Karlsson and Persson 2018, 895). The policy alternatives presented will also be specifically evaluated as to whether they are internally credible and coherent. Internal credibility will be evaluated through comparing how policy alternatives match with the most recent election manifestos. Coherence is based on whether the policy alternatives are coherent with one another over time. A fifth important category; attainability¹² has not been included, as this would be difficult to measure. I will also assess whether the positions taken by the national parties match those of their respective political groups in the European Parliament. While this is not included in my definition of credibility, a comparison of the positions of individual national parties with their respective political groups points to some preliminary insights about how ‘European’ the debate over the recovery plan was. It also helps to situate the Dutch and German parties in a broader European context.

From the methodology and the literature, there are three different ways for structuring the analytical chapters. As this thesis looks at whether parties are able to offer credible policy alternatives to EU policies, one can look at the parties either individual or based on which Eurosceptic typology they belong to or whether they are in government/opposition. Secondly, the different types of statements (alternative, critique and support) could be used. As this thesis is particularly concerned with the question of credibility, I have chosen to focus on the four different categories of credibility presented above.

The first analytical chapter will deal the question of whether German parties are able to offer credible policy alternatives to the recovery fund, followed by the second chapter about the Dutch parliament. In the concluding chapter, results from both countries will be brought together in a comparison.

¹² Attainability means that parties should have the resources and ability to achieve their policy goals.

Chapter Four: Debating the EU recovery plan in the German plenary – Are German parties able to offer credible alternatives?

Before 2017 – when the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) entered the German parliament – some European issues have been met with very weak Eurosceptic ideas within the Christlich Demokratische Union (CDU) and in particular its Bavarian sister party, the Christlich-Soziale Union (CSU), as well as the Freie Demokratische Partei (FDP) (Weldon & Schmitt 2014, 65). In the period since 2005 it was especially the CSU that engaged in a two-pronged strategy, remaining officially true to its pro-European roots, but increasingly voicing Eurosceptic statements to its supporters (Taggart & Szczerbiak 2012, 24-25). This was labelled Euro-populist in the German discourse (Taggart & Szczerbiak 2012, 24-25). However, the advent of the AfD and its entry into the German national parliament has created insecurities within the CDU/CSU and the FDP about how Eurosceptic ideas should be disseminated (Baloge 2021, 553).

On the left side of the political spectrum, Die Linke, also harbours some weak Eurosceptic ideas, in particular regarding the neoliberal direction the party sees the EU taking (Baloge 2021, 554). Yet even Die Linke is calling for further integration (Miklin 2014, 1203). Before the rise of the AfD no party in the German parliament challenged the founding values of the European Union or called for a withdrawal from the EU (Baloge 2021, 554).

This chapter will analyse how the parties perform on the four different aspects of credibility before considering whether German parties are able to offer credible policy alternatives. In a fifth section, I will also briefly assess whether the positions taken by the parties in the national parliament reflect those taken by their political groups in the European parliament. Special attention will be paid to the role of the AfD as the only hard Eurosceptic party in parliament.

4.1 Type of opposition

This section will evaluate whether parties engage in active, passive, constructive or scrutinising opposition behaviour. As discussed in the literature review, for the sake of introducing choice, engaging in constructive or active opposition is crucial.

Of the 336 statements, 167 were made by the CDU/CSU, 68 by Die Grünen and 65 by the AfD. They are followed by the Social Democratic Party (SPD) (43 statements) and the FDP (32 statements). Die Linke scores the lowest with 22 statements. Looking at the word count per party, a similar result can be observed (see Table 1). Die Linke thus scores the lowest both in terms of word count and statements made.

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Party (by size)	Number of statements	Overall word count
CDU/CSU (245 seats)	106	4388
SPD (152 seats)	43	2010
AfD (87 seats)	65	4071
FDP (80 seats)	32	1995
Die Linke (69 seats)	22	591
Die Grünen (67 seats)	68	2954

Table 1: Number of statements and word count per party (DE).

Note: Total number of statements: 336

Source: Plenary debates *Bundestag*, April 2020 - Dec 2021.

Although the CDU/CSU contributes the most in terms of statements and word count, it is important to mention that in the German plenary speaking time is allocated based on the size of the party (Deutscher Bundestag 2020w, 4; see Table 5 in Annex). As the largest party, the CDU/CSU has on average triple the speaking time of the opposition parties like the AfD, the FDP, Die Linke and Die Grünen. As the smallest opposition party, Die Grünen are allocated 0-7 minutes less speaking time (depending on the length of the debate) compared to the largest opposition party, the AfD. Taking this into account, Die Grünen and the AfD are the most active in the debate around the recovery fund. My data thus indicates, that the recovery fund is discussed on the pro-EU vs anti-EU axis rather than on the left-right axis. This matches divisions along the ‘GAL-TAN dimension’ where green/alternative/libertarian parties argue for more European integration, and traditional/authoritarian/nationalist parties argue against further integration (Hooghe and Marks 2008, 16). Given that (according to the literature), opposition parties will drive the debate on European issues in the plenary, it is interesting that neither Die Linke nor the FDP engage very much in the discussion.

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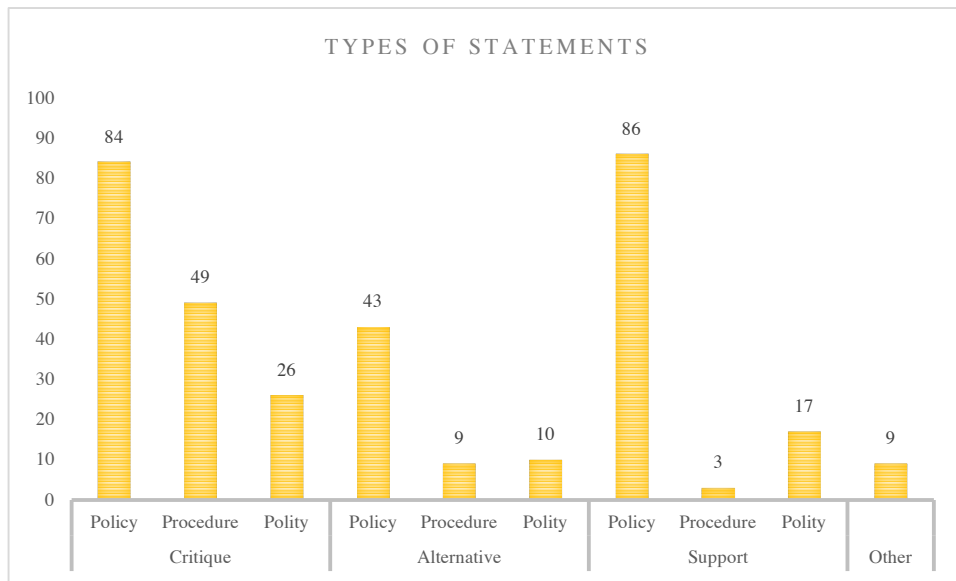


Figure 1: Number of statements per type of statement (DE).

Note: Total number of statements: 336.

Source: Plenary debates *Bundestag*, April 2020 - Dec 2021.

Nearly half of the total number of statements is critique (47.3%), followed by support (31.6%) and alternative (18.5%). Other types of statements are rare, which can be explained by the fact that within the *Bundestag* there are few opportunities to ask questions during the debate either towards the speaking MP or a member of government. This data suggests that it remains easier for parties to critique or express support rather than suggest alternatives. Regarding the polity critiques, it is, however, important to mention that 25 of these were made by the AfD, directed mostly at the EU (13 statements) and the government (8 statements).

Among the different parties, the types of statements are more mixed. While almost two-thirds of statements by the SPD are support (65.1%), for the other parties this is only 38.7% (CDU/CSU), 33.8% (Die Grünen), 27.2% (Die Linke) and 25% (FDP). The AfD makes no statement of support. Looking at the number of alternatives presented, here it is Die Grünen that take the lead with 27.9%, followed by the Die Linke with 22.7% and CDU/CSU with 21.7%. The AfD and FDP are most critical, with 93.9% and 59.4%.¹³

Die Grünen and the CDU/CSU make most use of all the tools available to parties in parliament by engaging both in scrutinising behaviour and actively trying to impact the policies. Die Linke also engages both in scrutinising and policy-making behaviour, but is the least active party in the debate around the recovery fund. Unwillingness to engage in European debates could point

¹³ For all types of statement per party see Table 6 in Annex.

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to a mismatch between the party's position and that of its voters, but also that the issue is not significant enough for voters of Die Linke (Miklin 2014, 1201). Given the low rate of participation, Die Linke can best be situated as a passive opposition party. The SPD, which as the second largest party is also allocated the second-to-largest amount of speaking time, also scores relatively low. The SPD was at the time of the debates (April 2020 to June 2021) also the junior partner in government, which could explain its unwillingness to engage in scrutinising behaviour, in particular as the SPD-politician and then Chancellor Candidate Olaf Scholz as Finance Minister is responsible for the policy. This matches Auel and Raunio's finding that government MPs want to protect their cabinet members and their cabinet's reputation (2014, 7). Governing parties may want to monitor the government behind closed doors without public criticism that might damage the reputation of the cabinet (Auel & Raunio 2014, 7). A similar result was found by Baloge when investigating statements on Brexit in the German parliament (2021, 556). As the SPD also does not actively engage in suggesting policy alternatives, it can be considered a passive opposition party.

Out of the six parties in parliament, only Die Grünen and the CDU/CSU can be considered active parties, which are trying to make political choices and political alternatives visible. In their behaviour, they do not only seek to criticise the policy at hand but actually have an impact on what the policy could look like in the end. This is particularly noteworthy in the case of Die Grünen who as an opposition party have to fight much harder to find other parties agreeing with their policy alternatives. While the other parties also propose alternatives, they do so to a much lesser extent and/or in much smaller numbers. These parties do not engage with the recovery fund enough to credibly fulfil their role of presenting political choices and political alternatives.

4.2 Object of opposition

Closely linked to the type of opposition is the object of opposition. Looking at the object of oppositional behaviour (expressing policy critique and voicing alternatives) about the recovery fund specifically, with the exception of the AfD and Die Linke, the majority of policy alternatives are directed at the EU and the EU/government level rather than the national level.¹⁴ This shows that national parties are actively engaged with the European level when considering alternatives to a European policy. Although most of the critique by the AfD is directed at the

¹⁴ For a full overview of object of opposition per type of statement per party see Table 7 in Annex.

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EU or the EU/government, it directs its alternatives only at the national level, suggesting that it does not attempt to make actual changes to the recovery fund but uses the plenary to express its overall criticism of the EU as a polity. This further underlines that the AfD is a critical opposition party, signalling to the voters that the party cares about their concerns and represents them in parliament against ‘unpopular’ policies supported by those in power (Louwertje & Otjes 2018, 3). This understanding of opposition is particularly linked to the populist character of the party (Louwertje & Otjes 2018, 4) but ultimately makes the policy alternatives – and opposition behaviour – less credible as the goal of the party is not to have an impact on the policies but rather to challenge those in power.

FDP and AfD direct most policy critique at the EU level, whereas the SPD, CDU/CSU and Die Linke direct most policy critique at Others¹⁵ and Die Grünen at the national government. At the level of policy support, most policy support is expressed at the EU and the EU/government level by all parties except the AfD (which does not express policy support), yet the CDU/CSU and the SPD and to a lesser extent Die Grünen and Die Linke also express policy support for the national government. Looking at questions of procedure, the plenary becomes more of a platform to criticise the government, since much of the procedural critique (48.8%) is directed at the government rather than at the EU. The plenary debates on the recovery fund in Germany are thus used both to show support and critique of the national government as well as the European level.

Only by actively engaging with the EU-level are parties able to make the claim that they are actually concerned with trying to present credible alternatives to the recovery fund rather than a situation where opposition and/or government parties use the plenary to express criticism of or support for the government (Karlsson & Persson 2018, 895). This is achieved by the CDU/CSU, the SPD, Die Grünen and the FDP. Die Linke and the AfD propose most alternatives at the governmental level, suggesting that these are less concerned with impacting the policy as such and more expressing concerns and criticising those in power.

In the last two sections a closer look will be taken at the policy alternatives¹⁶ proposed by the parties.

¹⁵ These can be other parties/ MPs from other parties but also member state governments.

¹⁶ For an overview of all the policy alternatives proposed by the parties including the nature of argument used, see Table 8 in Annex.

4.3 Internal credibility

All parties were able to propose alternatives that matched the election manifestos. Most of the policy alternatives (35.9%) discussed were related to financial matters regarding the fund, followed by totality (18.1%) and conditions (12.8%). Especially when it comes to the financing of the recovery fund, a polarisation along a left-right axis is discernible. On the one hand, the CDU/CSU and FDP are both arguing for strict conditionality (Deutscher Bundestag 2020g, 31; Deutscher Bundestag 2020j, 172), for loans as well as subsidies, budget discipline (Deutscher Bundestag 2020j, 172; Deutscher Bundestag 2021d, 65) and a quick return to the Stability and Growth Pact. This matches earlier findings by Miklin of the *Bundestag* and the Austrian parliament where (centre-)rights parties have argued in favour of financial stability (2014, 1203). On the other hand, the SPD, Die Grünen and Die Linke oppose this conditionality. The left-wing parties are all advocates for making the recovery fund more permanent and want the EU to have its own taxes and funds.

Grzymala-Busse has argued that the Christian Democrats and Social Democrats have failed to represent their constituencies, and propose distinct policy solutions to EU policies (2019, 39-40). Yet I would disagree with Grzymala-Busse's statement that they have failed to formulate distinct policy alternatives. Looking in particular at the financing of the recovery fund, their different ideas about Europe and the future of Europe become clear: the CDU/CSU does not want the EU to borrow funds, it does not want the recovery fund to become permanent and it does not want a 'debt and transfer union'. The SPD on the other hand wants the recovery fund to be the start of more integration of financial policies, and wants for the EU to have its own funds and taxes. During the debate, they have also on occasion criticised one another for their respective ideas.

The alternatives proposed by Die Linke are concerned with the conditions, financial matters and the contents. Especially regarding the financing, Die Linke felt that not enough was done to ensure that big companies and the super-rich pay for the European recovery, leading it to demand a European wide wealth tax (Deutscher Bundestag 2020g, 26). Die Linke also argues for the need for more investments in the social sector (Deutscher Bundestag 2021d, 63). In their party programme, Die Linke criticises the recovery fund for being too small to address the consequences of the pandemic, particularly because social investments and health expenditures have been cut in the final negotiation on the fund (2021, 148). Given that the two key demands of Die Linke regarding the financing and content were not fulfilled, the party decided to abstain in the vote on the recovery fund. Miklin (2014) argues that differences between the left and

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right are often pushed into the shadow by the old divide between Eurosceptic (often right-wing populist) parties rejecting basically everything coming from the EU and instead arguing in favour of (at least) partial disintegration, on the one hand, and on the other hand, large centrist super-majorities, that are jointly defending EU policies and EU integration against these attacks (1200). This can also be witnessed in the German parliament as Die Linke faced criticism by the SPD, Die Grünen and the FDP for not joining in on the super-majority against the AfD (Deutscher Bundestag 2021d, 63, 67).

Next to Die Linke, Die Grünen and the CDU/CSU are the only parties that have also engaged with policy alternatives regarding the content of the recovery fund. The CDU/CSU's main suggestions here are digitalisation (3 statements), industry, research and innovation (2 statements), the environment (2 statements), migration (1 statements), defence (1 statement) and transport (1 statement). These are also all topics that can be found back in the party programme of the party: the CDU/CSU is calling for a digital and data union (2021, 28), more innovation (28-29), a strengthening of European research (2021, 29), a modern European industry (2021, 24) and supports the Green New Deal (2021, 20-21). Yet looking in more detail at some of the policies proposed, and especially in comparison to other parties, this also highlights a dilemma for the voter.

“We need a recovery fund, to connect the recovery to the Green Deal, to invest in sustainable infrastructure, digitalisation and modern industrial value creation.”

(CDU/CSU, Deutscher Bundestag 2020d, 72)

“The fight against climate change must have top priority (...) The Green New Deal should not remain a nice catchword (...) but must be filled with life and sufficiently financed. More climate protection also includes an ecological traffic turn towards sustainable mobility (...) and smart investments in digitalization.

(Die Grünen, Deutscher Bundestag 2020j, 166)

It becomes clear to the voter that the environment and digitalization are priorities of both parties, but one can question to what extent the policy alternatives are distinct enough from each other. Here, one can argue that the Greens will be awarded more credibility, because they have clearer ideas about what climate protection entails and are advocating for set targets for climate protection (Deutscher Bundestag 2020i, 53; Deutscher Bundestag 2020j, 166; Deutscher

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Bundestag 2021b, 96). Additionally, Die Grünen are following Infratest dimap¹⁷ considered the most competent by voters when it comes to environmental and climate protection (Tagesschau 2021)¹⁸.

The AfD is the only party that has voiced criticism of the German contribution to the recovery fund, and its alternatives argue that the money would be better spent on national problems, such as infrastructure, digitalization and pensions (Deutscher Bundestag 2020e, 75). Here the line between policy critique and policy alternative is quite thin. As the party is opposed to any financial transfers to the EU, it also does not engage credibly with the recovery fund as a policy. In the party programme, the AfD stresses in particular the illegality of the recovery fund (2021, 29, 51), which, according to the AfD, has put in place a ‘transfer union’¹⁹. This also highlights that for the AfD criticism of the recovery fund is linked to criticism of the EU as a whole. Similar fears for a ‘transfer union’ are also evoked by the CDU/CSU and the FDP. Nevertheless, their opposition to financial transfers did not lead to the expression of polity critique against the EU in the mainstream centre-right parties (as argued by de Wilde & Trenz 2012, 540). This argument was only used by the AfD and refuted by politicians from the centre-right like the CDU/CSU, who repeatedly argued that the EU is what makes Germany strong and economically successful (Deutscher Bundestag 2020d, 72; Deutscher Bundestag 2020g, 31).

However, within the CDU/CSU and the FDP a certain uneasiness about the recovery fund as a whole can be sensed. The party programme of the CDU/CSU points to this more ambivalent picture. While the recovery fund is described as “appropriate” and “solidary” (2021, 21), the EU’s borrowing on the market is “limited and unique” – and should never be repeated (2021, 22). This undermines the CDU’s current stance on the recovery fund as it does not become evident why the borrowing of the market is needed in the case of the Covid-19 pandemic but not for other future crises. In the party programme of the FDP, one can find demands to quickly return to the Stability and Growth Pact after the pandemic and to increase sanctions for those countries that break the rules of the Pact (2021, 51). The FDP is also opposed to EU taxes and argues against common debts (2021, 51). In spite of this, the FDP is the only party that does not mention the recovery fund in its election manifesto, including the alternatives proposed to

¹⁷ Infratest dimap is a German institute that offers political research, in particular on elections.

¹⁸ Die Grünen are considered competent by 48 % of the population compared with the 12% who consider the CDU/CSU competent in environmental and climate questions.

¹⁹ A transfer union is an institutionalised transfer of resources from richer countries to poorer countries.

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it. This highlights that the recovery fund is a sensitive topic for the FDP, something that will be explored in the following section on coherence.

4.4 Coherence

Ensuring that policy alternatives are coherent with one another over time and will not be changed opportunistically is important for voters to believe that parties will follow through with their policies. The SPD, Die Grünen and Die Linke managed to present coherent alternatives over time. Especially when it comes to climate protection, Die Grünen are able to credibly argue for their climate protection policy by articulating binding targets and criticising in particular the CDU/CSU for their lack of climate policies. Additionally, one of the reasons for Die Linke not to vote in favour of the recovery fund, is the fear of social cuts and lack of investment in the health sector. The credibility of Die Linke is underlined by their abstention. The SPD on the other hand also manages to ensure coherence over time by focussing on how the recovery fund should be financed.

Especially regarding the financing of the recovery fund through the EU's borrowing on the capital market, the CDU/CSU remains divided, which led to three of their MPs to vote against it. But the FDP also struggled to remain coherent according to their own party programme. In particular, the voting behaviour of the FDP undermines its coherence. This becomes evident in the statement by party leader Christian Lindner in the debate before the vote on the recovery funding: "Everything, that Mr. Scholz [Finance Minister] applauds about the recovery fund – common debt and common taxes – we want to change in the future, and that happens in the next years." Yet Mr. Lindner still voted in favour of the policy, unlike 14 FDP MPs, including the spokesman for budget issues, Otto Fricke, who voted against the party line. The need to receive a super-majority defending European integration once again becomes evident. On the day of the vote about EU recovery spending²⁰ Eckhardt Rehberg (CDU/CSU) criticised the relevant State Secretary of the SPD for making it harder for the FDP to agree with the recovery spending, "which has already not been easy for them" (Deutscher Bundestag 2021d, 61). One can, however, make the argument that in order for the FDP's policy alternatives to remain credible, it would have been better for the party to abstain or vote against the recovery spending in its current form.

²⁰ In German: *Eigenmittelbeschluss*

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Both the CDU/CSU and the FDP experience a dilemma between wanting to act in solidarity with other European member states and their own financial ideas about Europe (no common debt, no European taxes, no borrowing of the EU on the market, strict conditionality). Startin and Usherwood (2013) have identified four different types of Eurosceptic parties. In particular through the fourth type, the mainstream right-wing parties, Euroscepticism is becoming increasingly embedded in European state systems. These mainstream right-wing parties are increasingly adopting a ‘soft Eurosceptic’ stance on issues like the EU budget (Startin & Usherwood 2013, 7). These tendencies can also be found in the CDU/CSU and the FDP that have struggled the most with having an openly Eurosceptic party in parliament. Especially in their opposition to common taxes and their fear of a ‘transfer union’, soft Eurosceptic tendencies can be noticed. In the end, these Eurosceptic tendencies were, however, subjugated to the need to present a united front to the only ‘openly’ Eurosceptic party in parliament. These conflicting statements and internal divisions undermine the coherence and thus credibility of the positions presented by CDU/CSU and the FDP. The need for this super-majority means that it is not only the CDU/CSU as a government party that needs to make compromises which is impacted by this, but also the FDP as an opposition party. As the FDP had until that point mainly engaged in criticising the policy, it is most impacted by this loss of credibility, as its voting behaviour does not match its earlier position.

4.5 The national parties and their European political groups

This dilemma of the CDU/CSU and the FDP becomes even more evident when looking at the positions of the European political groups both parties are part of. The Group of the European People's Party, of which CDU/CSU is a member, is supportive of the EU recovery plan of €750 billion and called for a comprehensive solution on the balance between loans and grants (2020). The EPP also called for a “credible repayment plan” (2020), starting in 2028 at the latest. The group argued for the need for the EU to have its own resources, for example in the form of a EU-wide plastic tax (2020). Initially the EPP also supported a parliamentary resolution for a Covid-19 recovery plan of €2 trillion in May 2020. While the CDU/CSU also has demands for a repayment plan, the other demands, such as on the EU’s own resources, do not match. Furthermore, the CDU/CSU advocated for keeping the recovery fund small. Here a difference between the ‘national’ Christian Democratic voice and the ‘European’ Christian Democratic voice is discernible, pointing to a lack of coordination between the groups. Even starker is the difference between the FDP’s position and the position of its European political group, Renew Europe. Renew Europe was the political group which initiated the parliamentary resolution for

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a Covid-19 recovery plan of €2 trillion in May 2020 (2020b). This recovery plan was to be financed by recovery bonds or the EU's own resources, such as a tax on big tech giants or a pollution tax (2020a). The Renew Europe Group also called for most of the money to come in the form of grants, direct investments and equity (2020b). Additionally, they argued that a mechanism to safeguard the rule of law should be applied (2020a, 2020b). The demands by the Renew Europe Group stand in stark contrast to the position of the FDP, who has been very critical of the recovery plan and advocated to keep it small, with a focus on loans as well as grants. Additionally, the FDP is opposed to the EU having its own resources.

The SPD, Die Grünen and Die Linke, on the other hand, all made use of arguments similar to those of their respective European political groups. For the Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament (S&D) of which the SPD is a member of, it was especially important to include the social dimension next to the digital and green transition, as well as gender equality (2021a, 2021b). They called for a binding calendar for the adoption of the EU's own resources, which should finance the recovery fund (2020d). In particular, they wanted to charge big companies and actors of the financial markets through a financial transaction tax, a digital tax and a common tax on big corporations (2020c). Especially the demands to have large corporations and wealthy individuals finance the recovery fund match the alternatives proposed by the SPD. This points to at least some form of coordination between the national and European groups. However, the SPD was much less active on the issue of the recovery fund than the S&D. The Group of the Greens/European Free Alliance (The Greens/EFA), of which Die Grünen are a member, also supported the parliamentary resolution on the recovery fund, highlighting in particular the need to put the European Green Deal and climate protection at the heart of the recovery fund (2020a, 2020b). According to The Greens/EFA at least half of funding should be allocated to climate action projects (2020d). Additionally, they argued that a recovery fund must safeguard the rule of law. The group also called for the continuous increase of the EU's own resources, through the introduction of environmental, corporate and financial taxes, while it opposes any austerity conditions attached to the fund. Furthermore, The Greens/EFA called for grants rather than loans and criticised the proposal by the 'frugal four' (2020d). The group had also called for a stronger role for the European Parliament, but was ultimately supportive of the agreement, which it described as a "remarkable institutional achievement" (2021b). (2020c) However, the group has criticised the national plans submitted for their shortcomings when it comes to climate protection. (2021a) The position of The Greens/EFA thus closely matches the position and demands of Die Grünen.

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Like Die Linke, The Left in the European Parliament - GUE/NGL (The Left) criticised the recovery plan for suffering from a lack of ambition and argued that it is insufficient to address the social and ecological challenges the EU is facing (2020b, 2020c). It regretted that cuts have been made in the field of agriculture, research, climate and health (2020d). The group feared that the conditions attached to the plan will further weaken social rights, cause cuts and privatisations, and plunge more countries into debt (2020c, 2020d). They also called for the plan to be funded through increased taxation of large corporations and wealthy individuals and criticize that the lack of a timeline for the introduction of own resources of the EU (2020a, 2020c). These demands and criticisms are also used by Die Linke in Germany, leading them to ultimately abstain from the vote, suggesting that there is some form of coordination, especially as one of the responsible MEPs is a member of Die Linke.

The German website of the Identity and Democracy Group (ID) is run by MEPs from the AfD. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the positions represented by AfD MEPs closely resemble those of AfD MPs: calling the recovery plan illegal and characterising it as a way into a ‘transfer union’. (2021). Furthermore, they argued that the recovery plan would establish Germany as the “ATM of Europe” (2021).

4.6 Conclusion(s)

Out of all the parties in parliament, only Die Grünen are able to perform well in all four aspects of credibility: They engage in active opposition behaviour, by focussing on presenting alternatives next to scrutinising behaviour, and their alternatives are directed at the European level, showing that they actually engage with the issue on a European level. Their policy alternatives are internally credible, because they match the party programme and are coherent over time. This shows that presenting credible alternatives to EU policies is possible, but that the other parties for a variety of reasons and circumstances do not choose to do so. In the German case, the presence of a hard-Eurosceptic party significantly impacted the extent to which the parliament presented credible alternatives. Although the AfD’s alternatives may have been internally credible, in other aspects of credibility it becomes clear that the party does not mean to engage with the recovery fund because it opposes the EU as a political system. This also impacts the overall type of statements made within the parliament, as without the AfD the debate is likely to have focussed much more on the actual policy than on questions of polity. In particular, parties on the right side of the political spectrum felt the need to compromise on their own position to present a super-majority to the AfD, although this negatively impacted the

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coherence and thus credibility of their own position. Other reasons undermining the credibility of alternatives presented are a lack of alternatives overall, either because of potential constraints experienced by being in government, an unwillingness to engage in European issues, differing positions within individual parties and/or favouring scrutinising behaviour.

Comparing the positions and demands expressed by national parties in the national plenary and those of European political party groups on their websites points to a mixed picture. Between several national parties and European political groups, such as die Grünen and die Linke, similar arguments were used and a common position was discernible. However, for others, especially mainstream (centre-) right parties belonging to pro-European political groups, a break between the ‘European’ position and the ‘national’ position is noticeable, especially when it comes to the question of the EU having its own resources, for example through European taxes.

A missed opportunity was the refusal of the government parties to discuss the national Resilience and Recovery plan in the plenary. This was also criticised by Die Grünen and the FDP (Deutscher Bundestag 2021h, 46; Deutscher Bundestag 2021b, 96). Discussing the national plan would have allowed the voters to see where the money would be spent in their own country, rather than in Italy or Spain. This could have served to bring the EU ‘closer to its citizens’ (Barret 2018, 83) by making political choices and political alternatives more visible to the citizens (Auel *et al* 2018, 14). It would also have contributed to *normalising* EU politics by relating debates about EU affairs to national debates about the advantages and disadvantages of certain policies (Kröger & Bellamy 2016, 139). Additionally, it would have served to make the alternatives presented more credible because voters would have had a clearer idea of whether the alternatives presented would be attainable or not. This would have made it easier for voters to form an opinion about the recovery fund as a whole. My results do not point to a credibility advantage for government parties. Rather, the failure to discuss the national plans for the recovery fund in particular undermine the credibility of the governing parties as it suggests that they either had no plans for the recovery fund at home or do not want to discuss these publicly.

Overall, the example of Die Grünen shows that national parties can present credible alternatives to EU policies such as the recovery fund and also that the other parties – with the exception of the AfD – did so to a certain extent. However, it seems that the majority of parties feel like they

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either cannot or do not want to foreground the development of distinct, competing and credible policy alternatives. While a left-right politicisation was discernible, this was ultimately overshadowed by an anti-EU vs pro-EU division, with the need expressed by SPD, CDU/CSU, Die Grünen and the FDP to form a supermajority against the AfD (see also Miklin 2014, 1200).

The next chapter will analyse whether Dutch parties are able to present credible alternatives in the *Tweede Kamer*.

Chapter Five: Debating the EU recovery plan in the Dutch plenary – Are Dutch parties able to offer credible alternatives?

In the *Tweede Kamer* both the overall amount of statements as well as overall word count were much larger than in the Bundestag. While the debates in the German Bundestag range from a set time of 27 minutes to 210 minutes, the debates within the *Tweede Kamer* are often much longer and can take several hours. This is also because of the large number of parties in the Dutch parliament that receive equal speaking time. Within the Dutch parliament, there are also more interruptions and questions by other MPs, which contributes to a higher amount of statements overall.

Given that within the *Tweede Kamer* debates are always held before and after a European Council meeting, the debates also remained more consistent over the covered time period. While there were no more debates in the German parliament after the summer of 2021, plenary debates still took place in the last four months of 2021 in the Dutch parliament.

The core parties in the Netherlands, the market liberal VVD (Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie), Christian democratic CDA (Christen Democratisch Appél) and the social democratic PvdA (Partij voor de Arbeid), have traditionally been supportive of European integration. However, since the beginning of European integration several smaller parties on the fringes have been actively opposed to it, particularly the strict Protestant party SGP (Staatskundig Gereformeerde Partij) as well as the Dutch Communist Party. In the 1990s, the pro-European consensus was challenged by VVD-leader Frits Bolkestein. D66 (Democraten 66) became the most pro-European party in parliament. With the emergence of the left-wing, anti-capitalist Socialistische Partij (SP) and new right-wing populist parties such as the Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV) in the early 2000s, both left- and right-wing Eurosceptic parties became part of the parliament and increasingly influential. The growing influence of the PVV led to the creation and fall of the minority government Rutte I (with VVD and CDA), which imploded because of the PVV's refusal to support austerity measures to meet EU guidelines and avoid a budget crisis (Taggart & Szczerbiak 2012, 28). This shows – according to Taggart and Szczerbiak – the impact of Euroscepticism on governments, even when the Eurosceptic party is not formally a member of government (2012, 28). However, unlike suggested by Heinisch (2003) and others, the support of the minority government did not lead to a toning down of the PVV's radical agenda or presentation. I would argue with Mudde that the PVV has remained unchanged in their radicalness (2012, 25). After the implosion, the PVV first started advocating for a 'Nexit', a Dutch exit from the EU (Otjes & Voerman 2016, 186-187).

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This chapter will analyse how the Dutch parties perform on the four different aspects of credibility before evaluating whether Dutch parties are able to offer credible policy alternatives.

5.1 Type of opposition

The party with the highest number of statements about the recovery fund is the Eurosceptic Party for Freedom. This strengthens Karlsson's and Persson's (2018) hypothesis that opposition is expressed mostly by openly Eurosceptic parties (898). The PVV is followed closely by the pro-European liberal D66. They are followed by the VVD, the CDA and the SP. Of the parties continuously represented in parliament during the covered time period²¹, the Partij voor de Dieren (PvdD), ChristenUnie and the right-wing populist Forum voor Democratie (FvD) score the lowest. Interesting is also the case of the newcomer party Volt, which first got elected in the March 2021 general elections but with 28 statements scores similar or even higher than several parties which have been in parliament before the last election. Two other newcomers – the BoerBurgerBeweging and Bij1 have made no statements about the recovery fund. Looking at the word count, the PVV is the unambiguous leader with 8116 words, followed by D66 with 5065, CDA with 3225 and VVD with 2777 words. The PvdD (814) and the two newcomers JA21 (592) and Volt (859), have the lowest word count, despite the latter's high number of statements.

Party (by average size)	Number of statements	Overall word count
VVD (33 seats*, 34 seats†)	69	2777
D66 (19 seats, 24 seats)	101	5065
PVV (20 seats, 17 seats)	123	8116
CDA (19 seats, 15 seats)	69	3225
SP (14 seats, 9 seats)	58	2558
GroenLinks (14 seats, 9 seats)	39	2523
PvdA (9 seats, 9 seats)	41	1759
PvdD (5 seats, 6 seats)	13	814
ChristenUnie (5 seats, 5 seats)	29	1332
FvD (2 seats, 8 seats)	32	1908

²¹ This excludes 50plus, which after the general elections in March 2021 was no longer represented in the Dutch parliament, and Volt and JA21, which first received representation after the general elections in March 2021.

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SGP (3 seats, 3 seats)	36	1716
DENK (3 seats, 3 seats)	38	2425
50PLUS (4 seats, 0 seats)	24	1166
Volt (0 seats, 3 seats)	28	859
JA21 (0 seats, 3 seats)	19	592

Table 2: Number of statements and word count per party (NL).

Note: *seats from April 20 to March 21, † seats from March 21 to Dec 21. Total number of statements: 718.

Source: Plenary debates *Tweede Kamer*, April 2020 - Dec 2021.

It is noticeable that even though all parties receive the same amount of speaking time, the larger parties take the lead in the debate around the recovery fund. A likely explanation is that given the limited time and resources of smaller parties, they have decided to focus on other issues. However, Volt and the minority-rights party DENK (38 statements, 2425 words) show that small parties can also set different priorities.

The data point to a pattern similar to the German *Bundestag*, where the recovery fund was discussed along pro-European vs anti-European lines. The PVV can be described as a typical TAN (Traditional/Authoritarian/Nationalist) party, whereas D66 matches the profile of a liberal, green party. However, the following parties occupy different positions on the Eurosceptic scale: SP can be considered a left-wing Eurosceptic party. The VVD and the Christian Democrats are mainstream right-wing parties with some soft Eurosceptic stances on issues like the EU budget. Unlike in Germany, three of the four government parties (VVD, CDA and D66) are some of the most active in the debate around the recovery fund.

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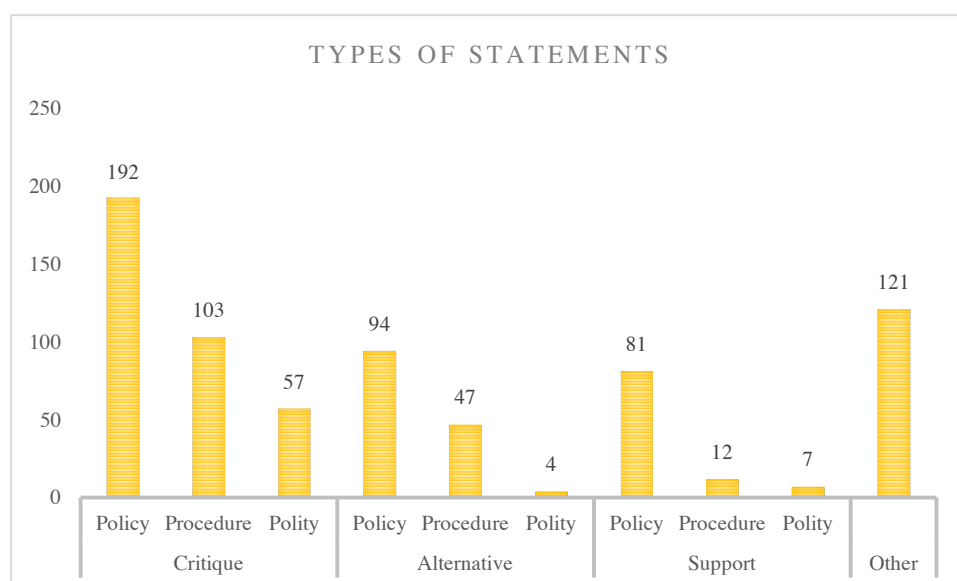


Figure 2: Number of statement per type of statements (NL).

Note: Total number of statements: 718.

Source: Plenary debates *Tweede Kamer*, April 2020 - Dec 2021.

Around half of the total number of statements can be classified as critique (49%), followed by alternatives (20.2%) and support (13.9%). Other types of statements are prominent, which is because debates in the *Tweede Kamer* are organised as ‘question moments’ towards a member of government and frequent interruptions and questions to the speaking MP are common. As in Germany, this data suggests that it remains easier for parties to engage in critique rather than propose alternatives. However, overall support is much lower than in the German plenary. Looking at the type of statements, in all fields (polity, procedure and policy) critique dominates the two other types of statement. Unlike in Germany, in the Netherlands more policy alternatives (94) were proposed than support expressed (83) – but none of them came close to the number of policy critiques (192). This difference between Germany and the Netherlands was even stronger when looking at statements about the political system as such. Although the hard-Eurosceptic radical right-wing parties expressed 17 out of the 34 polity critiques directed only at the EU,²² the more mainstream parties on both the left and right side of the political spectrum also expressed critique of the EU, with the exception of D66, GroenLinks and PvdA.²³ Only D66 and the PvdA expressed explicit support of the European Union.²⁴

²² The other polity critiques were directed at the government (11), the EU/government (6) and at others (12).

²³ D66 also expressed a form of polity critique but it was directed at other member state governments in the EU, particularly Poland and Hungary.

²⁴ For all types of statement per party see Table 9 in Annex.

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Out of the fifteen parties in parliament only two parties express more support (D66) or more alternatives (Volt) than critique. Most critical are the three radical-right wing parties, FvD, JA21 and the PVV. Out of those three parties only JA21 does not advocate for a Nexit. These are followed by the PvdD and the SP, which can be considered left-wing Eurosceptic parties in the sense that they oppose the neoliberal direction they feel the EU is taking (Startin & Usherwood 2013, 7). While Otjes and Voerman characterise the SP and the PvdD as two distinct ‘flavours’ of Euroscepticism – an anti-capitalist and a green Euro-critique (2016, 185) – I argue that both actually share many similarities. They both see the EU as an entity that makes decisions for big businesses rather than for the planet and the people living on that planet. Looking at the number of alternatives presented, it is Volt that take the lead with 35.7%, followed by the ChristenUnie with 29.2% and the two governing parties CDA (26.5%) and the VVD (26.1%). Volt was also the only party that offered more alternatives than critique about the recovery fund. Volt presents itself as a very constructive opposition, focussing on offering up policy alternatives rather than critiquing the government or the EU level (Louwerse and Otjes 2018, 3). Here it must be noted that while percentage-wise Volt and ChristenUnie take the lead, VDD and CDA contribute more alternatives as they participate more in the debate. These alternatives also differ in nature. While fifteen of the VVD’s eighteen alternatives are directed at the policy as such, most of the CDA’s alternatives are focussed on procedural issues rather than policies.

Out of all the parties, only the government parties VVD, CDA and D66 were relatively equally active in engaging both in scrutinising behaviour and suggesting policy alternatives. All opposition parties, with the exception of Volt, foregrounded the importance of scrutiny.

	Critique	Alternative	Support
VVD	31.9%	26.1%	20.3%
D66	24.8%	19.8%	39.6%
PVV	77.2%	21.4%	0.8%
CDA	29.4%	26.5%	13.2%
SP	63.8%	12.1%	8.6%
GL	43.6%	20.5%	12.8%
PvdA	48.8%	14.6%	14.6%
PvdD	69.2%	23.1%	0.0%
FvD	81.3%	6.25%	3.1%
ChristenUnie	31.0%	20.7%%	10.3%
SGP	52.8%	16.7%%	5.6 %
DENK	57.9%	15.8%	15.8%

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50PLUS†	41.67%	29.2%	16.7%
Volt*	21.4%	35.7%	10.7%
JA21*	79.0%	10.5%	5.3%

Table 3: Percentage of statements per party (NL).

Note: † in parliament until March 2021, * in parliament since March 2021. Total number of statements: 718.

Source: Plenary debates *Tweede Kamer*, April 2020 - Dec 2021.

The dominance of the government parties was also aided to some extent by the failure of the pro-European integration parties such as the PvdA and GroenLinks to contribute to the debate with policy alternatives. Together with D66, GroenLinks can be considered one of the most pro-European parties in the Dutch parliament (Otjes & Voerman 2016, 187). Although the PvdA – similarly to the VVD and CDA – has become more critical towards European integration since the 1990s (Otjes & Voerman, 187), it can also be situated as part of the pro-European left-wing opposition. The PvdA and GroenLinks were the only parties to vote in favour of Eurobonds (Kuhn 2021, 21).

In particular GroenLinks has been identified by Louwarse and Otjes as an active opposition party (2018, 11). However, looking at the debates on the recovery fund this image is not confirmed. Out of GroenLinks' 39 statements in total, 22 are concerned with procedural issues rather than the policy itself. These are largely critiques directed at the government's negotiation style during the recovery fund negotiations. The PvdA also directs many more statements to critiquing both the policies of the government (9) and how the government conducts policies (7). For example, with only three policy alternatives, the PvdA was able to offer fewer alternatives than for example the much smaller SGP, ChristenUnie, DENK and the pensioner's party 50PLUS. The example of the Dutch plans for the recovery fund highlights this: while the PvdA criticised the government twice for not yet handing in any plans (61/2021, pos 41; 90/2021, pos 1209), unlike other parties, it makes no suggestions as to *what* the money should be spent on.

The SGP and the ChristenUnie have been identified by Louwarse and Otjes (2018) as constructive opposition parties (10). However, the SGP is mostly critical of the recovery fund. Following Otjes and Voerman (2016), Euroscepticism in the Netherlands is characterised by four different 'flavours'. One of them is represented by the SGP and the ChristenUnie: the resistance of European supra-nationalism from a Protestant background (185). In particular the SGP has expressed the fear that a united Europe would undermine the Calvinist character of

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the Netherlands (186). This can explain why in the debate around the recovery fund, the SGP does foreground scrutinising behaviour.

Out of the seventeen parties in parliament, only VVD, CDA and D66 can be considered active parties to a certain extent, which do not only seek to criticise the policy at hand but actually have an impact on what the policy could look like in the end. However, these are also three of the largest parties in parliament which thus have to make less of a choice between scrutinising and policy-making behaviour. Additionally, as government parties they also have an interest in convincing the rest of the parliament of their policy choices. Volt is the only party that can be identified as a constructive opposition party. The example of Volt is particular noteworthy, because it is not only an opposition party, but also a newcomer. While the other parties also propose alternatives, they do so to a much lesser extent and/or in much smaller numbers.

A special role is played by the PVV. While a large majority of their statements are critique, with 26 proposed alternatives, the PVV actually has the largest number of alternatives overall. Although they are a hard-Euro-sceptic party, the PVV also tries to impact actual policy, unlike the AfD in Germany. Nevertheless, it still foregrounds its scrutinising behaviour.

5.2 Object of opposition

One important aspect of credibility is whether oppositional behaviour (alternatives and critique) is directed at the EU level rather than at the national government (Karlsson and Persson 2018, 895). Looking at the alternatives proposed, only VVD, CDA, GroenLinks, DENK and 50PLUS direct more policy alternatives at the European level.²⁵ One reason for this is that the national plans for the recovery fund were also discussed in the plenary. For example, out of the five policy alternatives proposed by Volt, four are about the content of the Dutch plan for the recovery fund. This also explains why a majority of them are directed at the government. However, it also underlines that in the Netherlands the plenary is understood as a forum in which the policies of the national government are challenged.

Looking at the critique, it is interesting to see that – with the exception of the PvdD – only the pro-European parties D66, PvdA and GroenLinks express more critique at the government itself

²⁵ For a full overview of object of opposition per type of statement per party see Table 10 in Annex.

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than at the EU and the EU/Government level. Much of this criticism is procedural criticism directed at the government's negotiation tactics during the recovery fund. Yet, the PVV and the SP also express only marginally less critique of the EU and EU/Government than of the national government. This further underlines their understanding of opposition as one of critique, aimed at challenging those in power both at the European level and at the national level. Overall, the high number of critique (including polity critique) against the European level shows that the Dutch parliament is much more critical of policies like the recovery fund in case these contribute to a further strengthening of European integration and give more power to European institutions. This is also shared by mainstream parties in government like the VVD and the CDA.

Only by actively engaging with the EU-level can parties claim that they are actually concerned with trying to present credible alternatives to the recovery fund rather than with using the plenary to express criticism of or support for the government (Karlsson and Persson 2018, 895). This is achieved by very few parties and suggests that the majority are less concerned with impacting the policy than with expressing concerns and criticising those in power.

The following two sections will look more closely at the actual policy alternatives²⁶ presented by the parties.

5.3 Internal credibility

This section will evaluate whether the policy alternatives proposed match the programme of the parties and thus whether they are internally credible.

With 15 proposed alternatives, the VVD is able to offer the second largest number of alternatives. Eight of these alternatives focus on the conditions attached to the recovery fund, with the VVD demanding 'hard and tight' conditions to enable reforms (Tweede Kamer 2020d, pos 224; Tweede Kamer 2020e, pos 749; Tweede Kamer 2021f, pos 1075). The VVD also argues for strict control, oversight of the recovery plans in other countries as well as a hard and automatic deadline (Tweede Kamer 2020d, pos. 224; Tweede Kamer 2020e (2020), pos 751). Similarly, the CDA highlights the need for reforms and the need to make sure that only countries hardest hit by the pandemic should receive support (Tweede Kamer 2020d, pos 180,

²⁶ For an overview of all the policy alternatives proposed by the parties including the nature of argument used, see Table 11 in Annex.

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181; Tweede Kamer 2020e, pos 721). However, with only seven alternatives, the CDA manages to present fewer policy alternatives than the VVD. These alternatives focus on conditions (2) and financial matters (1), as well as on the content (2) and values (2) of the recovery fund.

Party	Number of policy alternatives
VVD	15
D66	11
PVV	21
CDA	7
SP	4
GroenLinks	5
PvdA	3
PvdD	2
FvD	2
ChristenUnie	5
SGP	4
DENK	5
50PLUS†	4
Volt*	5
JA21*	1

Table 4: Number of policy alternatives per party.

Note: † in parliament until March 2021, * in parliament since March 2021. Total number of statements: 718

Source: Plenary debates *Tweede Kamer*, April 2020 - Dec 2021

In their election manifesto, the VVD also highlights that the recovery fund must be temporary and linked to conditions (2021, 53). Furthermore, every member state should be able to pull the emergency brake if another member state spends money from the recovery fund unwisely (2021, 52). There should be no European taxes (2021, 53). The VVD is also calling for a return to the Stability and Growth Pact (2021, 53) and would like to stop financing member states that step over the budget rules on a structural basis (2021, 53). While the CDA does not specifically mention the recovery fund in its party programme, the party does call for a return to the budget rules after the pandemic and a need economic reforms (2021, 91). The party also remains against the issue of Eurobonds and member states should be able to make an independent assessment about whether it will participate in new financial initiatives (2021, 91). On issues such as the EU budget and taxation, veto rights should prevail (2021, 91). As in Germany, the parties on the centre-right are aiming to establish themselves as parties of financial stability and

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budget discipline. Prime Minister Mark Rutte and Finance Minister Wopke Hoekstra are two influential politicians who also represent the call for stricter conditions on a European level, including both reforms and strict controls with limited subsidies. Through the informal alliance of the ‘frugal four’ (plus Finland), the Netherlands was able to make substantial changes to the initial proposal by the European Commission as well as to the Merkel and Macron Plan (Verdun 2021, 14).

The VVD also has a strong focus on the rule of law conditionality of the recovery fund. With four alternatives (Tweede Kamer 2020d, 232; Tweede Kamer 2020e, pos 1159; Tweede Kamer 2021f, pos 1082; Tweede Kamer 2021m, pos 797) on that issue, the VVD are consistently calling for a stricter rule of law mechanism, as well as the ability to veto measures like the Polish Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF)-plan for failing to comply with rule of law standards. In their party programme, the VVD also calls for the EU to be able to withhold subsidies from the MFF and the recovery fund if the rule of law is ignored (2021, 52). This priority is also shared by another coalition partner: the social liberal D66. The focus on the rule of law is clear in the ten alternatives proposed by party, of which five are concerned with a stricter rule of law mechanism (Tweede Kamer 2020e, pos 822; Tweede Kamer 2020o, pos 2828; Tweede Kamer 2021e, pos 1246; Tweede Kamer 2021f, pos 1286; Tweede Kamer 2021m, 762-763). Furthermore, D66 is advocating for a more diversified EU budget in the form of EU taxes, a fast implementation of the fund and connection between the fund, the European Green Deal and research (Tweede Kamer 2020a, pos 100, 412; Tweede Kamer 2020d, pos 20, 439; Tweede Kamer 2020o, pos 2848). Given the positive reception of the recovery fund by D66, it is unusual that it is not explicitly mentioned in the election manifesto. What is mentioned, however, is that spending from joint funds should be linked to common goals, member states’ reform priorities and European values (2021, 184). D66 also reiterated their commitment to safeguarding the rule of law, democracy and human rights by stating that member states who fail to respect them should receive less money and that all member states should undergo a yearly investigation into whether they conform to European values (2021, 180).

VVD and CDA on the one hand and D66 on the other hand represent two differing opinions regarding the future of European integration, a difference which can also be found in Germany. While VVD and CDA argue for strict conditions, loans as well as subsidies, budget discipline, and a quick return to the Stability and Growth Pact, D66 advocates for a larger contribution and for the EU to have its own taxes. This shows that differing positions on the recovery fund are

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possible without opposition to the EU. However, these positions are expressed by the old and new government parties rather than the opposition parties, which does not necessarily result in more electoral choices for the voters. Interestingly enough, VVD and D66 take different positions, despite belonging to the same political group in the European Parliament.

While D66, followed by VVD and GroenLinks have proposed the most alternatives on the rule of law, a total of 20 out of all the 93 alternatives (21.5 %) by eight different parties are concerned with it. The rule of law is a shared priority for almost all parties except JA21, the PVV and FvD. This does not necessarily impact the internal credibility of the parties, but it does make it harder to link the rule of law to a certain party profile. While GroenLinks also devote a paragraph to the importance of safe-guarding the rule of law in their party programme (2021, 94), it is not readily clear why GroenLinks should be better at tackling the rule of law crisis than D66, the CDA or even the SP – all parties that have also proposed alternatives to the current rule of law mechanism. Only one of GroenLinks' alternatives deals with the environment and a reform of the Common Agricultural Policy. Paparo *et al* (2017) have found that GroenLinks is considered the most credible party when it comes to fighting pollution and climate change (31). In their election manifesto, GroenLinks stress the importance of social and green conditions for the recovery programmes (2021, 93). It thus seems like a missed opportunity that within the plenary discussion more alternatives were not suggested on the environment, climate action and a greener economy; areas in which the party would have profited from being awarded more credibility.

The alternatives proposed by the PVV can be divided into three different overall alternatives: Firstly, rather than using the recovery fund, countries should make use of already existing support measures, like the European Stability Mechanism, or borrow on the market (Tweede Kamer 2020b, pos 609; Tweede Kamer 2020d, pos 12, 25, 111, 246, 250; Tweede Kamer 2020p, 231). Secondly, rather than contributing to the recovery fund, the Dutch government should spend that money in the Netherlands, in particular on healthcare, (small and medium) businesses, and lowering VAT (Tweede Kamer 2020d, pos 15, 22, 120, 246, 253, 395; Tweede Kamer 2020e, 793; 5 (2020), pos 593-594; Tweede Kamer 2020p, pos 233; Tweede Kamer 2021f, pos 1166). This matches with the image of the PVV as a party of critical opposition, as it focuses on its ability to represent the voices of underrepresented voters in parliament (Louwerse & Otjes 2018, 3). Only one alternative is concerned with the content of the Dutch plan for the recovery fund, which the PVV wants to use to increase purchasing power (Tweede Kamer 2021h, pos 1471). In their party programme, the PVV also reiterates its opposition to

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the recovery fund and its desire to invest the money in “our own people, our own businesses, our own economy and the public sector” (2021, 51). The PVV thus manages to present alternatives that are internally credible. The priorities of the PVV become clear: improving the healthcare system, supporting small and medium businesses and increasing purchasing power, through lowering VAT. However, whether the alternatives presented are workable in a European context is doubtful. Nevertheless, the PVV’s implosion of the minority government over EU budget rules at least points to the unwillingness to make compromises on EU issues, which suggest that if they had been in power, the recovery fund might not have happened.

Another interesting example is the PvdD. As one of the least active parties in parliament, the PvdD proposes only two alternatives. These focus on different ways to finance the fund, particularly through agricultural subsidies rather than contributions by member states (Tweede Kamer 2020d, pos 126; Tweede Kamer 2020e, pos 690). These alternatives match the profile of the party and can also be found in their election manifesto (2021, 96). Contrary to several other parties in the *Tweede Kamer*, the PvdD deals quite extensively with the recovery fund in its election manifesto, particularly on what the money should be spent (2021, 96 - 97). It thus seems like a missed opportunity that the PvdD does not propose these alternatives in the plenary. The PvdD is also known for its exceptional activity in offering policy alternatives and scrutinising the government (Otjes 2014). This could point to the relatively small capacity of the PvdD, which forced it to set different priorities.

In contrast to the PvdD, none of the alternatives proposed by the SP can be found back in the party programme. In their election manifesto, the SP mentions neither the recovery fund nor the rule of law. Rather, it focuses on creating a “completely different Europe” (2021, 27), with strengthened member states, a strengthened European Parliament and abolishing the European Commission (2021, 27). However, these polity alternatives do not get mentioned during the plenary debate.

For other parties, which engage more in presenting alternatives, such as 50PLUS and Volt, it is also harder to find a clear link with the election manifestos, as neither mentions the recovery fund. Volt is actually able to make their goals clearer in the plenary than in their election manifesto, which only includes a vague commitment to work towards a more “decisive, democratic and sustainable Europe” (2021, 7). 50PLUS’ financially conservative alternatives also fail to appear in the party programme (2021, 19), as do the concrete alternatives proposed in the plenary such as the use of agriculture subsidies for the recovery fund. Additionally, only

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one of the alternatives focusses on intergenerational equality, which is one of the party's core values (Paparo *et al* 2017, 31).

Many parties, particularly smaller ones, struggled with presenting alternatives that could easily be linked to the party's profile and election manifestos. Here, the advantage of the larger government parties becomes clear, since they were able to best develop and reiterate internally credible policy alternatives. But the PVV was also able to present a large number of alternatives which were internally credible.

5.4 Coherence

Closely linked to the question of internal credibility is the question of coherence.

One way for parties to ensure coherence is to focus on a single aspect or topic of the recovery fund. The ChristenUnie is a good example of how smaller parties can also present credible, coherent and distinct alternatives to European policies by focusing on one core topic. In their alternatives, the ChristenUnie focuses specifically on research, innovation and education (Tweede Kamer 2020d, pos 137; Tweede Kamer 2020h, pos 197; Tweede Kamer 2020i, pos 1165) as well as cross-border trains (Tweede Kamer 2002n, pos 476). By focusing on concrete proposals for the content of the policy, rather than more abstract issues such as macro-economic conditions, the ChristenUnie is able to clearly highlight what it wants to do with the fund rather than conditions other countries should fulfil to be able to receive it. Volt pursues a similar strategy by focussing on their wishes for the Dutch plan for the recovery fund. As such, they are able to make the recovery fund more concrete, leaving voters with a good idea about their core topics. In particular, they stress the need to use that money for climate action, housing, education, research and digitalisation (Tweede Kamer 2021i, pos 415, 417; Tweede Kamer 2021k, pos 80; Tweede Kamer 2021i, pos 935). With their contributions, Volt is able to provide a progressive voice in the opposition, and to profile itself as a European party for the younger generation.

The VVD and D66 also manage to present their alternatives coherently. Apart from the common focus on strengthening the rule of law mechanism, VVD and D66 are also able to highlight their differing ideas in particular about the financing of the recovery fund. These demands are not only iterated in one debate but consistently over a longer time period. The larger number of alternatives (15 and 10 respectively) also allows both parties to focus on different aspects of the recovery fund.

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Similarly to the VVD and the D66, the PVV, another large party, also manages to remain consistent over time in the alternatives proposed. In particular the possibilities for countries to borrow money on the capital market or use other funds was not only iterated by other right-wing populist parties such as the FvD, but also Dutch parties traditionally more supportive of European integration like DENK (Tweede Kamer 2020d, pos 92, 159, 161) and 50PLUS (Tweede Kamer 2020d, pos 165; Tweede Kamer 2020e, 578) as well as by parties from different sides of the political spectrum like the PvdD (Tweede Kamer 2020d, pos 126). This also shows the impact of a hard Eurosceptic party on the overall debate in the parliament. DENK also manages to present coherent alternatives focussing on the use of other funds. However, as all of these were made in the same debate, it is harder to see how they are coherent over time.

Less able to present coherent policy alternatives to the recovery fund are the SP and the PvdA. The SP does not propose many alternatives to the recovery fund: only four statements by the SP are policy alternatives. Two of those four call for a strict rule of law requirement - an alternative also voiced by many other parties in parliament. Of the others, the SP proposes to help countries in need directly rather than going through European mechanism (Tweede Kamer 2020e, pos 552). The fourth alternative is concerned with how Dutch money from the recovery fund should be spent. Here, the SP proposes a good public transport system and an isolation plan (Tweede Kamer 2021f, pos 1217). This is particularly interesting as the SP earlier criticised the idea of spending money from the recovery fund will be spent on issues like climate action rather than recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic (Tweede Kamer 2020d, pos 102). The PvdA's policy alternatives are also not coherent, as all of them deal with different issues: one asks for conditions to support large companies through the recovery fund to prevent tax evasion (Tweede Kamer 2020a, pos 105), another for the recovery fund money to be spent on housing (Tweede Kamer 2020o, pos 2843) and another alternative is about the rule of law (Tweede Kamer 2021f, pos 1307).

The fragmentation in the Dutch parliament has made it much more difficult for opposition parties to present credible, coherent alternatives, with the exception of larger parties such as the PVV. This once again shows how much the hard Eurosceptic party is able to dominate the debate on European issues. Yet the example of Volt shows that even a small opposition party is able to present coherent alternatives. In particular, the left-wing parties PvdA and SP have

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struggled with presenting coherent alternatives. This also resulted in the absence of a common ‘left’ position to the recovery fund in the Netherlands, as was the case in Germany.

5.5 The national parties and their European political groups

Similarly to the CDU/CSU and the FDP in Germany, the positions of the CDA, ChristenUnie and the VVD show significant divergence from their European political groups. Especially the questions of own resources and the size of the recovery fund are sites of disagreement. D66, like the VVD also a member of the Renew Europe Group, shares its demands, which explains why VVD and D66 – although belonging to the same political group in the European Parliament – took different positions in the national plenary discussions.

The positions taken by the PvdA and GroenLinks, although the former struggled to present coherent alternatives, do reflect the priorities of their respective groups, S&D (social protection, the rule of law, and charging large companies) and The Greens/EFA (the rule of law and climate action). Like in Germany, this points to at least some form of coordination, although the European political groups were much more active on the issue of the recovery fund than either PvdA or GroenLinks. There is, however, no clear match between The Left in the European Parliament and its Dutch member, the Partij voor de Dieren, or with its former Dutch member, the SP.

JA21’s and the SGP’s critical stance on the recovery fund is matched by those of their political group in the European Parliament, the European Conservatives and Reformists Group (ECR). The group is much more opposed to the recovery fund than the other European political groups (with the exception of ID). On their website, the ECR Group remained relatively vague about the recovery fund. The ECR disagreed with the minimum earmarking of a significant proportion of sectors, as this would prevent member states from tackling individual problems as effectively and quickly as possible (2020). They argued that next to the digital and green transition, the plan should focus on promoting jobs, competitiveness, science, innovation, territorial cohesion, education, future generations and other ‘significant challenges of our time’ (2020). Furthermore, the group opposed the blocking of the recovery plans for Poland and Hungary (Brzozowski 2021, ECR 2021), a position that matches that of JA21. Given the limited amount of information on the ECR’s website regarding their standpoint on the recovery plan, it is, however, rather difficult to establish the extent to which the positions match.

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ID, of which FvD is a member and PVV used to be a member, has published nothing on the recovery plan on their English-language or Dutch-language website. However, the statements used by the German MEPs were also made in similar form by the (former) ID members PVV and FvD, portraying the Netherlands rather than Germany as the ‘ATM of Europe’.

Nevertheless, as there is nothing published on their website, the recovery fund seems to have low priority for the European section of the FvD. The PVV, which is very involved in the national debate on the recovery fund, is no longer represented in the European Parliament.

In the Netherlands, the coordination between national parties and European political party groups was much lower than in Germany. Not only the mainstream (centre-) right parties belonging to pro-European political groups showed a break between the ‘European’ position and the ‘national’ position, but also parties like the PvdD. Several national parties are also not represented in the European Parliament, suggesting that the debate was held more in national terms than in European terms.

5.6 Conclusion(s)

In an increasingly fragmented party system that has many (mainstream) parties with openly hard and soft Eurosceptic discourse, it is much more difficult – especially for the generally pro-European integration opposition parties – to present credible, distinct alternatives. Karlsson and Persson have argued that opposition behaviour – especially in the form of presenting alternatives – is on the rise (2018, 900). While there is a much larger number of alternatives presented in the Dutch parliament than in the German parliament, taking a closer look at the alternatives shows that it is mostly the larger government parties which manage to perform well on all four aspects of credibility. Many of the opposition parties focussed on critique rather than alternatives, directed oppositional behaviour at the national government and struggled to present internally credible and/or coherent policy alternatives. Karlsson and Persson’s study thus suffers from a failure to look in sufficient depth what types of alternatives are presented and whether those alternatives are credible.

Another reason for the lack of distinct alternatives is the shared goal of strengthening the rule of law mechanism. With a total of 80 statements (11.2%) made about it, the rule of law came

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second only to the EU budget (89 or 12.4%).²⁷ Although, in one sense, it is promising that the rule of law is such a widely shared goal on which parliamentarians want to take action, if this means that the alternatives to the recovery fund presented by such diverse parties as the Christian Democrats to the Socialist Party are in essence the same, this makes it harder for voters to see different perspectives on the recovery fund. In this regard, it was only the hard Eurosceptic parties that presented alternative views, arguing that the Dutch government should focus on the Netherlands rather than concerning themselves with other member states. Additionally, other alternatives regarding the Dutch plan for the recovery fund were often not distinct enough to be easily linked to the party's profile and were thus less credible. Nevertheless, to have that discussion about the Dutch plan is positive because it serves to link the more abstract issue of the European recovery fund to the national level.

Regarding the dominance of the PVV in the debate, it is also noticeable that the government parties were very active both when it came to suggesting alternatives and in the debate. This points to what de Wilde and Rauh call “the lack of EU accountability by the opposition” (2018, 210). While de Wilde and Rauh have found that government parties structurally outperform all opposition parties, this was not the case in the Netherlands where the PVV was most active. Yet it was the government parties that presented credible alternatives to the recovery fund. Here it seems that the informational advantages of the governing parties (de Wilde & Rauh 2018, 210) allowed them to significantly influence the debate in the plenary. The dominance of the governing parties was also aided by the pro-European left-wing opposition, who were too occupied with criticising the government's European policies to suggest credible alternatives to the recovery fund themselves. This became clear during the discussion on the Dutch plans for its Recovery and Resilience Facility.

Whereas in the German debate on the recovery fund, a left-right polarisation is ultimately overshadowed by a pro-EU vs anti-EU divide, within the Dutch parliament a left-right polarisation was not at all noticeable. Although there are different ideas present about how the EU budget should be financed in the future, these were discussed more in terms of pro-European integration vs anti-European integration terms rather than in left vs right terms. In particular, between the mainstream left-wing and those left-wing parties beyond the mainstream, there was no common vision about the financing or the content of the recovery fund, as was the case in

²⁷ For the top five themes linked to the recovery plan in the German and Dutch plenary debates, see Graph 3 and 4 in Annex.

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Germany. This also shows in the lesser use of similar arguments between the national parties beyond the ‘mainstream’ left and their political group in the European parliament. The Dutch example shows that a crisis like the Covid-19 pandemic has not reduced the GAL-TAN conflict to one amongst many. This is further aided by a process of ‘mainstreaming’ Euroscepticism in the Dutch parliament, where mainstream parties – including those in government – make use of Eurosceptic discourse.

Overall the plenary debates in the Netherlands match the findings of de Wilde and Rauh (2018), who have argued that plenary debates about Europe are characterised by a lack of balanced debates between opposition and government parties and a limited supply of electoral choice.

Chapter Six: Factors impacting the ability of parties to present credible alternatives and Concluding Remarks

This thesis has empirically evaluated whether which Dutch and German parties manage to formulate credible alternatives to the EU Recovery Plan. In order to measure credibility, the statements made by national parties have been evaluated based on four different aspects of credibility: (1) type of opposition, (2) object of opposition, (3) internal credibility and (4) coherence. My results point to a mixed picture at best. First of all, in both Germany and the Netherlands offering critique is much more common than proposing alternatives. Secondly, the plenary is as much – if not more – understood as a platform to challenge and defend governmental policies rather than European policies. Parties also struggled with presenting alternatives that were internally credible and/or coherent over time. Thus, while some parties in both Germany and the Netherlands perform well on all aspects of credibility, the majority of parties fall short on either one or more aspects of credibility. This was even more so in the Netherlands than in Germany.

6.1 Factors impacting the ability of parties to present credible alternatives

Parties in Germany and the Netherlands experience a number of different constraints that make it harder for them to present credible alternatives. One of these is the presence of a hard Eurosceptic party in the parliament. In particular, in the German plenary, this has led to insecurity within the two mainstream (centre-)right parties on how to address this. The perceived need for presenting a super-majority further undermined the ability of parties to remain coherent with their position in their voting behaviour. The AfD was one of the most active parties on this issue.

If Germany is still struggling to deal with one hard Eurosceptic party in its parliament, then the Dutch situation holds little promise for the future. The debate in the Netherlands was very strongly dominated by the hard Eurosceptic PVV as well as by the governing parties. For the voters, this significantly reduced the supply of electoral choice between a ‘Weiter So!’²⁸ and an opt-out of the European Union altogether. The starkest differences were noticeable between the governing parties themselves rather than between the government and the (pro-European integration) opposition. The dominance of the PVV was also highlighted by the use of their arguments by other parties which are not opposed to European integration *per se*. Additionally, the EU as a polity was also criticised by the mainstream right-wing parties in government. The

²⁸ Translated into English as ‘More of the same’.

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results from both countries support the hypothesis that opposition to a large extent is driven by hard Eurosceptic parties, with a few exceptions such as Die Grünen in Germany.

Next to the presence of a hard Eurosceptic party, parties also experienced a number of other constraints, such as questions of capacity and fragmentation, in particular in the Netherlands. Nevertheless, the ability of parties to present credible alternatives also depends on their understanding of what it means to engage in oppositional behaviour. Here many parties chose to focus on scrutinising behaviour rather than making a contribution to develop the recovery fund. Other parties engaged in passive opposition focussing on neither scrutinising nor proposing alternatives, potentially because the issue was not important enough for them or their voters, or because their party was internally divided.

Whether a party was in government or not did not have conclusive impacts on their ability to present credible alternatives. More important was the size of the parties, their position towards the European Union and their relation to the hard Eurosceptic parties in parliament as well as their willingness to engage in active opposition. In the Netherlands, these factors contribute to a strong presence by the government parties, whereas in Germany this was not necessarily the case.

One of the reasons for limited credible alternatives by the mainstream (centre-) left and (centre-) right parties seems to be that issues about European integration are not politicised across a right and left-wing divide but across pro-EU versus anti-EU lines. A left-right politicisation could help to reduce a conflict between pro- and anti-EU parties to one among other conflicts (Miklin 2014, 1200). This would help provide citizens with more electoral choices within the political system of the EU rather than having to opt out of it completely (Miklin 2014, 1200). My findings support Miklin's statement that the presence of a hard Eurosceptic party pushes any left-right polarization into the shadow in favour of the conflict between mainstream parties and their Eurosceptic competitors. In the case of the Netherlands, where hard and soft Eurosceptic voices are present in the majority of parties, no right-left division was discernible. This is also because the left-wing parties beyond the 'mainstream' in the Netherlands are much more Eurosceptic than in Germany, using arguments also used by the PVV. Nevertheless, unlike argued by amongst others Kröger and Bellamy (2016) and Grzymala-Busse (2019), the alternatives proposed by the centre-parties SPD and CDU/CSU in Germany and the VVD, CDA, and D66 in the Netherlands highlight different ideas about the future of European integration and in particular the financing of the recovery fund. This shows that parties do have different views and are also not afraid to discuss different positions taken by the government parties in the plenary as attested by Miklin (2014).

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Other than in plenary sessions, parties might propose credible alternatives to EU policies in alternative settings but these fail to make political choices more visible to the voters. Many debates about the recovery fund will also have taken place in the European Affairs and Budget Committees of the parliaments. However, these have some major disadvantage compared to the plenary, because not all committee meetings are public, which means that neither voters nor the media can see the different position taken by parliamentarians and the political alternatives they propose. Even those committees that are public receive a lot less coverage than the plenary.

Concluding remarks

This thesis has investigated whether national parties formulate credible alternatives to EU policies such as the recovery plan, focusing on four aspects of credibility. My results point to a mixed picture. Parties do have different ideas about how an EU policy like the recovery fund should look and formulate these ideas in the plenary sessions. Nevertheless, too often parties engage in other types of oppositional activity, especially critique, before proposing alternatives. Furthermore, parties struggle with presenting credible, distinct alternatives that are both internally credible and coherent, especially in the Netherlands, which is characterised by an increasing fragmentation of the parliament. Additionally, parties face an important number of constraints, relating to the strength and mainstreaming of (hard) Eurosceptic parties and ideas. All of this undermines the introduction of choice into EU politics for voters. Nevertheless, examples like Die Grünen in Germany show that proposing credible alternatives is possible, even for smaller (opposition) parties.

This research has focussed on Germany and the Netherlands. Both of these countries are ‘net contributors’ to the European Union and as such many of the debates focussed on the financial matters and conditions attached to the recovery fund.²⁹ In order to better understand the extent to which credible alternatives are presented by national parties, it would be interesting to investigate these debates in countries like Italy and Spain. Additionally, both Germany and the Netherlands have one (or more) hard Eurosceptic parties in parliament. To investigate the impact of Euroscepticism conclusively, investigating plenary discussions where Eurosceptic parties are not present would be necessary.

²⁹ For the top five nature of arguments used in the German and Dutch plenary debates, see Graph 5 and 6 in Annex.

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This thesis has highlighted that there appears to be limited coordination between the national parties and their respective political groups in the European Parliament on the issue of the recovery plan. Between several national parties and European political groups, such as die Grünen and die Linke, similar arguments were used and a common position was discernible. However, for others, especially mainstream (centre-) right parties belonging to pro-European political groups, a break between the ‘European’ position and the ‘national’ position is noticeable, especially when it comes to the question of the EU having its own resources, for example through European taxes. Other national parties made no effort to have a similar position to their European political groups, and in the Netherlands, several national parties are also not represented in the European Parliament. Further research including a wider range of countries should consider whether there are processes of ‘uploading’ and ‘downloading’ arguments between the European Parliament and the national plenaries, as well as the actual coordination between the positions of European political groups and national parties. This could be helpful to understand the dynamics between ‘European’ and ‘national’ debates better.

With this thesis, I have shown the importance of empirically and qualitatively investigating national parties’ statements in order to assess whether they fulfil their role of making political choices and alternatives visible. This serves to further identify the role national parties and parliaments can play in EU policy making. I have also shown that it is possible for parties to offer credible alternatives, but this needs to be a priority for parties and take place in an environment where they feel it would not undermine their policy-seeking, vote-seeking or office-seeking motivations. My thesis has highlighted the need to qualitatively investigate not only whether parties manage to present alternatives but also what these alternatives are about and whether they are credible. In order to measure this, I have developed an understanding of credibility based on four different aspects. This method plus the added layer to the coding scheme of Karlsson and Persson about the nature of argument, has allowed me to investigate the behaviour of national parties in the plenary in greater depth.

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Annex

Format	Length of debate	CDU/CSU	SPD	AfD	FDP	Die Linke	Die Grünen
Short = XS	27	9	6	3	3	3	3
Standard = S	30	11	6	4	3	3	3
Medium = M	60	21	13	7	7	6	6
Long = L	90	32	19	11	10	9	9
XL	120	42	26	15	14	12	11
XXL	210	73	45	27	24	21	20

Table 5: Speaking times per party in the German parliament.

Note: All data in minutes. Translated from German by me.

Source: Datenhandbuch zur Geschichte des Deutschen Bundestages, Chapter 7.11. Regulations on the length of debates (Deutscher Bundestag 2020w, 4)

	Critique			Alternative			Support			Other	Total
	Policy	Procedure	Polity	Policy	Procedure	Polity	Policy	Procedure	Polity		
Total	160			61			106			10	336
CDU/CSU	19	18	2	15	5	3	32	2	7	3	106
SPD	3	3		4	1	1	21		7	3	43
AfD	28	5	25	3		1					65
FDP	14	5		4			7	1		1	32
Die Linke	7	3		4		1	6			1	22
Die Grünen	10	15		13	3	3	20		3	1	68
Total	84	49	27	43	9	9	86	3	17	10	336

Table 6: Type of statement per party (DE).

Note: Total number of statements: 336.

Source: Plenary debates *Bundestag*, April 2020 - Dec 2021.

Party	Critique				Alternative				Support			
	Government	EU/Government	EU	Other	Government	EU/Government	EU	Other	Government	EU/Government	EU	Other
CDU/CSU	5	5	7	22		7	10	4	12	7	18	4
SPD	1			4	1	3	2		5	14	8	1
AfD	19	17	20	4	3		1					
FDP	8	4	3	4	1	2	1			2	2	4
Die Linke	2	2		6	2	2	1	1	1	2	2	1
Die Grünen	17	2	1	5	4	7	7	1	2	4	12	5
Total	52	30	31	45	11	21	22	6	20	29	42	15

Table 7: Object of opposition per type of statement per party (DE).

Note: Total number of statements: 336.

Source: Plenary debates *Bundestag*, April 2020 - Dec 2021.

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Party	Number of policy alternatives	Nature of Argument (several per statement possible)	Themes (several or no per statement possible)
CDU/CSU	15	Financial Matters (6), Implementation (6), Conditions (5), Content (4), Longevity (1), Totality (1)	Digitalisation (3), EMU (2), Environment/energy (2), EU budget (2), Industry/Research/Innovation (2), Migration (1), Defence (1), National budget (1), Transport (1)
SPD	4	Financial Matters (4)	
AfD	3	Totality (2), Financial Matters (2)	Digitalisation (1), Environment/energy (1), Employment & Social Affairs (1), Migration (1), EU budget (1)
FDP	4	Conditions (3), Totality (1), Financial matters (1),	EU budget (1), Other financial support measures (1), Employment & Social Affairs (1)
Die Linke	4	Financial Matters (2), Conditions (2), Content (1)	Employment & Social Affairs (3), Rule of Law (1)
Die Grünen	13	Financial Matters (6), Values (4), Content (4), Conditions (2), Totality (1)	Digitalisation (4), Rule of law (2), Environment/Energy (6), Transport (2), Foreign policy (1), Agriculture (1), Corona/health (1), Employment & Social Affairs (1)

Table 8: Policy alternatives per party (DE).

Note: Number in brackets refers to the number of statements per nature of argument/theme. Total number of statements: 336.

Source: Plenary debates *Bundestag*, April 2020 - Dec 2021.

Total	Critique			Alternative			Support			Other	Total
	Policy	Procedure	Polity	Policy	Procedure	Polity	Policy	Procedure	Polity		
	12	6	4	15	3	0	10	3	1	15	69
VVD	12	12	1	11	8	1	32	4	4	16	101
D66	54	18	23	21	3	2	1			1	123
PVV	11	6	3	7	10	1	7	2		21	68
CDA	7	10		5	3		5			9	39
GL	19	14	4	4	3		4	1		9	58
SP	10	10		3	3		4	1	1	9	41
PvdA	5	1	3	2	1					1	13
PvdD	5	3	1	5	1		3			11	29
CU	11	4	11	2					1	3	32
FvD	13	5	1	4	2		1	1		9	36
SGP	15	6	1	5	1		6			4	38
DENK	7	3		4	3		4			3	24
50+ †	3	3	5	5	5		3			9	28
Volt*	8	2		2	1		1			1	19
JA21*											
Total	192	103	57	94	47	4	81	12	7	121	718

Table 9: Type of statement per party (NL).

Note: † in parliament until March 2021, * in parliament since March 2021. Total number of statements: 718.

Source: Plenary debates *Tweede Kamer*, April 2020 - Dec 2021.

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Party	Critique				Alternative				Support			
	Government	EU/Government	EU	Other	Government	EU/Government	EU	Other	Government	EU/Government	EU	Other
VVD	3	2	9	8	6	6	5	1	9	3		2
D66	13	1	3	8	13	5	1	1	6	11	17	6
PVV	46	14	34	12	14	4	3	5	1			
CDA	3	6	8	3	7	8	3		2	2	3	2
GL	14	3			3	4	1		2	1	1	1
SP	14	6	12	6	4	1	1	1	1	1	1	2
PvdA	16		3	1	4	1		1	1	1	4	
PvdD	6	1	2		2			1				
CU		1	6	2	4	1	1		1			
FvD	2	6	13	5				2	1		1	1
SGP	2	6	11	2	3	1	2		1		1	
DENK	6	4	8	5	1	1	3	1	2	2	2	2
50+ †	3	2	4	1	2	2	3				4	
Volt*	5	1			4	1		5				
JA21*	5	2	8		2						3	
Total	138	55	121	53	69	35	23	18	27	21	37	14

Table 10: Object of opposition per type of statement per party (NL).

Note: † in parliament until March 2021, * in parliament since March 2021. Total number of statements: 718.

Source: Plenary debates *Tweede Kamer*, April 2020 - Dec 2021.

Party	Number of policy alternatives	Nature of Argument (several per statement possible)	Themes (several or no per statement possible)
VVD	15	Conditions (8), Content (3), Financial Matters (2), Values (2), Longevity (2)	Rule of law (4), EYCTS* (3), EU budget (1)
D66	11	Conditions (5), Values (3), Financial Matters (2), Totality (2), Contents (2) Implementation (1)	Rule of law (5), Industry/research/ innovation (2), National budget (1), Energy/Environment (1), Economic Affairs (1)
PVV	21	Totality (15), Financial Matters (6), Content (1)	Other financial support programmes (6), Corona/health (5), Economic Affairs (4), Employment & Social Affairs (3), Other (1)
CDA	7	Content (2), Conditions (2), Values (2), Financial matters (1), Content (1), Other (1)	Rule of law (2), Migration (1), Corona/health (1), EU budget (1), Industry/research/innovation (1),
SP	4	Totality (2), Content (1), Conditions (1), Values (1)	Transport (1), Environment/energy (1), Rule of law (1), EU budget (1)
GL	5	Conditions (4), Values (3), Content (1)	Rule of law (4), Environment/Energy (1), Agriculture (1)
PvdA	3	Totality (1), Content (1), Conditions (1), Values (1)	Economic Affairs (1), Employment & Social Affairs (1), Rule of law (1)
PvdD	2	Financial matters (2), Totality (1)	Agriculture (1), EU budget (1), Rule of law (1)
FvD	2	Financial Matters (2), Totality (1)	
CU	5	Content (4), Values (1), Conditions (1)	Industry/research/innovation (2), EYCTS* (1), Rule of law (1), EU budget (1), Transport (1)
SGP	4	Content (2), Totality (1), Conditions (1), Other (1)	Other financial support measures (1), Environment/energy (1)
DENK	5	Totality (3), Financial matters (1), Content (1)	Other financial support programmes (3), Environment/energy (1)
50+ †	4	Financial matters (2), Content (1), Conditions (1), Implementation (1)	EU budget (1)
Volt*	5	Content (4), Longevity (1)	Environment/Energy (3), Digitalisation (3), EYCTS* (2), Industry/research/innovation (1), Employment & Social Affairs (1)
JA21*	1	Implementation (1)	

Table 11: Policy alternatives per party (NL).

Note: Number in brackets refers to the number of statements per nature of argument/theme. † in parliament until March 2021, * in parliament since March 2021. °EYCTS = Education, Youth, Culture, Tourism, Sports. Total number of statements: 718.

Source: Plenary debates *Tweede Kamer*, April 2020 - Dec 2021.

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Top five themes linked to the recovery plan in the German and Dutch plenary debates

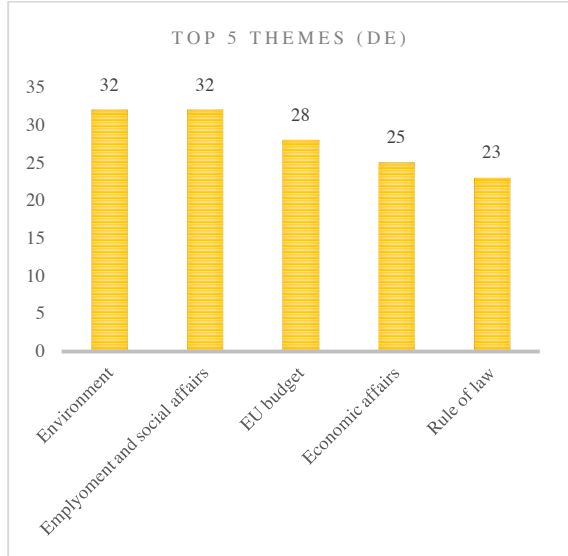


Figure 3: Top 5 themes in the German plenary.

Note: Total number of statements: 336.

Source: Plenary debates *Bundestag*, April 2020 - Dec 2021.

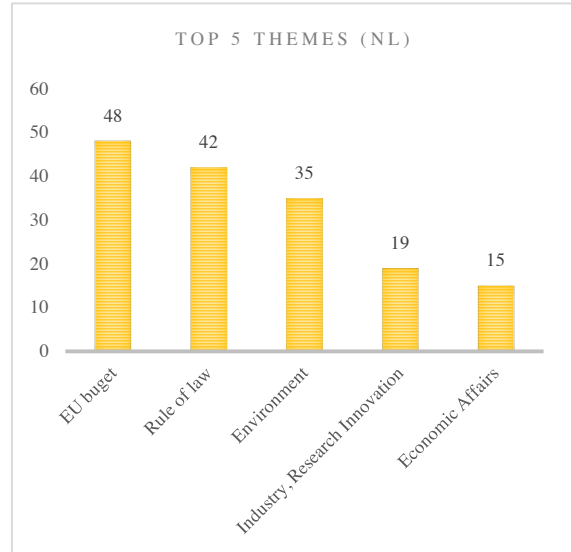


Figure 4: Top 5 themes in the Dutch plenary.

Note: Total number of statements: 718.

Source: Plenary debates *Tweede Kamer*, April 2020 - Dec 2021.

Top five nature of argument used by MPs in the German and Dutch plenary debates

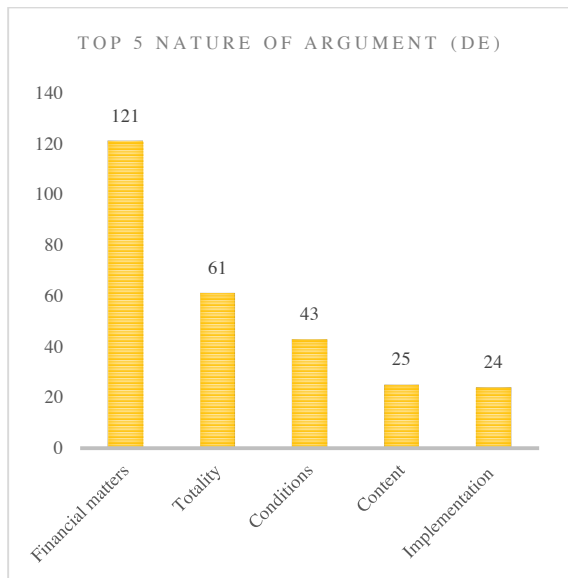


Figure 7: Top 5 nature of argument in the German plenary.

Note: Total number of statements: 336.

Source: Plenary debates *Bundestag*, April 2020 - Dec 2021.

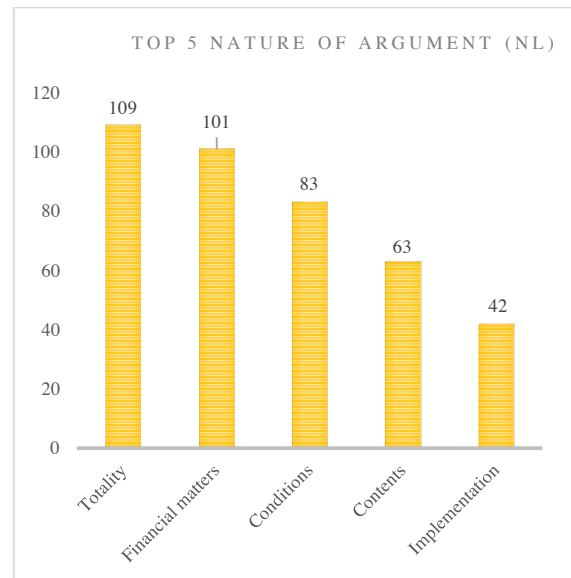


Figure 6: Top 5 nature of argument in the Dutch plenary.

Note: Total number of statements: 718.

Source: Plenary debates *Tweede Kamer*, April 2020 - Dec 2021.