

**Title: Hostile or Consensual?: A Comparative Study of Personal Attacks and Positive Self-Reference in Exchanges between the Conservatives and the SNP in PMQs and FMQs**

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**Abstract:**

Existing research on party leader questioning in legislatures has tended to focus on single case studies, less than ideal behaviours, and if studied over time across leader, similar, often post-election time periods. In this paper we compare hostility and positivity in behaviours across parliaments and, because of the Covid crisis, across very different time periods, while controlling for the same leaders. Our data contrasts levels of parliamentary leader hostility and positivity in both Holyrood and Westminster (SNP versus Conservative) across three time periods: pre-Covid; initial Covid; and lockdown Covid. We find that while the initial shock of the Covid crisis suppressed hostility and positivity, compared with Westminster, Holyrood typically has lower levels of hostility and positivity irrespective of face-to-face versus hybrid (live and online) working arrangements.

**Introduction**

In recent years, there has been increased interest in the quality of legislative procedures like Prime Minister's Questions (see for example: Bates et al. 2014; Waddle et al. 2019; Bull and Strawson, 2020; and Shephard and Braby 2020). However, most of the attention has focused on single cases (especially Prime Minister's Questions in the House of Commons) with comparisons focusing more on changes over time than comparisons across countries. In this paper we take a comparative approach by comparing Prime Minister's Questions in the House of Commons with First Minister's Questions in the Scottish Parliament. We also make use of comparisons across a unique period of a world-level crisis (Covid-19) permitting a pre-crisis versus crisis comparison of how procedures fared over time epochs and across two-similar procedures in two different parliaments across two different parties.

The present study is the first to explore whether First Minister's Questions deviates from its Westminster counterpart in terms of both levels of hostility, and levels of positivity. It does this across a 'normal' pre-crisis period, and then across a crisis-discovery period and a lockdown crisis period to explore whether procedures not only work differently in different parliaments, but across different political scenarios that affect both parliaments equally. In sum our research is both comparative across similar cases and across similar comparative crisis time epochs.

Theoretically and empirically we explore a number of new dimensions: 1) To what extent is there any kind of 'new politics' in Holyrood compared with Westminster during questions to the leaders?; 2) How does a world-wide crisis affect hostility and positivity in Holyrood and Westminster over time; and 3) To what extent does elite behaviour vary for hybrid (live and online) and face-to-face interactions for parliamentary leaders?

Our results suggest that there is less hostility and generally less positivity in Holyrood compared to Westminster, and while hybrid arrangements do coincide with more hostility and more positivity,

the pre-Covid arrangements suggest that this is more a product of different institutions and different leaders than internal procedural arrangements per se.

Dividing our comparisons over time into three periods: 1) pre-Covid; 2) initial-Covid; and 3) lockdown-Covid, we find that hostility decreased markedly during the initial Covid period, before starting to recover somewhat in Holyrood and a lot more in Westminster. We also find a similar dip in positivity in the initial Covid period by three out of the four investigated political actors (Johnson, Sturgeon and Blackford). However, the Scottish Conservative Party Leader was an exception with increased positive self-referencing during this initial Covid period. Carlaw seemingly responded to the need for UK unity at a time of crisis and appeared to utilise the opportunity to increase the standing of the Scottish Conservatives by associating more with otherwise unpopular Westminster-based Conservatives.

In the next section, we discuss our theories pertaining to 'new politics' (or not), to behaviour observed in legislatures, to behaviour that we might expect during crises, and during different working arrangements (face-to-face versus hybrid live and online). We then explain the nature of our data and our methods before providing more details about our results, conclusions and limitations and implications for the literature.

## **Theories**

### **A 'New Politics'?**

At the outset (e.g. Scottish Constitutional Convention, 1995; Consultative Steering Group, 1998), there were hopes that the new Scottish Parliament could help deliver a less adversarial 'new politics' by designing a parliament that would be different from Westminster, for example: unicameral; more powers to committees to provide the possibility of more balanced executive-legislative relations; a less adversarial semi-circular seating arrangement with seats for all members; and an electoral system that would permit fairer representation of smaller parties. While procedures at Westminster did help inform choices made for the Scottish Parliament too (e.g. First Minister's Questions is a derivative of Prime Minister's Questions), the differences envisaged for the new legislature were deemed different enough to facilitate the possibility of a new way of doing things (Brown, 2000), albeit subject to 'the extent to which its Members embrace the new culture' (Consultative Steering Group, 1998: 9), bearing in mind that it was 'not in the interests of any of the political parties for it to be seen to fail' (Brown, 2000: 555).

However, after the heady enthusiasm and expectations of the early years, it soon became apparent that hopes for a 'new politics' were short-lived. Indeed, Mitchell (2010) argues that once we delve beyond issues of the electoral system and representation, the institutional set-up and operation of the Scottish Parliament resembles Westminster in many ways. For example, while the additional member system used in Scotland does ensure parties are more accurately represented in the Scottish Parliament according to their levels of support compared with the House of Commons, many procedures are very similar to Westminster, for example, First Minister's Questions (FMQs) is clearly modelled on Prime Minister's Questions (PMQs) and the highly partisan nature of Westminster party politics has been replicated in Holyrood as the parties are not new. Moreover, party political tensions have been heightened in recent years over constitutional divisions between the parties over Scottish independence and Brexit, particularly between the Conservatives and the Scottish National Party (SNP) who have more 'clearly defined positions' here on both of these issues (Mitchell and Henderson, 2020: 144). Consequently, we expect that:

H1) Given the similarity of FMQs to PMQs, and the adversarial nature of politics at both Westminster and Holyrood, hostility in the Scottish Parliament is unlikely to be that different from hostility in the House of Commons.

### **Hostile versus Positive Political Behaviour**

Most of the literature on elite behaviour tends to focus more on the negative behaviours than the positive behaviours of politicians. There is an obvious reason for this, because researchers are fundamentally interested in exploring what is deemed not to be working well, so that they can assess the validity or not of the situation, before possibly suggesting potential solutions such as procedural changes. For example, initial studies tended to focus on participation rates & procedural changes of Prime Ministers' engagements (see for example, Dunleavy et al. 1993).

Newer studies have explored more of the specific content that occurs during exchanges with Prime Ministers. For example, Bates et al. (2014) find that Prime Minister's Questions has become rowdier, more diverse in question range, more likely to produce unanswerable questions, and more dominated by leaders over time. Waddle et al. (2019) devise a coding scheme for the analysis of personal attacks and found that these had heightened in more recent time periods possibly due to heightened TV and social media coverage. Shephard and Braby (2020) explore the state of Prime Ministers asking questions of the leader of the opposition (the converse of what is expected in a procedure such as Prime Minister's Questions) and find an increase in this behaviour over time. Finally, Bull and Strawson (2020) explored the extent to which the Prime Minister actually answered questions and found that there was a very high degree of equivocation (e.g. ignoring questions, modifying questions, or stating that answers had already been provided). What all this literature has in common, is the depiction of a less than ideal operating procedure that most literature suggests has declined over time.

Work on the positive side of behaviour is far less developed, and is one of the measures we aim to include in our own research here. That said, in a world of office-seeking behaviour, 'positive' behaviour is not as one-sided as it might seem. In a study of applause during political speeches, Bull (2006) illustrates how applause can both be indicative of support for the politician making the speech, as well as an indicator of hostility towards those who do not hold the same view, typically the opposition. In short, evidence of positive self-reference may be as much about attempting to elevate the position and status of one's own side as it is about attempting to puncture the position and status of the opposition. Consequently, we expect that it would be logical for:

H2) Office-seeking leaders to be hostile about the opposition

H3a) Office-seeking leaders to engage in positive self-referencing

One caveat with H3/positive self-referencing here is the status of the parties in the public's perception at any one time, particularly when we account for the post-devolution party system changes that have created multi-party politics across different levels of government (see Lynch, 2007). Leaders of a party at one level, may not wish to draw attention to same party leaders or party positions at another level of government if that is a potential liability to the electoral success. This issue is particularly acute for the Conservatives in Scotland. At the Scottish level, for example, Brexit is not popular (62% voted to remain in the EU), and so Scottish Conservatives have to be cautious about associating themselves with the UK Conservative Party position, particularly given the discordant goal of a domestic union between England and Scotland (see Kenny and Sheldon, 2020) and a different flavour of unionism for the Scottish Conservatives (Hassan, 2020). We also know that support for the UK leader of the Conservatives is not just low among the Scottish electorate (see

IPPOS Scottish Political Monitor ratings with satisfaction declining from just over 20% in December 2019 to 12% in May 2022), but low among Scottish Conservative politicians themselves. Scottish Conservative leader (2011-2019) Ruth Davidson has been openly vocal and critical of Prime Minister Boris Johnson, while four of the six Scottish Conservative MPs (including Scottish leader Douglas Ross) expressed no confidence in a vote on the UK Conservative leader Boris Johnson in a June 2022 ballot. Consequently, we expect that:

H3b) Conservative leaders in Scotland will be most likely to have to tread carefully regarding broader party and leader promotional activities, and so they be least likely to engage in self-promotional references.

### **Crisis Politics**

Covid-19 provided the world with an unprecedented international public health crisis. Given such a crisis, the literature suggests that there is a 'rally-around-the-flag' effect in which support for governments increases in response to the perceived threat (Hetherington and Nelson, 2003), albeit subject to a decay over time (Mueller, 1970; Kritzing et al., 2021) and less likely where there is a strong partisan divide (Kritzing et al., 2021).

Similar findings are also found from the perspective of the legislature. Howell et al. (2013) find that legislative priorities often move from the local to the national at times of war resulting in greater tendencies of legislators to defer to the President. In relation to the crisis of Covid-19, research suggests that power has moved from legislatures to executives, as the overestimation of the risks of the pandemic creates both real limitations on the operation of legislatures, as well as increased tolerance and even support for executive actions (Bar-Simon-Tov, 2020).

Consequently, we hypothesise that:

H4a) During the advent of crisis (e.g. Covid-19), party leaders will reduce hostilities temporarily

H4b) During the advent of crisis (e.g. Covid-19), the Scottish Conservative Leader will be most supportive of the UK Conservative leader

### **Online versus Face-to-Face**

One of the bi-products of Covid was the effect that it had on the workplace, and legislatures were no exception. Parliaments responded by introducing social distancing measures in the chambers (e.g. increasing the distances between members) and introduced new ways of doing business (e.g. opening up the capacity for virtual/online contributions). In the case of the UK Parliament, much of our data post-Covid lockdown includes hybrid scenarios where one party leader was live (Boris Johnson, Conservative) and one leader was invariably virtual/online (Ian Blackford, SNP), unlike for the Scottish Parliament where both leaders under investigation remained live.

Exploring the literature on face-to-face versus computer-mediated communication, Okdie et al. (2011) find that there are more positive impressions developed during face-to-face interactions compared with online interactions. They contend that face-to-face interactions are more advantageous to communication online as you are more likely to pick up on social cues and expressions than you would online (see also Sproull and Kiesler, 1985). Moreover, Okdie et al. (2011) argue that interacting through the computer heightens an individual's self-awareness leading to a more self-focused and self-centred behaviour, and less ability to perceive others accurately. Consequently, we expect that:

H5) Face-to-face exchanges between leaders are likely to be less hostile than exchanges involving online contributions, and

H6) Face-to-face exchanges between leaders are likely to be less self-promotional than exchanges involving online contributions

### Data and Methods

Analysis is based on the official transcripts of First Minister’s Questions and the Prime Minister’s Questions. The data is freely available from the Official Report of the Scottish Parliament and from Hansard for the House of Commons. Research focuses on exchanges between the SNP and Conservative Party leaders, in both the House of Commons and in the Scottish Parliament. The rationale for the case selection strategy was to compare two parties that were simultaneously both in government and in opposition, albeit at different levels (SNP leads the Scottish Government and is the second biggest opposition party in Westminster, while the Conservatives form the UK government and are the biggest opposition party in the Scottish parliament). Both parties are also the core counterparties in the Unionist/Secessionist divide which has arguably been the main ‘fault line’ underpinning Scottish politics since 2014 (Keating, 2017; Curtice 2022).

Our analysis focuses on Scottish First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon) and the Leader of the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party (Jackson Carlaw) in the Scottish Parliament and the Prime Minister (Boris Johnson) and the Leader of the SNP in the House of Commons (Ian Blackford) between the period 8<sup>th</sup> January 2020 until 22<sup>nd</sup> July 2020. The sampling frame excluded any exchange in which Nicola Sturgeon, Boris Johnson, Jackson Carlaw or Ian Blackford did not participate. Exclusion of exchanges where somebody else stood in for one of the political leaders (such as the PMQs on the 22<sup>nd</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> April 2020) is necessary to control for changes in discursive styles. We also excluded the *Leaders Virtual Question Time* (LVQT) in the Scottish Parliament (9<sup>th</sup> April and 16<sup>th</sup> April 2020) as it only operated with leaders and so was unlike a regular FMQs.

Table 1 summarises our data sampling and its organisation around key COVID events. The time frame of the sample covers the pre-Covid period (January until late February 2020), the first month in which COVID has been recognised as an issue (March 2020) and the UK-wide lockdown period (from 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2020 until the summer recess in 2020). It allows us to compare how the different stages of the crisis impact the exchanges while also covering “normal” time periods where COVID has not been the subject of debate. Overall, exchanges of 20 FMQs and 22 PMQs have been included in our sample. We refrained from including different time frames (e.g., exchanges in FMQs/PMQs in 2019 or after summer 2020) since there would have been different incumbents for the leadership positions in place which would undermine our like-with-like approach.

<b>Time Frame</b>	<b>PMQs (N = 22)</b>	<b>FMQs (N = 20)</b>
Pre-COVID-19	<i>8<sup>th</sup> January to 26<sup>th</sup> February (7)</i>	<i>9<sup>th</sup> January to 27<sup>th</sup> February (7)</i>
Initial COVID	<i>4<sup>th</sup> March to 18<sup>th</sup> March (3)</i>	<i>5<sup>th</sup> March to 19<sup>th</sup> March (3)</i>
Lockdown COVID (starting with announcement of UK-wide lockdown on 23 <sup>rd</sup> March 2020 until Summer Recess)	<i>25<sup>th</sup> March to 22<sup>nd</sup> July (12)</i>	<i>21<sup>st</sup> April to 24<sup>th</sup> June (10)</i>

Table 1 Overview of sampled PMQs/FMQs

Up to lockdown in late March 2020, PMQs and FMQs took place in a face-to-face setting without social distancing measures. PMQs and FMQs post-lockdown were socially distanced and allowed for online

contributions (*hybrid Parliament*). While all exchanges in the Scottish Parliament between the First Minister and the leader of the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party have been face-to-face, discussions between the leader of the SNP and the Prime Minister in the House of Commons have varied between face-to-face (15<sup>th</sup> July 2020) and hybrid (in the remaining PMQs Ian Blackford participated online).

The coding was conducted in two rounds. In the first round, we applied our coding schedule on *Personal Attacks*. The coding schedule builds up on the schedule used by Waddle et al. (2019). We made two adjustments to their coding schedule (see Annexe 1):

- 1) We redefined the categories to reduce the overlap between those categories.
- 2) We added a new category accounting for personal attacks administered in the exchange by attacking organisations or individuals closely associated with counterpart.

Coding was completed at the sentence level by one author. Sentences which fall in one of the categories of the coding schedule have been coded as “personal attack”, and sentences without any personal hostility were coded as neutral. The other author undertook an Intercoder-Reliability Test for 20% of the coded sessions; the results concluded a high degree of inter-coder reliability (Cohen’s Kappa = 0.81). To ensure intra-coder reliability the coding has been revisited several times by the initial coder before undergoing testing the ICR. To determine the degree of hostility of the coded elements, we calculated the ratio of hostile units by dividing the hostile units by the sum of neutral and hostile units.

In the second round, we applied our coding schedule to “positive self-reference” (see Annexe 2). Our approach to utilising this schedule in the second stage mirrors the application of the coding schedule on personal attacks in the first round. One author undertook the coding of the whole sample and applied the schedule on the sentence level. Sentences entailing a positive self-reference with promotional framing that fall in one of the categories of the coding scheme have been coded as “positive self-referential”, and sentences without any positive self-reference were coded as neutral. The other author undertook an Intercoder-Reliability Test for 20% of the coded sessions; the results concluded a high degree of inter-coder reliability (Cohen’s Kappa = 0.78). To determine the degree of positive self-referential content of the coded exchange, we calculated the ratio of positive self-referential units by dividing the positive self-referential units by the sum of neutral and positive self-referential units.

## **Results/Empirical Analysis**

### ***Hostility in PMQs and FMQs***

Our findings show that the exchanges between Johnson and Blackford were more personally hostile throughout the observation period. This is mirrored in the hostility ratios of Johnson compared to Sturgeon, and then Blackford compared to Carlaw. Speakers in the Scottish Parliament were, on average, less hostile to their counterparts in Westminster. However, we also find significant fluctuations in the hostility ratios of the exchanges during both FMQs and PMQs, which means that hostility can be something that is more episodic in nature rather than consistent. This is the case even when accounting for the lengths of those coded sentences (see Figure 1).

While hostility levels differ in FMQs compared with PMQs, what is interesting is that trends of hostility follow similar patterns in both cases. The average hostility of exchanges in the pre-COVID period has been the highest compared to those in March 2020 and in the months immediately post-official UK

lockdown. Indeed, the exchanges in March 2020 were the least hostile in both FMQs<sup>1</sup> and PMQs<sup>2</sup>. While the personal hostility in the exchanges during PMQs and FMQs remained lower during lockdown than pre-Covid, hostility levels have recovered somewhat since the atypical period of March 2020. However, while the levels of hostility in FMQs were still less than half that of pre-pandemic levels, the relative degree of hostility during exchanges in PMQs recovered more than this (see Figure 1).

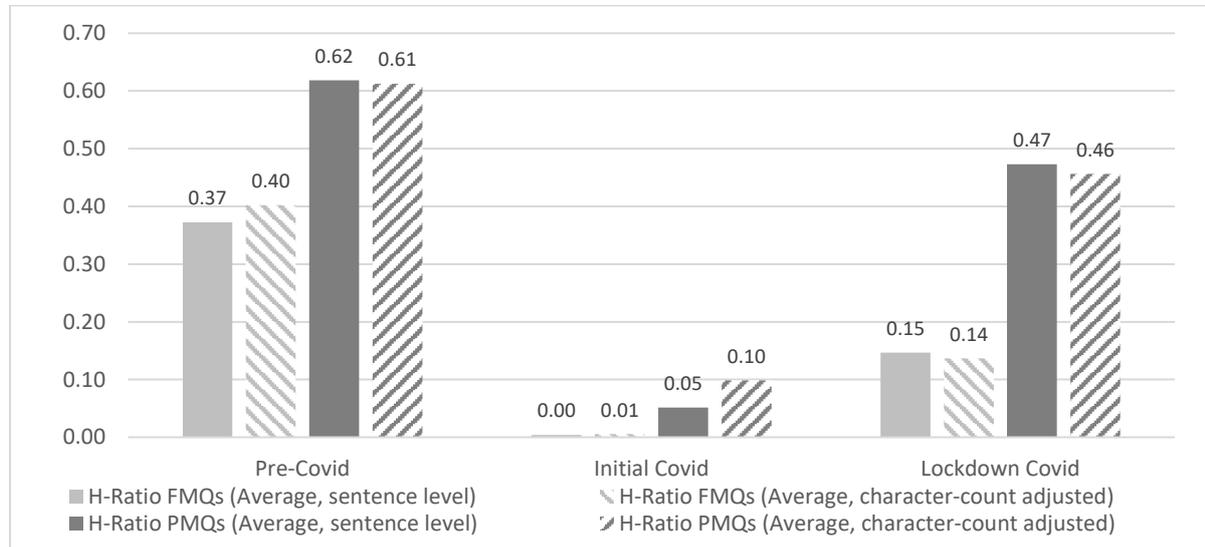


Figure 1 Average Hostility-Ratios in Exchanges in FMQs/PMQs by Time Period

The differences in the recovery of hostility levels is clear when comparing the hostility ratios of PMQs and FMQs on a week-by-week basis (see Figure 2). This comparison is particularly interesting since FMQs and PMQs took place on the same day during lockdown COVID. While the data has gaps either due to FMQs/PMQs not taking place (e.g., on the 27<sup>th</sup> May there was no PMQs but an FMQs) or because one of the leaders has been unavailable (e.g., Johnson absent due to sickness during PMQs on 22<sup>nd</sup> April and 29<sup>th</sup> April), the trend of a stronger recovery in hostility levels in PMQs is apparent.

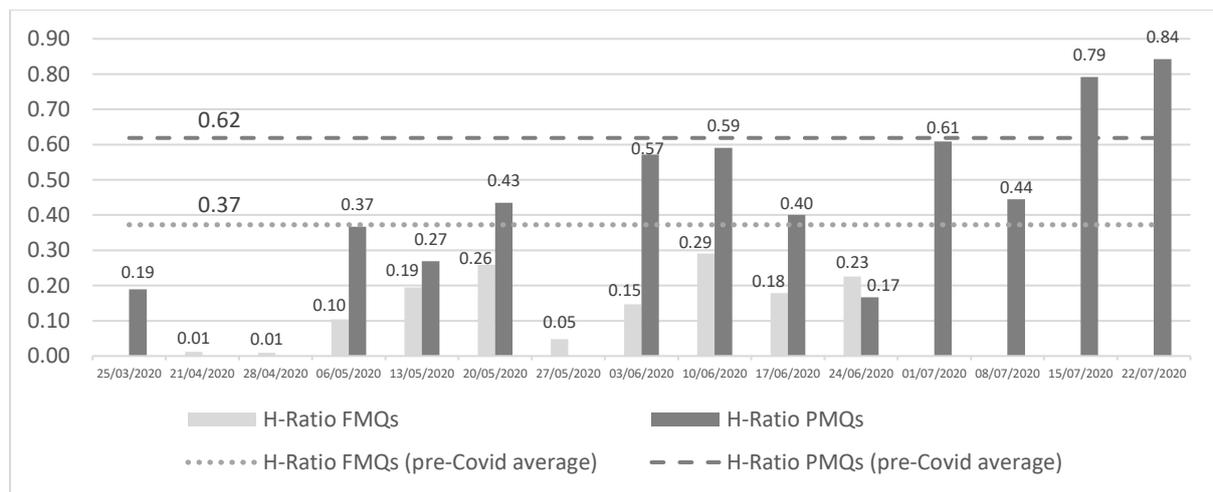


Figure 2 Hostility-Ratios of PMQs/FMQs during lockdown COVID (week by week)

<sup>1</sup> FMQs on 6<sup>th</sup> February 2020 also had a very low hostility ratio too. However, the exchange has been treated as an outlier since the subject of much of the debate surrounded allegations concerning Minister Derek Mackay MSP of grooming a teenager resulting in his resignation on the day before the FMQs. The sensitivity of the topic might have caused restraint from both sides and consequently lead to less hostility.  
<sup>2</sup> PMQs on 25<sup>th</sup> March was also of equally of low personal hostility. While we count it here as being post-lockdown, it was nonetheless very close to the initial period of first discussion and shock surrounding what to do next. Indeed, the rest of the post-lockdown data commences post-Easter recess from 6<sup>th</sup> May 2020, almost 1.5 months after the lockdown has been announced.

Comparing the pre-pandemic levels of personal attacks by the Prime Minister compared with by the First Minister, we find that Johnson’s level of personal hostility was 2.18 times higher than it was for Sturgeon’s. In contrast, the differences in the average level of hostility by the leaders of the opposition parties during the pre-pandemic were quite similar as Blackford was only 1.2 times more hostile than Carlaw (see Figure 3). However, the magnitude of differences in the hostility of exchanges in PMQs and FMQs during lockdown Covid has changed compared to exchanges pre-Covid (see Figure 4). The magnitude of hostility rose as Johnson was 3.68 times more hostile than Sturgeon, and Blackford was 2.08 times more hostile than Carlaw. Going back to the initial research question on whether politics in the Scottish Parliament is substantially different to the hostile engagements in the House of Commons, our findings can confirm a lower degree of personal hostility in the observed exchanges in FMQs compared to PMQs. However, the magnitude of the difference varies when comparing different time periods (especially pre-Covid versus lockdown Covid) and leaders (Sturgeon compared to Johnson, and Blackford compared to Carlaw).

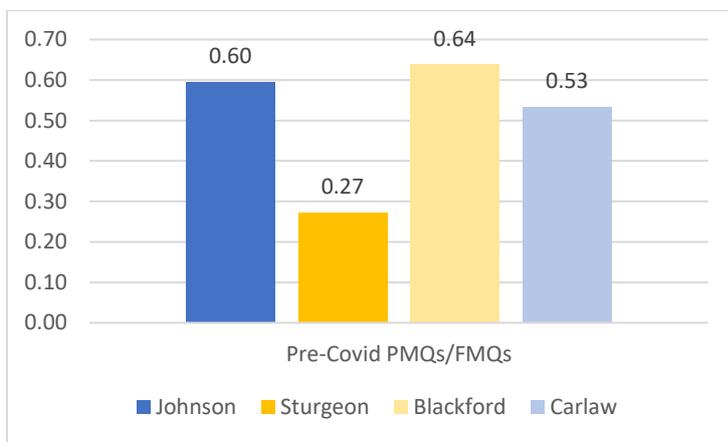


Figure 3 Hostility-Ratios of individual leaders pre-Covid

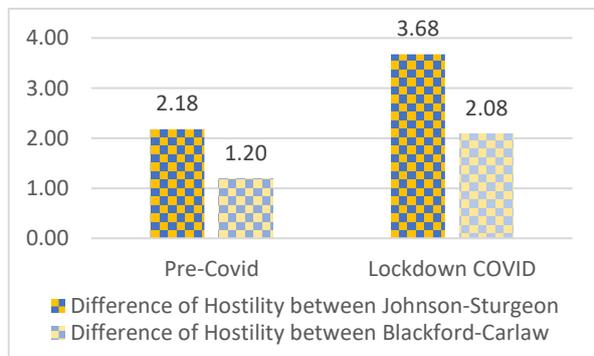


Figure 4 Difference of Magnitudes in the Hostility Levels in pre-Covid and lockdown Covid exchanges between Johnson and Sturgeon, and Blackford and Carlaw

The COVID-19 pandemic has substantially impacted levels of hostility in exchanges between political leaders in both PMQs and FMQs. While there is no conclusive evidence why personal hostilities largely ceased during initial Covid discussion pre-lockdown in March 2020 (see Figure 1), it is possible that fear and the need for more unity of approach given a common unknown threat provides a possible explanation. Leaders arguably refrained from personal attacks at the outset of Covid as this would appear petty at the time of a public emergency with heightened public concerns. Another possible explanation is the genuine concern for public health in times of crisis, which encouraged participating

leaders to be more constructive in their approach. Indeed, there is some evidence of both in this comment by Jackson Carlaw:

“Partisan rough and tumble may be the stuff that excites some of the parliamentary sketch writers, but I believe that there is a huge and understandable public appetite for detailed information on coronavirus and the measures that are being taken to deal with it. [...] The public are [sic] worried and need reassurance.” (Jackson Carlaw, *Official Report*, First Minister’s Question Time, 12 March 2020, Col. 11)

The COVID-19 pandemic has seen the introduction of social distancing measures in parliaments, which has effectively reduced the number of possible attending parliamentarians in the chambers. While our findings cannot conclusively indicate whether and to what extent social distancing measures influenced degrees of hostility, they nonetheless coincided with reduced levels of hostilities. In particular, FMQs are most suitable to be used as a case study: while both leaders participated throughout the observation period in person, social distancing measures were put in place after the lockdown had been announced, and pre-pandemic data with the same leaders is also available. If there was an impact due to social distancing measures we might also have expected hostility levels to have remained lower than pre-pandemic measures. However, beyond the first couple of sessions, there is not much evidence that this made much of a difference (see Figure 5).

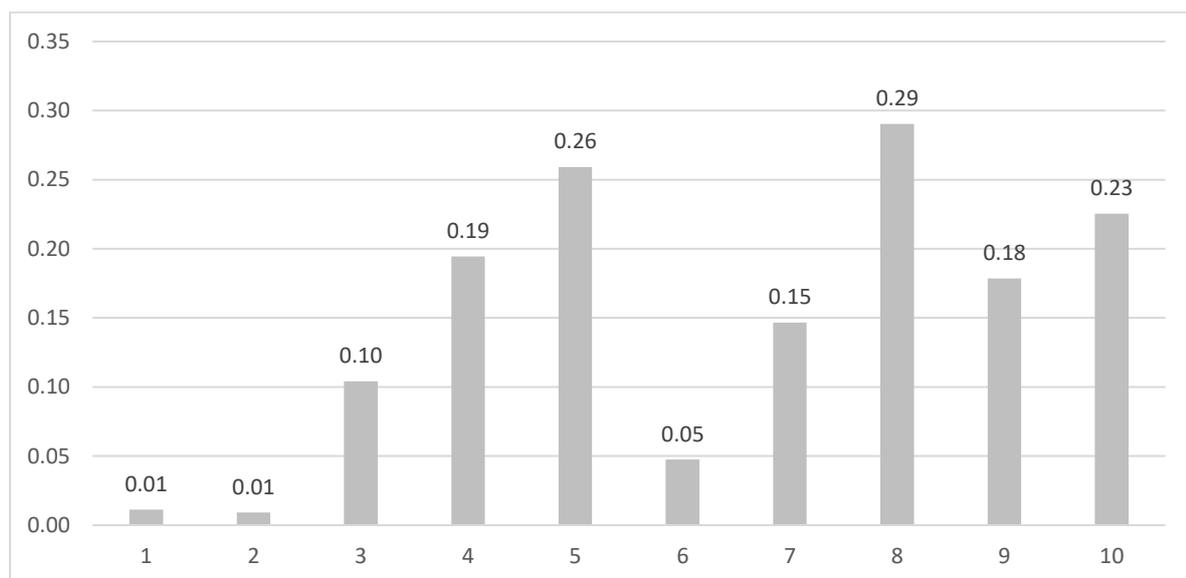


Figure 5 Hostility Levels of FMQs in lockdown Covid (numbers on x-axis represent FMQ sessions in chronological order)

Another change to PMQs and FMQs was the introduction of virtual participation. Unlike the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party leader (Jackson Carlaw), Ian Blackford participated virtually in all PMQs during lockdown Covid except one (PMQs on 15<sup>th</sup> July 2020). While virtual participation during lockdown is associated with higher levels of hostility (Blackford was 2.08 times more hostile than Carlaw, and Johnson was 3.68 times more hostile than Sturgeon – see Figure 4); if we compare the relative increases in hostility we find that while there is more hostility in Westminster in total, the ratio of hostility increase (pre-Covid versus lockdown Covid) is not that different between the two institutions. Hostility rose for Blackford in relation to Carlaw by 1.74, whereas for Johnson in relation to Sturgeon hostility rose by 1.69 (see Figure 6). However, in terms of level of difference, hostility is still more prevalent in Westminster than Holyrood (see Figure 1). That said, more research is needed here to explore all of the dynamics of the hybrid set-up versus the live set-up.

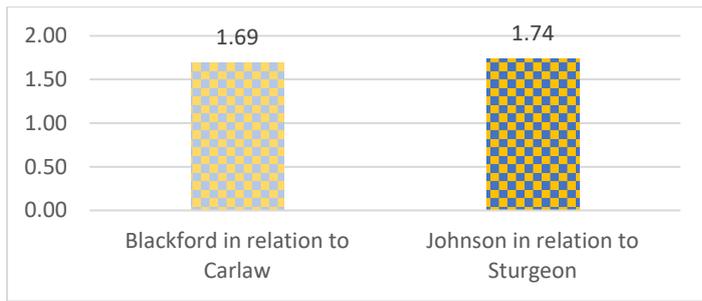


Figure 6 Relative increase of hostility between Blackford/Carlaw and Johnson/Sturgeon (pre-Covid versus lockdown Covid)

### Positive Self-Reference

Our findings suggest that the display of positive self-reference (PSR) in exchanges between Sturgeon and Carlaw differs in magnitude and trajectory compared to the exchanges between Johnson and Blackford. The ratio of positive self-references in the exchanges between the First Minister and the leader of the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party went up in the initial Covid phase (March 2020) and then down to levels below those seen during normal times once we get to lockdown Covid. Results remain largely unchanged when we control for sentence length and character count (see Figure 7).

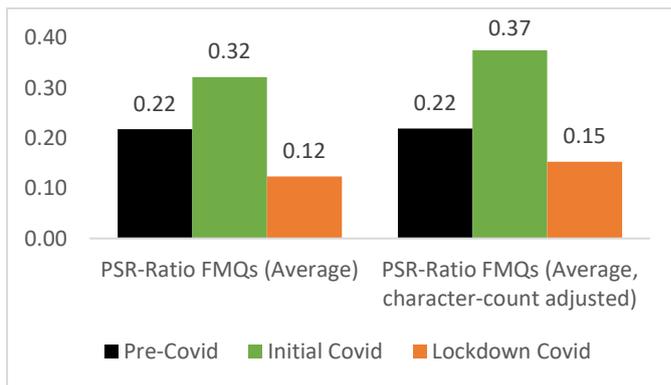


Figure 7 Average PSR-Ratios in FMQs per Time Period

In contrast, the PSR-ratio sharply declined during PMQs in the initial Covid phase (March 2020) to partially recover during lockdown Covid. Results remain largely unchanged when we control for sentence length and character count (see Figure 8).

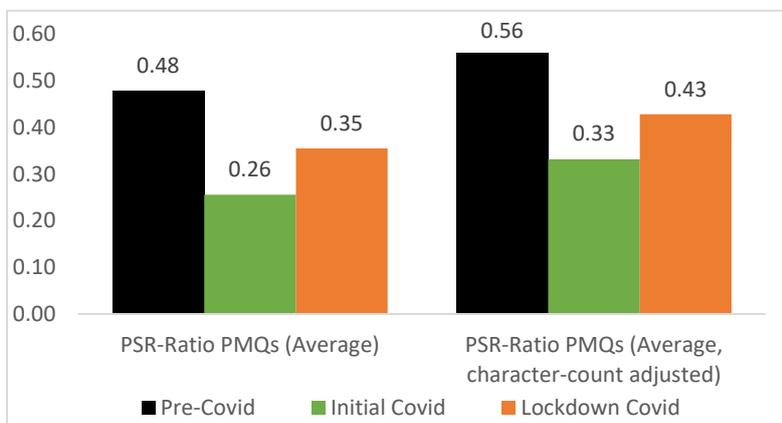


Figure 8 Average PSR-Ratios in PMQs per Time Period

PSR-ratios' magnitude and behaviour differ significantly, not just between exchanges in PMQs and FMQs but also among individual political actors. In particular, Jackson Carlaw's PSR-ratio contrasted with other leaders' PSR-ratios. While having a very low PSR-ratio in exchanges during FMQs pre-Covid and during lockdown Covid, his PSR-ratio increased significantly during the initial Covid period in March 2020 (see Figure 9).

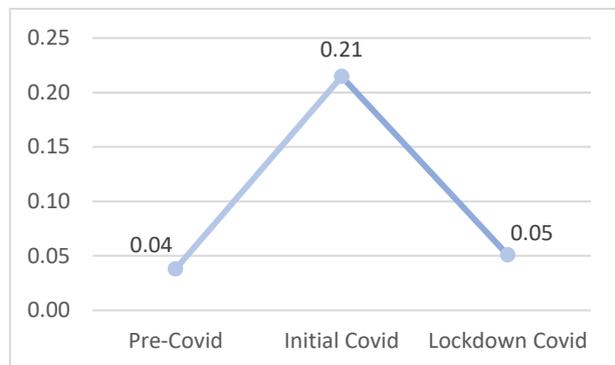


Figure 9 Average PSR-Ratio of Jackson Carlaw by Time Period

Although our findings do not allow us to provide an exhaustive explanation for this divergence, it is likely that this change in the PSR-ratios is partly shaped by the crisis situation and the Scottish context. The Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party is, in the context of the Scottish party system, a medium-sized party in contrast to the Conservative and Unionist Party in England and Wales. The Conservative and Unionist Party, the governing party in the UK, is comparatively unpopular in Scotland, and the UK government is less trusted than the Scottish government for being seen to be acting in Scotland's best interest (Reid et al., 2020).

Consequently, there are ordinarily few incentives for Carlaw to try and emphasise his connections with the Westminster Conservatives through positive self-reference as this association might damage the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party's image. However, when COVID-19 was becoming a serious world public health issue, a presumed "rally-around-the-flag" effect could have encouraged promotion of the affiliations and connections with Westminster. Indeed, it offered a rare opportunity to relate to an otherwise unpopular but closely associated political actor to promote not just the Scottish Conservatives but also the UK Union. Another explanation could be that promoting the activities of the Conservative and Unionist Party in Holyrood and Westminster was an attempt to encourage collaboration and a constructive relationship between the SNP and the Conservative and Unionists Party to deal with the crisis since both are governing parties, albeit at different levels. As Carlaw noted:

"Both of Scotland's Governments need to work together constructively and effectively."  
(Jackson Carlaw, *Official Report*, First Minister's Question Time, 5 March 2020, Col. 10).

However, March 2020 is an anomaly for FMQs versus PMQs. While Carlaw's heightened positive self-referencing during the initial Covid scare does mean that FMQs surpasses the ratio of positive self-referencing occurring during PMQs at this time (see Figure 11), positive self-referencing is still more typically found in Westminster outwith this unique period. Sturgeon's average PSR-ratio is lower than that of both Johnson and Blackford (see Figure 10), and the very low PSR-ratio by Carlaw overall (see Figure 9) further amplifies the differences we find typically between the average PSR-ratio during FMQs compared with PMQs.

In terms of relative ratios, and for the other three leaders, Figure 10 shows that while Sturgeon and Johnson and Blackford decreased their positive self-references during lockdown Covid compared with pre-Covid, the decrease was most marked for Sturgeon. The PSR for Sturgeon halved ( $0.16/0.33 = 0.48$ ) during lockdown Covid versus pre-Covid. This is a significant difference compared with Johnson ( $0.48/0.58 = 0.83$ ) and Blackford ( $0.28/0.41 = 0.68$ ). Results suggest that the SNP strategy was for a more humble approach than that of Johnson, albeit still a lot more self-promotional than Jackson Carlaw. The patterns suggest that exchanges in person became more humble than exchanges in hybrid mode.

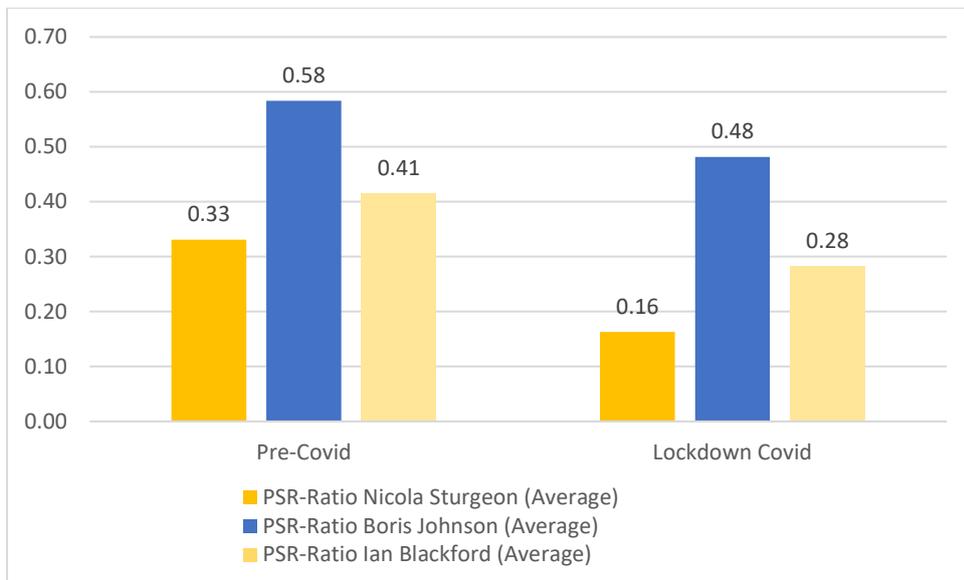


Figure 10 Average PSR-ratios of Sturgeon, Johnson and Blackford in PMQs/FMQs Pre-Covid versus Lockdown Covid

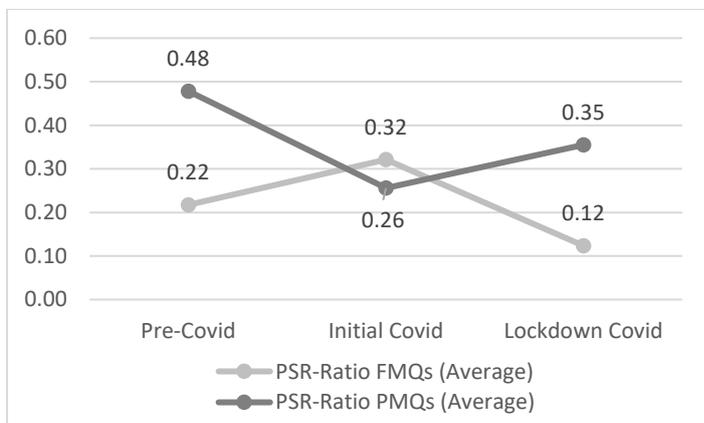


Figure 11 PSR-ratios of PMQs and FMQs in comparison (by Time Period)

### Conclusions, limitations and implications for the literature

In this paper, we explored the comparative dynamics of hostility and self-promotion during questions between Conservative and SNP leaders in Holyrood and Westminster across three time periods: pre-Covid; initial Covid; and lockdown Covid.

In terms of hostile references, we found that these were higher in Westminster than in Holyrood across all time periods. However, in both parliaments, hostility decreased markedly with the initial

onset of Covid. Moreover, hostilities quickly resumed as time elapsed and the policy (e.g. care homes) and personal mistakes (e.g. Barnard Castle) over Covid became evident.

In terms of self-promotional references, our data suggest that these were also generally higher in Westminster than in Holyrood. The only exception here was during the initial discussions/realisations around Covid, when the Scottish Conservative leader acted more positively, which we argue reflected the spirit of the urgency of the time: the need for unity and solidarity in the face of a common serious threat to public health and stability, and a unique opportunity to extol the positive benefits of working together with the UK Government as a way of enhancing union.

While face-to-face exchanges were less hostile and less self-promotional than hybrid arrangements, the pre-Covid data suggest that this was more the product of different institutions. However, one important caveat to our research is that the variance in our findings (especially in terms of the positive self-references) might have little or nothing to do with the differing institutional arrangements.

While we might expect more hostility and self-promotion in an adversarial chamber arrangement with a hybrid setting rather than in a hemispherical chamber and live setting, our findings might be more of a reflection of the different policy and personal decisions, as well as the individuals we analysing, including as well the dynamics of individual pairings and different levels of intensities of dislike for the other in those pairings (e.g. Johnson versus Blackford). Also, while the differences in the time frame during the lockdown Covid period make a week- by-week contrast difficult, FMQs in the Pre-Covid and initial-Covid periods typically took place a day after PMQs and so hostilities and positive self-references during PMQs on Wednesdays may have taken some of the wind out of the political sails by FMQs on Thursdays. In effect, for the first two periods, while there were 5 days for issues to build up in between FMQs and PMQs, there was only one day in between PMQs and FMQs. However, this does not explain continued patterns of difference between the two institutions post-lockdown. Finally, and arguably of more salience, there are more MPs (650) than MSPs (129), and even accounting for social distancing measures, this does make for higher levels of noise (support or opposition) in Westminster than Holyrood.

That said, we did find that Covid had a chilling effect on the usual level of hostilities between party leaders. While this was short-lived, results suggest that leaders can put aside more of their differences when an issue is pressing. Conversely, positive self-references can show signs of sudden increase (e.g. Jackson Carlaw) when Covid first hit and we presented some evidence that this reflected the need to all pull together to get through a crisis that was bigger than national frontiers. So, while our data show that Scottish Conservatives typically lie low in terms of their self-promotion (not wanting to associate Scottish Conservatives with the actions of largely English Conservatives), during the initial stages of Covid, talking positively about all levels of government and the need to act ensemble became evident.

The implications of our research for the literature are several. First, literature to date has suggested that 'new politics' in Scotland has not manifested, in large part due to the institutional legacy of the Westminster model in Scotland and to the continuation and perpetuation of party political animosities. However, our data do suggest that Holyrood is less hostile than Westminster, and most importantly, less hostile during a procedure that is virtually identical to that in Westminster. That said, and as mentioned above, this could be the product of the dynamics between the leaders themselves (more hostility between Johnson and Blackford than between Sturgeon and Carlaw) and less a reflection of the different institutions themselves. Consequently, although there are differences in behaviors across the two institutions, this does not necessarily equate to 'new politics' per se.

Second, while hybrid arrangements do seem to coincide with comparatively more hostility and positivity than face-to-face, once we account for pre-hybrid arrangements, the relative relationships

between the two institutions hold (except for positivity measures during a brief period in the Scottish Parliament), suggesting that institutions and leaders are more important than internal procedural operations.

Third, and finally, our data add weight to the crisis literature that points to heightened levels of cross-party elite co-operation during periods of serious crises. That said, like much of the literature, our data also point to a decay to that co-operation over time, albeit interestingly more delayed for Holyrood than Westminster.

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Category	Explanation	Example
<b>Attacks on associated persons or closely linked organisations (Category 1)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>aiming at the relationship of the person and the third party, the attack must concern a closely linked organisation or a closely linked person (such as a friend, an aid, or a colleague)</li> <li>the third person or associated organisation must be identified as an element of the person's identity or behaviour</li> <li>subcategories mirror categories 2-7</li> </ul>	<p>"It was also the Conservatives who robbed the Police Service of Scotland of £125 million in VAT, which should never have been claimed." (Sturgeon to Carlaw, 23-01-2020)</p> <p>"As those on the Government Benches bray, it is clear that this place simply does not accept the reality that the Scottish Parliament speaks for the people of Scotland." (Blackford to Johnson, 22-01-2020)</p>
<b>Attacks on integrity (Category 2)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>attacks directed to core qualities of the person as a party leader, government official or parliamentarian</li> <li>attacks must include accusation of the person concerned as being self-serving or deceptive or genuinely untrustworthy (e.g., reference to spin doctoring) or genuinely unreliable or evil or explicitly undemocratic =&gt; attacks which are not explicitly contain these accusations should be assigned to Category 3</li> </ul>	<p>"So, spin to the first question, denial to the second—spin and denial: the twin pillars of this Government." (Carlaw to Sturgeon, 09-01-2020)</p> <p>"This was not a surprise: the Prime Minister is a democracy denier." (Blackford to Johnson, 15-01-2020)</p>
<b>Attacks on character traits and endorsed policies (Category 3)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>attacks on character traits not mentioned in Category 2 ("Attacks on Integrity")</li> <li>the accusation of incompetence in executing endorsed policies/politics/political actions</li> <li>the accusation of endorsing ineffective/inefficient policies</li> <li>charges of misplaced political priorities, which may undermine the success of (more relevant) policies</li> </ul>	<p>"Having promised five years ago that education would be her number 1 priority, is it not time for the First Minister to make it exactly that?" (Carlaw to Sturgeon, 09-01-2020)</p> <p>"I know that Jackson Carlaw wants to talk down the Scottish education system, but he should not be allowed to do so." (Sturgeon to Carlaw, 27-02-2020)</p>
<b>Attacks that are patronising or condescending (Category 4)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>attacks implying apparent misjudgements and failures which are supposedly undetected by the attacked person</li> <li>attacks indicating inappropriate behaviour or child-like/amateur-like behaviour</li> <li>attacks suggesting a limited cognitive and intellectual capacity</li> </ul>	<p>"I think that Jackson Carlaw should reflect on the premise of the question that he is asking me today." (Sturgeon to Carlaw, 09-01-2020)</p> <p>"Once again, the Prime Minister shows that he is utterly delusional." (Blackford to Johnson, 26-02-2020)</p>
<b>Mockery (Category 5)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>making fun, being sarcastic, or is joking about the attacked</li> <li>supposedly humorous critique on either the person's character or their actions</li> </ul>	<p>"The cliché meter was ringing loud there, was it not?" (Carlaw to Sturgeon, 23-01-2020)</p> <p>"Apparently, their great strategy amounts to more UK Cabinet Ministers coming to Scotland." (Blackford to Johnson, 22-07-2020)</p>
<b>Badgering and Rhetorical Questions (Category 6)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>repeated asking of questions implying or indicating (political/policy) failure</li> <li>usage of rhetorical questions attacking character traits or endorsed policies or integrity of the person</li> </ul>	<p>"How difficult is it not to reconcile Derek Mackay's conduct with the very worst connotation?" (Carlaw to Sturgeon, 06-02-2020)</p> <p>"Is that progress? First Minister, is any of that in any way acceptable?" (Carlaw to Sturgeon, 30-01-2020)</p>
<b>Negative Labels or Names (Category 7)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>using negatively connotated (short) phrases or terms or negatively connotated metaphors/analogies to label the attacked person</li> <li>using negatively connotated (short) phrases or terms or negatively connotated metaphors/analogies to label the behaviour or character of the person</li> </ul>	<p>"rocketing pheasant" (Johnson to Blackford, 22-01-2020)</p>
<b>Implication or accusation of enduring negative character trait or malpractice (Category 8)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>categories 1-7 must be applicable, but attack must emphasise an enduring quality beyond a single event or the short term</li> <li>short term excludes notions off the continuation of a particular trait or actions (e.g., you acted like that in the past and continue acting like it now)</li> <li>dimension beyond the short-term and the enduring quality must be explicitly mentioned (being just implied would not be enough to qualify for this category)</li> </ul>	<p>"I note that she did not quote Professor Lindsay Paterson; she always chooses the selective quotes of people who will cheerlead for her argument." (Carlaw to Sturgeon, 27-02-2020)</p> <p>"We have had years of missed opportunity from a distracted and disengaged government." (Carlaw to Sturgeon, 23-01-2020)</p>

Category	Explanation	Example
Reference to own values and identity (Category 1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>can refer to own values or specific elements of the identity</li> <li>can refer to manifestations of these values or identities (e.g., specific institutions)</li> <li>example for Unionists: direct or indirect reference to Unionist values or UK's Union</li> <li>example for Separatists: direct or indirect reference to the value of independence, autonomy, or separate status as a nation</li> </ul>	<p>"First, I pay tribute to our front-line NHS staff, which I am sure will be echoed across the chamber." (Sturgeon to Carlaw, 05-03-2020)</p> <p>"Beyond that, work is being done across all four nations to come to the right definition." (Sturgeon to Carlaw, 19-03-2020)</p>
Reference to own policies, policy proposals or political actions (Category 2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>reference to proposals or policies where the speaker implies ownership and refers positively to it</li> <li>ownership reference with either implied involvement or explicit involvement</li> <li>focus needs to be on own role on those proposals, policies, or political actions</li> </ul>	<p>"From the action that has been taken already, it should be obvious to everybody how seriously I, my Government and my party treat the matter." (Sturgeon to Carlaw, 06-02-2020)</p> <p>"I do not think anybody listening to my speech on Monday could have mistaken it for having anything but the most passionate internationalist, globalist, open, outward-looking approach." (Johnson to Blackford, 05-02-2020)</p>
Reference to policies, policy proposals, values, or political actions by third parties associated with the speaker (Category 3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>needs to match positive reference of either category 1 or category 2</li> <li>reference to another person (e.g., cabinet member, a party member) or institution / any entity with a close association is required</li> <li>two subcategories mirror category 1 and 2</li> </ul>	<p>"On wider performance, we know that there is more work to be done in Scottish education, which is why it remains this Government's top priority." (Sturgeon to Carlaw, 09-01-2020)</p> <p>"We have an extensive benefits system, free for people across this country, and indeed, our health system is very well managed and very well prepared for this epidemic." (Johnson to Blackford, 11-03-2020)</p>
References that address category 1 to 3 and implied enduring character (Category 4)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>reference must fit in either category</li> <li>reference must imply an enduring quality and not an on-off incident, this includes references to ongoing processes or reference to continue something as long as it doesn't refer to an on-off event (e.g., COVID)</li> <li>three subcategories (in case of category 3 it also includes further subcategories) mirror category 1 to 3</li> </ul>	<p>"Although it is not something that I encourage, I always defend people's right to express their view if they have the opportunity to do so." (Carlaw to Sturgeon, 09-01-2020)</p> <p>"We will continue to invest massively in Scotland because Scotland, like the whole of the UK, benefits from being part of the oldest and most successful political partnership anywhere in the world." (Johnson to Blackford, 24-06-2020)</p>

Annexe 2 Coding Schedule on Positive Self-Reference with Explanations and Examples.