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Abstract

Why do MPs devote attention to some issues while ignoring others? The question of the issue content of parliamentary activities has been neglected in previous research. The authors use longitudinal data on parliamentary questioning in Belgium and Denmark, two similar European democracies. The analyses show that the questioning behavior of MPs is structured according to clear patterns. Opposition parties ask more questions in general. MPs tend to focus on the issues the government parties have put forward as being important. Furthermore, MPs ask more questions about issues the media have paid attention to and about issues their party cares about and identifies with. In their questioning, opposition MPs are more strongly influenced by issue ownership and media coverage. The Belgian and Danish MPs follow largely the same pattern.

Keywords

agenda setting, Belgium, Denmark, Question Time, parliamentary control

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Parliament is one of the key institutions in contemporary democracies. It passes legislation and controls the executive. Scholarly work on parliaments has mainly concentrated on two topics: the changing institutional power of parliaments vis-à-vis the government (e.g., Döring, 1995; Heller, 2001) and the role behavior of individual members of parliament (MPs; see, e.g., Müller & Saalfeld, 1997). Much less attention has been paid to the issues parliaments deal with. The central claim of this study is that to better understand how parliaments work, we need to focus on the *content* MPs deal with in their daily activities. By focusing on what MPs question, legislate, organize hearings about, and talk about, we can lay bare the mechanisms and antecedents of parliamentary behavior. Second, to understand what topics MPs deal with in parliament we must focus on the role of political parties and party competition, and in particular on the government–opposition cleavage. This seems trivial, but the extant literature regarding parliamentary questioning almost totally neglects this evident fact. Wiberg (1995) complains about “the almost total absence of the political dynamics involved in (the literature on) questioning. . . . We neither know nor understand the incentive structure relating to the various actors involved in parliamentary interactions” (p. 183). Similarly, Damgaard (1994) calls for research that goes beyond dealing with single questions but analyses questions “as possible elements in a wider party competition strategy” (p. 73). Until now, attempts to do so have been limited. Focusing on the content of questions enables us to put the political dynamics center stage and to lay bare the party competition strategy underlying parliamentary action.

Why is focusing on the content of parliamentary action so revealing? From an agenda-setting perspective, the resources of MPs and their parties are inevitably scarce—they have limited time, energy, effort, and institutional opportunity to devote attention to issues. In principle, the number of issues MPs may deal with is infinite as the real world produces an endless array of concerns (Jones & Baumgartner, 2005). Because of the bottleneck of attention, only a limited number of issues will get attention in parliament whereas others remain outside the scope of parliamentary attention. Opting for one issue instead of another reflects a choice from the side of parties and their MPs. Continuous issue prioritization under circumstances of scarcity turns the issues parties decide to address in parliament into a powerful instrument to reveal the mechanisms of parliamentary action.

MPs do many things. The most obvious function of parliament is to pass legislation. In many countries, though, the government dominates the legislative process. Government initiates most laws (Ström, Müller, & Bergman, 2003). Consequently, the role of parliament has shifted and the parliamentary

control function, scrutinizing government's actions, became the most important aspect of parliamentary life (Green-Pedersen, 2010). Studies have shown that the number of questions has gone up considerably in most countries during the past decades. The main instance of parliamentary control, and the focus of this article, is MPs asking questions of specific ministers or the cabinet as a whole. Most of the time, once a week, MPs get the opportunity to monitor the government and pose it any question they see fit and the government responds immediately (oral questions) or after a short delay (written questions). Although the number of questions has risen in most countries, the carrying capacity of the questioning institution is not unlimited; parties typically get a number of question slots, which means that the issues addressed in their questions reflect an explicit choice.

Parliamentary questioning is relevant not just because it may have become the only truly parliamentary activity. Questioning also is the main institutional arena where government and opposition clash. Focusing on questions allows us to study directly the interaction between government and opposition. Conversely, our main explanatory variable affecting what issues are addressed by what parties is the government or opposition position parliamentary parties sit in. We employ the government–opposition dialectic to understand why some issues are preferred above others by specific parties. Government and opposition MPs devote attention to other issues for different reasons. That the government–opposition cleavage is the engine of parliamentary questioning implies that studying questions from this perspective generates findings that can be applied to other aspects of the parliamentary game. Also lawmaking, for example, is deeply rooted in the parliamentary competition between government and opposition.

Finally, examining the content of parliamentary questions is important as parties use questions to set the political agenda more generally. Parties use Question Time to highlight their pet topics, force other parties to react to those topics, and set the broader political agenda of issues that are currently debated in the entire polity. For example, Green-Pedersen and Mortensen (2009) show for the Danish case that questions posed by opposition parties are (indirectly) connected to and exert influence on the content of the prime minister's speeches and more generally and directly on the topics dealt with in the debates in parliament. Questions matter as they not only are part of but also determine to a considerable extent the broader political agenda.

We examine parliamentary questions in Belgium and Denmark, two small parliamentary democracies. Both polities are in many aspects similar with proportional electoral rules, a fragmented party system, and coalition governments. A key difference is that Danish coalitions most of the time are

minority cabinets—Denmark is the world's record holder when it comes to minority cabinets (Damgaard, 2003), whereas Belgian cabinets always have a clear and often very large majority in parliament (to revise the Constitution, a frequent activity in Belgium). The peculiarity of minority cabinets is likely to affect the agenda-setting dynamics in the Danish Folketing, whereas the exceptional size of the Belgian cabinets may also have an effect on the questioning in the Belgian Kamer. Despite these differences, our study focuses on the similarities in the questioning behavior in both countries.

We draw on oral question and interpellation evidence in the Belgian parliament (1993–2000) and on written (and some oral) questions and interpellations in the Danish parliament (1984–2003). All questions are coded for issue content. As independent variables, we rely on data about other political agendas that are issue coded using a similar issue codebook: government agreement, party manifestos, and mass media coverage. Altogether, these data form an exceptional data set. Not only do we have quite unique longitudinal data about the content of parliamentary questions in two countries, we match this evidence with information of issue prioritization on other political agendas.

Theory and Hypotheses

Parliamentary questioning offers opportunities to the questioners to present information that is useful to themselves (or their party) while, if possible, harmful to their opponent. As the advantageousness of a question depends on the issue—this is the basic tenet of the issue-ownership literature—and as the opportunity to ask questions is institutionally limited, MPs do not engage blindly in tabling questions but rather choose the content of their intervention carefully to maximize its gains. Parliamentary control is an instrument of party competition (Green-Pedersen, 2010).

Hardly any previous empirical work has dealt with the issue content of parliamentary questions (exceptions include Soroka, 2002a; Soroka, Penner, & Bidook, 2009). Most work has focused on the institutional rules shaping control activities or on the legislative impact of parliaments (e.g., Frears, 1990; Norton, 1990). The only substantive information on what MPs deal with related to which ministers questions were addressed to (e.g., Mattson, 1994; Wiberg, 1994). This information hardly reveals the issue, nor is it informative as to where the question came from. Other parliamentary control research has focused on global quantitative trends in questions and/or explained these trends (e.g., Damgaard, 1994; Wiberg, 1994). Comparative evidence on the issue content of questions in several countries is lacking entirely. We already cited Wiberg's and Damgaard's complaints about the

“apolitical” way parliamentary questioning has been dealt with and argue that focusing on the content of questions enables us to incorporate the necessary political factors in parliamentary oversight research.

As a point of departure we assume that MPs talk about issues to destabilize the opponent and to gain leverage for themselves or their party. Broadly speaking, through questions MPs force ministers to state an opinion about issues the minister would often prefer not to voice an opinion about or, in contrast, to address issues the minister is very keen to address (Wiberg, 1994, p. 123). As a consequence, we expect MPs’ questioning behavior to be affected by the government–opposition fault line; government and opposition MPs occupy an institutionally different position, leading to contradicting stimuli.

First, it is evident that the number of parliamentary questions asked by an MP (party) depends on his or her institutional position. By asking questions in parliament, especially opposition parties can raise issues the government is forced to react to. In general, we can assume that questioning ministers is the home turf of opposition MPs; questioning is a control activity and it is the opposition’s main duty to control the government. However, the literature on parliamentary control presents a mixed picture as to the number of questions asked by government and opposition parties. Damgaard (1994) reports on the Danish Folketing, where the vast majority of the questions are tabled by the opposition. Rasch (1994, pp. 266-268) examined the Norwegian Storting and found that the opposition asks more questions but that government MPs frequently ask questions too. The same applies to the Swedish Rikstag (Mattson, 1994, p. 307). In the U.K. Lower House, both government and opposition ask a more or less equal number of questions (Borthwick, 1993), and the same applies to the Finnish Eduskunta (Wiberg, 1994, pp. 155-161). Analyses have shown that parties’ questioning changes profoundly in quantitative terms when they switch from government to the opposition, and vice versa (see, for the Danish Folketing, Damgaard, 1994, pp. 67-70). MPs become a lot more active when they belong to the opposition. In sum, in none of the recorded cases do government MPs dominate parliamentary questioning, and in most cases opposition MPs are more active questioners.

Second, not only the number but also the content of the questions asked by government or opposition MPs may differ. This is suggested but never tested in extant work. For example, Wiberg and Koura (1994) state,

Opposition MPs will always pose inconvenient questions. . . . MPs from the parties in government want to pose more convenient questions. . . . His or her chief purpose is to help the cabinet distribute information that is believed to be politically expedient for the cabinet. (p. 23)

Indeed, even if opposition parties tend to ask more questions, government MPs may have strong stimuli to engage in oversight activities too. To account for this “awkward” control behavior by government MPs, we need to know more about the content of their questions. Government party MP questions are sometimes “arranged,” which means that the origin of the question lays within the cabinet; a government MP poses a question to give a minister the opportunity to publicize governments’ opinion on an issue. Also, government MPs may have individual reasons to be active in tabling questions and interpellations: They can gain personal publicity, serve their constituency, and get personal recognition (Rasch, 1994). Finally, government MPs may also ask questions of ministers belonging to another government party (Mattson, 1994, p. 309). This way, they try to sharpen their party’s profile and attempt to “reclaim” part of the portfolio of another government party’s minister and demonstrate their party’s stance. This should apply in particular to large cabinets with a lot of different coalition parties.

Drawing on these general ideas, we formulate five hypotheses about the content of Belgian and Danish MPs’ parliamentary questions: Hypotheses 1 to 3 regard the main effects of other political agendas (government agreement, party manifestos, and mass media coverage) on the content of questions, whereas Hypotheses 4 and 5 test our assumptions about the different logic of opposition and government questioning.

In a coalition system with several parties forming a cabinet, as is the case both in Belgium and in Denmark, a government agreement is made. The government agreement contains government’s main policy pledges. More than in Denmark, the Belgian government agreement is a kind of “bible” that government parties refer to when enacting policy and when monitoring other parties (De Winter, Timmermans, & Dumont, 2000). Government parties’ MPs cannot openly criticize the government agreement, but when other government parties do not respect the agreement they react and may subject ministers from other parties to questions. Moreover, opposition parties know they can hurt the government amidsthips when they are able to challenge it on issues that it has announced in the government agreement. Thus, both opposition parties and government parties have incentives to focus their parliamentary action on the topics addressed in the government agreement: The more attention an issue receives in the government agreement, the more attention will be devoted to it in parliamentary questions (Hypothesis 1 [H1]).

Some parties are considered by the public at large to be more capable than other parties of dealing with some issues. Parties are the “owners” of issues when they are widely considered to be most competent to deal with the issue (Budge & Farlie, 1983; Petrocik, 1996). One of the ways in which parties

claim ownership over issues is by devoting a lot of attention to these issues in their party manifestos (Walgrave & De Swert, 2004, 2007). We expect parties to focus on their issues in parliament and to put questions on issues they are identified with as this yields them a competitive advantage. The more attention a party devotes to an issue in its party manifesto, the more attention it will devote to that issue in its parliamentary questions (Hypothesis 2 [H2]).

In the past few years, a growing stream of studies has started to explore the impact of the mass media on the political agenda. Many students have found that mass media coverage, to varying extents, affects the political agenda and more specifically control activities in parliament (Soroka, 2002a, 2002b; Trumbo, 1995; van Noije, Kleinnijenhuis, & Oegema, 2008; Vliegenthart & Roggeband, 2007; Walgrave, Soroka, & Nuytemans, 2008). Evidence for this influence exists for Belgium (Walgrave et al., 2008) as well as for Denmark (Green-Pedersen & Stubager, 2010). We derive the following hypothesis from that literature: The more attention the media devote to an issue, the more attention will be devoted to that issue in parliamentary questions (Hypothesis 3 [H3]).

Apart from the main effects of the government agreement, party manifestos, and mass media coverage, two more hypotheses deal with the interaction between party position and these alternative agendas and with the effect of this interaction on the issue content of a party's questions. Government and opposition MPs' questions have a diverging logic—attacking government versus promoting government, pursuing personal interests versus monitoring ministers from other coalition parties. First, opposition parties do not carry out the government agreement. Their MPs are less constraint by topics they can cover in their questions. The only binding document for an opposition party is its party manifesto: This is what the party promised to fight for, there is no other guideline or standard, there is no confusing, compromising, or accommodating adherence to the governmental project as a whole. More than government MPs, thus, we expect opposition MPs to remain loyal to their party manifesto and to table questions in line with their manifesto. Moreover, as opposition parties are on average smaller parties—the largest parties are part of the government—they are more likely to be single-issue parties, to be owners of issues, and to display a clear issue profile in their manifesto. When asking questions, opposition parties, more than government parties, raise issues that are prominent in their election program (Hypothesis 4 [H4]).

We also expect opposition parties to react more directly than government parties to media coverage. By asking questions opposition parties can raise issues the government is forced to react to. In a coalition system, government MPs have to act cautiously as they might destabilize government, whereas

opposition MPs use whatever ammunition at hand to attack government. Continuously reporting on the political and societal state of affairs, media coverage generates a lot of potential ammunition for the opposition, whereas government MPs cannot simply respond to the media as they have to await government's reaction (also see Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006). In sum, opposition MPs are less constrained in reacting to media coverage than are government MPs. On top of this, government parties cannot pick and choose issues as they see fit; they have to offer credible solutions to problems and cannot back away from an issue if it would turn out to become disadvantageous (Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2009). So our final hypothesis is the following: Opposition parties' parliamentary control is more affected by media coverage than government parties' actions (Hypothesis 5 [H5]).

Data and Method

We draw on two data sets: one of all oral questions and interpellations in the Belgian Chamber (Kamer) 1993-2000 and the other one of mainly written and some oral questions tabled in Danish Parliament (Folketing) 1984-2003. For Belgium, we do not distinguish between oral questions and interpellations, although there are formal differences between questions and interpellations. Interpellations are in principle devoted to matters of general interest, lead to a debate, and can be followed by a vote of nonconfidence in the government. All these features do not apply to oral questions. The Belgian data exclusively contain oral activities, whereas the Danish data are mainly written parliamentary activities. Yet the political *function* of these activities in the two countries is identical: both types of questions or interpellations basically are control activities in which parliament monitors what the government is doing or not doing. In Belgium the control function is mainly carried out orally, whereas this is done in writing in Denmark. As a consequence of the similar function of the covered questions in Belgium and in Denmark, we expect similar dynamics in both countries.

For Belgium we coded all parliamentary records for the 1993-2000 period, containing 10,556 oral questions and interpellations. Issue codes are based on the internationally employed hierarchical EuroVoc thesaurus, designed for coding all EU documents (<http://eurovoc.europa.eu>). This thesaurus contains 6,075 different hierarchically structured descriptors. Mainly relying on aggregate categories, we reduced the total number of codes to 110. But using all 110 issue categories for analyses would mean that many categories would be very small and equal to zero much of the time. Therefore, the 110 issues were further combined, and our analyses consequently rely on a

collapsed form of the data set, where the 110 issues are collapsed into 25 major issue categories. In the final analyses, the “other” issue category is excluded since it includes a wide variety of divergent and unrelated topics. For Denmark, we use the data available through the Danish agenda-setting project (<http://www.agendasetting.dk>). The Danish data comprise 43,638 parliamentary questions tabled between 1984 and 2003—the total Danish question data set encompasses a longer period, but there are no media data available before 1984. These questions are mainly written ones, with the exception of 527 questions that have been asked during Question Time, held in Danish parliament since 1997. The Danish coding scheme differs somewhat from the Belgian and is derived from the scheme being used for the U.S. agenda-setting project. In the Danish case, 236 detailed codes are also collapsed into 23 issue categories that are very comparable to the Belgian categories. For Denmark, in the actual analyses the foreign affairs issue is excluded. This category takes up a considerable amount of especially media attention and covers a wide range of events and topics that are not likely to spur any domestic political reaction, simply because of the fact that those issues are outside the borders of authority of the Danish parliament. This leaves us with 22 issues for Denmark.

In the analyses, we use as a dependent variable the weekly percentage of parliamentary questions in Belgian or Danish Parliament about any of 24 or 22, respectively, issues by each of the political parties that were represented during our research period. All of the questions asked in a given week add up to 100% of the attention. Thus, with 10 parties in parliament, the average party controls 10% of the agenda in a given week.

We use a weekly aggregation level for two reasons. First, it encompasses what one can call the shortest “political cycle” with one question session per week. Second, as Vliegthart and Walgrave (IN PRESS) have demonstrated, effects (of the media) on the parliamentary questioning agenda are mainly short term, and a weekly time span seems to be appropriate. Belgian parliament does not meet every week, and those weeks in which no parliamentary activity took place are excluded, leaving 236 weeks for the 8 years that are used in our analyses in Belgium. A total of 10 political parties were represented in the Belgian parliament during (part of) this period, resulting in a total of 55,152 units of analysis. For the Belgian analyses we use 1-week lags between the independent and dependent variables. For Denmark, we have a longer research period at our disposal. Furthermore, the Danish parliament meets more regularly. This results in a total of 993 weeks for the 20 years we used in our analyses. In all, 11 parties were represented during (parts of) this 20-year time span, resulting in a total of 180,837 Danish cases. By far most

Danish parliamentary questions are written questions, or at least are answered in writing (Damgaard, 1994, p. 53), and we have the exact date of the answer only for those questions at our disposal—written answers should be produced by the government within 1 to 2 weeks after the question. Hence, for the Danish analyses we use longer lags, averaging the scores of the independent variables lagged 1 to 3 weeks.

For the independent variables, we have asymmetric data at our disposal: we have one more data series available in Belgium than in Denmark and, hence, can test one more hypothesis in the Belgian than in the Danish context. We include government agreement evidence in Belgium, whereas we do not have these data in Denmark. The reason is that there is not a strong tradition of government agreements in Denmark, at least not prior to 2001. Still, as the government agreement is theoretically very relevant, we decided to keep the Belgian government agreement data on board and to limit our test of the related hypothesis to one country only. That we have a bit more data on Belgium does not affect our results: We ran the Belgian models with and without the government agreement variable, and this did not affect the direction or significance of the other variables in the model.

The independent variables are operationalized as follows:

Opposition party: A dummy variable was created indicating for each political party whether it was during a certain week member a government (value 0) or an opposition party (value 1). In the Danish case, parties move in and out of government without elections and more regularly switch position.

Size party: The size of the party was measured by the number of parliamentary seats it held in a certain week as a percentage of the total number of seats in parliament.

Government agreement: To assess the influence of typical government issues we coded the three agreements in Belgium that were relevant for the research period (drawn up after the elections in 1991, 1995, and 1999) in a similar way as the parliamentary questions and used the percentage of the total attention devoted to each of the 25 issues for all the weeks preceding the next government agreement. As mentioned, for Denmark we do not have similar government agreement data.

Issue ownership: To assess issue ownership we coded party manifestoes drawn up before the elections of 1991, 1995, and 1999 for each party that gained parliamentary seats using the same coding scheme as for the parliamentary agenda. Thus we assessed the importance

each party attributed to each of the 25 issues and used those values until the publication of the next party manifesto. Two parties did not issue party manifestoes and were therefore excluded from the analyses. For Denmark, we use similar data based on attention to 23 issues in party manifestoes that were issued before the elections in 1981, 1984, 1987, 1988, 1990, 1994, 1998, and 2001. Since party manifestoes differ considerably in length across parties, we use the percentage a party devotes to an issue in a party manifesto.

Media: For Belgium the media database comprises the main evening news of the four major TV stations, two Dutch-speaking (TV1 and VTM) and two French-speaking (RTBF and RTL) stations, and five major newspapers (Dutch: *De Standaard*, *De Morgen*, and *Het Laatste Nieuws*; French: *La Libre Belgique* and *Le Soir*). We coded all front-page newspaper stories, with the exception of newspapers that appeared on Tuesdays and Thursdays, on a daily basis. The prime-time TV news (7:00 p.m.) was coded in its entirety on a daily basis. The media were coded according to the same procedure as the parliamentary questions and interpellations. We decided to lump together all Belgian media outlets in a single media variable. To ensure causality, the media variable was lagged one week. For Denmark, we use codings of the radio news of 12:00 a.m. and 6:30 p.m. on the national news station produced by the Danish Broadcasting Corporation DR. These are long versions of the hourly broadcasted news broadcasts. They can be argued to be an adequate reflection of the Danish news environment (Green-Pedersen & Stubager, 2010). The radio news were coded in a less detailed way than the parliamentary questions were, but the codings were aggregated into the same 23 broader issue categories. For Denmark, the media variable is the average score for lags of 1 to 3 weeks, as we want to know what generated the question and not the answer that usually follows 1 to 2 weeks later and from which the data were registered.

To test H4 and H5, for the government–opposition variable and for both the issue ownership and media variables, interaction terms were created by multiplying the value of the government–opposition variable and the value of the other independent variable.

To fully focus on the content of questions we control in the analyses for general quantitative questioning patterns. We also consider party position and party size as controls. Indeed, previous work has found not only that

opposition parties are more active questioners, but also that small parties tend to be more active in control activities than large parties (Damgaard, 1994; Mattson, 1994; Rasch, 1994). The reason probably is that small parties, on average, are further away from government power than large parties. As large parties can influence government policies more directly they do not have to resort to a typical outsider tactic such as asking questions. For small parties, asking questions is the only instrument at their disposal (Damgaard, 1994, p. 61).

Our data set's structure is complex and includes three layers: parties, issues, and weeks. The over-time dependency is usually dealt with using time-series analysis, such as vector autoregression (Soroka, 2002b; van Noije et al., 2008; Vliegenthart & Roggeband, 2007). When multiple issues are considered in one analysis, a form of pooled time-series analysis is used, for example, ordinary least squares regression with panel-corrected standard errors (Walgrave et al., 2008). When clustering takes places on more than two dimensions, (pooled) time series is not a viable option anymore. Therefore, we decided to apply a multilevel analysis. This type of analysis accounts for the hierarchical dependency of observations. When one of the clustering dimensions is time, its application does not differ substantially from those in many pooled time-series analyses (Gelman & Hill, 2007) but allows for more than one other dimension on which the observations cluster. Our data set has a multilevel structure with three levels: Time (weeks) is nested in issues that are nested in political parties. Therefore, multilevel modeling is appropriate. Next to a multilevel structure, also the time-series character of the data set has to be taken into account. After all, the value of a certain party–issue combination in a certain week is likely to be highly dependent on its value in the previous week. Therefore, we include a lagged dependent variable as an independent variable as a control in all our analyses.

The variables (and related hypotheses) we draw on in the following analyses are all situated at one of these three different levels. First, at the first and lowest level that varies across weeks, issues, and parties, we have the lagged dependent variable (parliamentary attention in the week before) and media coverage. Second, at the issue level, we have variation in government agreement and issue ownership. Though both change several times during our research period, they are largely stable throughout the period, and we consider them statistically as an issue characteristic. At the party level, we position the opposition party and party size variables, which also fluctuate somewhat over time but are again largely stable at the party level.

We do our analyses in various steps. For all analyses we conduct multilevel models using STATA (xtmixed command) with restricted maximum likelihood estimations and (if necessary) unstructured covariance matrices.

Table 1. Mean Number of Parliamentary Questions per Week per Party in Belgium (1993-2000) and Denmark (1986-2003)

	Coalition parties	Opposition parties
Belgium	3.959	4.635
Denmark	0.420	7.825

We start with a model that includes our main effects (fixed effects) and that tests the first three hypotheses. To model the final two hypotheses about the interaction between government–opposition and issue ownership and media we add interaction terms to a random slope model, where we allow the slope of the media variable to vary across issues and parties and the issue ownership variable to vary across parties. This offers the opportunity to test whether media and issue ownership effects differ for government and opposition parties in both countries. For Denmark, we present a separate analysis for the oral parliamentary questions to test whether they are influenced in a similar or distinct way. Since they are limited in number and almost solely asked by opposition parties, we take the weekly number of questions asked by the opposition together and report the results from a fixed effects pooled time series analysis with a lagged dependent variable.

Results

Before we present the results of the multivariate analyses, we first look at the properties of parliamentary questioning in both countries. The first question is to what extent questions are indeed being used differently by opposition and government parties in Belgium and Denmark. Table 1 contains the mean number of questions by government or opposition MPs. Confirming previous research, the table shows that questioning is more an opposition than a government tactic. In Belgium, opposition parties do it more than government parties, but the difference is small (factor of 1.2). In Denmark asking questions is largely the territory of opposition MPs. Opposition parties, on average, ask almost 19 times more questions than government parties. Government MPs do sometimes ask questions, but very much less so.

How are questions distributed over time? Figure 1 presents an overview of the total weekly number of questions throughout the research period. The number of questions differs considerably over time. Further analysis of the dynamic properties of both series reveals that in both countries parliamentary activity is an autoregressive process: The number of questions being asked

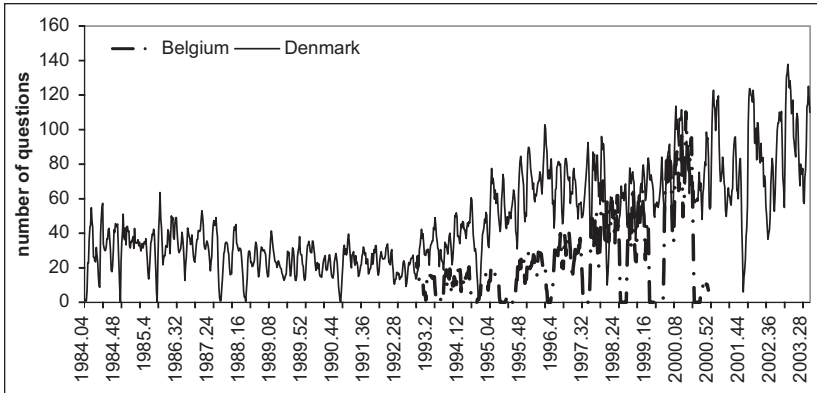


Figure 1. Weekly number of questions in Belgium and Denmark (4-week moving average)

Estimations are based on fixed part of results—lines for opposition and coalition parties with +1 SE and -1 SE confidence intervals, all other variables held at their mean.

depends strongly on the number of questions asked in the previous week or weeks. Furthermore, and not surprisingly, we also find strong effects of the activity in the same week 1 year earlier, which indicates the institutionally structured character of parliament, with peaks in activity and weeks of limited or no activity at regular points in time. In both countries the number of questions increases over time, though this increase is statistically significant only in Denmark. This trend is in line with previous observations that parliamentary questioning is on the rise in most Western European countries (Green-Pedersen, 2010). In Denmark we also find an additional slight increase in parliamentary questioning throughout the period between two elections, indicating the presence of an electoral cycle, with increased activity when the next election comes nearer.

Table 2 presents an overview of what issues are addressed in the questions and also reports how much attention those issues get in media coverage and party manifestoes. In Belgium, we see little variation between opposition and coalition parties. They both focus mainly on state issues, justice and law, and social questions. Also in their party manifestoes, these are the three issues that receive the most attention, though here social questions are by far the most prominent. Media focus most on “other issues,” followed by the three issues that are addressed most often by politicians. In general, there seems to be a substantial level of agreement regarding issue importance among the various political actors. The picture for Denmark is somewhat different.

Table 2. Presence of Various Issues in Parliamentary Questions, Party Manifestoes, and Media Coverage

Issue	Denmark				Belgium				
	Parliament coalition	Parliament opposition	Manifestoes	Media	Issue	Parliament coalition	Parliament opposition	Manifestoes	Media
Economy and taxation	0.22	6.25	20.42	3.74	Political organization	0.82	3.18	7.21	5.82
Personal rights	0.11	2.28	1.74	0.78	Institutions	0.12	0.57	0.45	1.21
Danish National Church	0.04	0.47	0.21	0.59	Executive	0.19	1.78	0.57	0.93
Refugees and immigrants	0.18	5.94	4.56	1.59	State	6.51	9.57	7.50	7.11
Health	0.28	7.36	5.10	3.21	Development aid	0.19	0.23	1.71	0.47
Agriculture	0.16	4.47	2.03	0.51	Defense	2.26	3.23	2.00	7.58
Labor market	0.30	6.58	9.72	3.27	European Union	0.78	1.36	5.04	2.46
Education	0.25	4.80	6.69	1.48	Justice and law	5.33	9.17	7.54	6.19
Culture and sports	0.12	1.95	1.17	1.67	Economy and trade	1.06	2.06	5.18	2.47
Environment	0.24	8.18	5.83	2.48	Finances	3.45	3.75	5.15	2.67
Energy	0.06	2.78	1.11	1.22	Social questions	7.84	8.93	27.97	11.13
Transportation	0.29	6.98	1.36	2.40	Leisure	0.46	0.38	2.63	3.03
Justice and crime	0.41	6.59	3.92	3.60	Religion and cultural identity	0.23	0.34	0.09	0.81
Social affairs	0.23	5.52	11.75	1.44	Education	0.44	0.54	5.25	1.85

(continued)

Table 2. (continued)

Issue	Denmark				Belgium				
	Parliament coalition	Parliament opposition	Manifestoes	Media	Issue	Parliament coalition	Parliament opposition	Manifestoes	Media
Housing	0.07	1.95	2.30	0.88	Communication and information Science Companies Labor and employment	0.78	0.57	1.66	1.54
Business	0.21	5.31	3.91	3.55		0.07	0.12	0.46	0.37
Defense	0.15	4.19	3.84	1.57		0.41	0.96	0.52	3.25
Foreign affairs	0.14	2.54	0.79	59.29		1.86	2.69	7.38	5.92
Technology and communication	0.36	5.96	6.32	2.39		2.92	3.70	2.90	3.79
European Union	0.01	1.08	4.11	1.79		1.04	1.77	5.77	2.46
Regional and local affairs	0.07	1.58	0.92	1.00		1.18	1.19	1.45	1.04
Public sector	0.07	2.18	2.21	0.75		0.23	0.22	0.81	0.53
Control of government	0.05	1.07	0.02	0.81		0.28	0.29	0.47	0.13
				Energy Industry Other		0.60	0.83	0.07	0.16
					1.18	1.37	0.25	27.10	

Reported are week-averaged percentages that sum up to 100 per column (for parliament coalition and opposition jointly)—except for the Belgian parliament, where a small number of questions were asked of parties that did not issue a manifestoes and are consequently excluded from the analysis.

When it comes to parliamentary questions, the attention is more equally divided, with no single issue receiving more than 10% of the total attention. Furthermore, there is somewhat more variation in the opposition's and coalition's agendas: Although opposition is mainly focusing on the environment, foreign affairs is the most important issue for the coalition. Both also pay considerable attention to health and transportation. As mentioned before, the media focus largely on foreign affairs: Almost 60% of the attention in the Danish radio news goes to this issue. The rest of the attention is roughly equally divided among the other issues. Finally, what parties do in their manifestoes does not correspond significantly with what they do in parliament. They devote attention to different issues, such as the economy and taxation, and social affairs. This might well be a consequence of the different function of party manifestoes in Denmark compared to Belgium: In Belgium, manifestoes are instruments for party profiling and for truly claiming issue ownership; in Denmark, party manifestoes are more a collection of ideas of the parties regarding all current political issues. We return to this point later on.

The results of the multivariate multilevel time-series analyses are presented in Table 3. The first column for each country contains the main effects and allows us to test H1-H3; the second column adds the interaction effects encapsulated in H4 and H5. Note that all analyses have been carried out by consecutively introducing the different levels. Although the table has been organized according to the two types of hypotheses, the underlying data structure consists of three levels of analysis (party, issue, week) that do not completely match the structure of the hypotheses.

There is quite a bit of path dependency in parliament. If one knows what issues MPs asked questions about in Week $t - 1$, one can predict pretty well what they will discuss in Week t . All effects discussed below come on top of the sizable effect of the lagged dependent variable. Interestingly, Danish MPs' questioning behavior is more determined by last week's activities than Belgian MPs'. Danish MPs more routinely ask questions about the same issues, whereas Belgian MPs' questions are more changeable and address varying topics. In both countries, opposition parties ask significantly more questions than government parties. As suggested by the bivariate evidence presented above, the difference is much larger in Denmark than in Belgium. Party size affects the number of questions the party asks to a significant extent in both Belgium and Denmark. Yet the direction of the effect is different: In Belgium especially small parties are keen to ask a lot of questions, whereas in Denmark the larger (opposition) parties ask the most questions. Though the coefficients in the table seem small, they matter substantially. Take, for example, the opposition coefficient in Belgium: It indicates that

Table 3. Explaining Attention for Different Issues in Parliamentary Questions

		Belgium		Denmark	
		Main effects (FE model)	Interaction effects (RE model)	Main effects (FE model)	Interaction effects (RE model)
Hypothesis					
Controls					
Lagged questions		0.0129** (0.0042)	0.0094* (0.0043)	0.0923*** (0.0023)	0.0876*** (0.0023)
Opposition party		0.1617*** (0.0212)	0.0249 (0.0253)	0.5086*** (0.0125)	0.3732*** (0.0184)
Size party		-0.0200*** (0.0050)	-0.0176*** (0.0038)	0.0451*** (0.0015)	0.0433*** (0.0016)
Issue content					
Government agreement	H1	0.0412*** (0.0033)	0.0432*** (0.0032)		
Issue ownership (manifesto)	H2	0.0211*** (0.0030)	0.0076 (0.0122)	0.0031** (0.0010)	-0.0074** (0.0034)
Media	H3	0.0169*** (0.0027)	0.0126* (0.0055)	0.0421*** (0.0045)	0.0789*** (0.0299)
Issue content + position					
Opposition × issue ownership	H4		0.0256*** (0.0040)		0.0417*** (0.0070)
Opposition × media	H5		0.0111* (0.0058)		0.0128*** (0.0018)
Constant		0.1924* (0.0855)	0.2550*** (0.0525)	-0.4047*** (0.1189)	-0.3346*** (0.1154)
Level 3 N (party)		10	10	11	11

(continued)

Table 3. (continued)

Hypothesis	Belgium		Denmark	
	Main effects (FE model)	Interaction effects (RE model)	Main effects (FE model)	Interaction effects (RE model)
Level 2 <i>N</i> (issue)	240	240	242	242
Level 1 <i>N</i> (week)	55,152	55,152	180,837	180,837
Variance Level 3	0.0352	0.0027	0.1434	0.1286
Variance Level 2	0.0830	0.0604	0.1503	0.2326
Variance Level 1	2.2949	2.2867	4.713	4.6782
Deviance	202936.16	202713.32	794368.92	-793515.70

FE = fixed effects model; RE = random effects model. Coefficients are unstandardized results from a restricted maximum likelihood multilevel model. Standard errors are in parentheses. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

opposition parties score on average 0.169 higher on the dependent variable than coalition parties. If one considers the construction of the dependent variable—the attention a party devotes to an issue as the percentage of the attention all parties devote to all issues—it is substantial. In the situation of 10 parties in parliament, the average score on the dependent variable is 0.4% (100% divided by 25 issues and 10 parties); a difference of 0.169% is considerable.

Our first hypothesis held that parties would more frequently address issues that have received ample attention in the government agreement. We have only Belgian evidence regarding this hypothesis. The Belgian data corroborate the hypothesis. The Belgian government agreement lays out the arena where government and opposition cross swords. The government makes a number of pledges in the government agreement, and parliamentary parties do monitor the government in particular on those issues. We indeed find that those issues addressed in the government agreement get more attention in questioning: a one-percentage-point increase in attention in the government agreement results for each party in a 0.041% increase, which boils down to

an overall increase in 0.41% on the parliamentary agenda when 10 parties are present in parliament. Thus, we find support for H1

We argued that MPs would ask more questions on issues encapsulated in their party program. Parties make promises to address certain issues, and they keep their promises by devoting more attention particularly to those issues in their questions. The Belgian and Danish data do confirm the hypothesis. In Belgium, party manifestos serve a clear ideological and competitive function as they allow parties to sharpen their ideological profile by claiming some issues over others (Walgrave & De Swert, 2007). This is less so the Danish case, and we indeed find only a small yet significant effect of party manifestos on questions. Manifestos in Denmark appear to be electoral documents that address the issues of the day and focus less on the party's own issues; all parties address more or less the same issues. There does not exist a firm party manifesto tradition in Denmark, and there is some debate about the precise status of Danish party manifestos (Hansen, 2008). This may explain why Danish MPs tend to follow their manifesto in their questions to a lesser extent than do Belgian MPs. Still, overall, we can confirm H2.

The results on the impact of the mass media on the questioning institution back up previous research (for Denmark, see Green-Pedersen & Stubager, 2010; for Belgium, see Walgrave et al., 2008). Both in Belgium and in Denmark, MPs take cues from mass media coverage. Media generate issues that the public cares about and devotes attention to. MPs are sensitive to these cues, as they want to ride the current wave of attention. This upholds H3. Substantially, the media effects are considerable in size. In Belgium, a one-percentage-point increase results in a 0.017% increase per party, whereas in Denmark this effect is even 0.043%—though because of the dominance of the foreign affairs issue, it is an increase that occurs less often for most issues. With 10 parties in parliament, this sums up to an average overall effect of 0.17% and 0.43%. Interestingly enough, this effect is also very substantial for Danish MPs, even though they largely ask written questions. Since written questions are less visible and since the answers do not come immediately, one might have anticipated a smaller effect. In any case, these results confirm the idea that Danish written questions and Belgian oral questions are structurally equivalent.

We now have a more detailed look at the Danish case. Table 4 presents the results of a pooled time-series fixed effects analysis that looks at only (a limited number of) oral questions. Because of the limited number of cases, we take all parties together. Note that oral questions are almost solely asked by opposition parties. Here, we see that oral questions are less predictable and regular: Both the lagged dependent variable as well as size and party

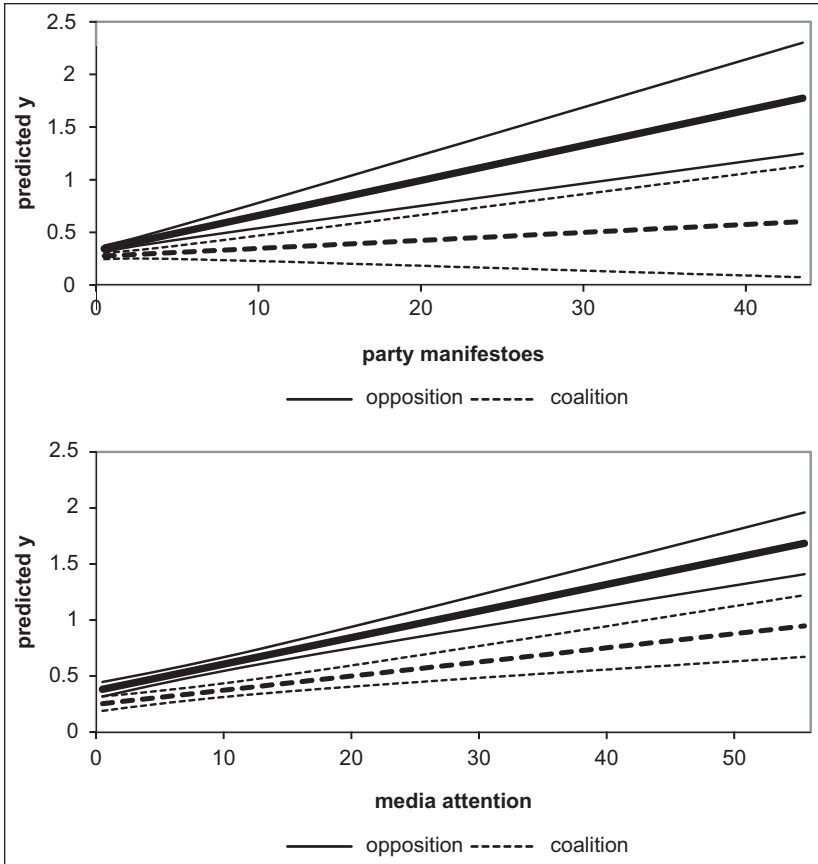


Figure 2. Interaction effects for Belgium
 Estimations are based on fixed part of results—lines for opposition and coalition parties with +1 SE and -1 SE confidence intervals, all other variables held at their mean.

manifestoes do not exert an influence. The attention devoted to the issue in the media—this time looking only at the previous week since the date the question was asked is registered—is the only significant variable. Though we are hesitant to compare the effects of two such different models, the media effect seems even stronger here: a 1% increase in media attention for an issue results in a 0.73% increase on the parliamentary agenda. Apparently, oral questions represent current issues rather than more structural considerations.

For H4 and H5, regarding the interactions of the previous variables with government–opposition position, the models in the second column of Table 3

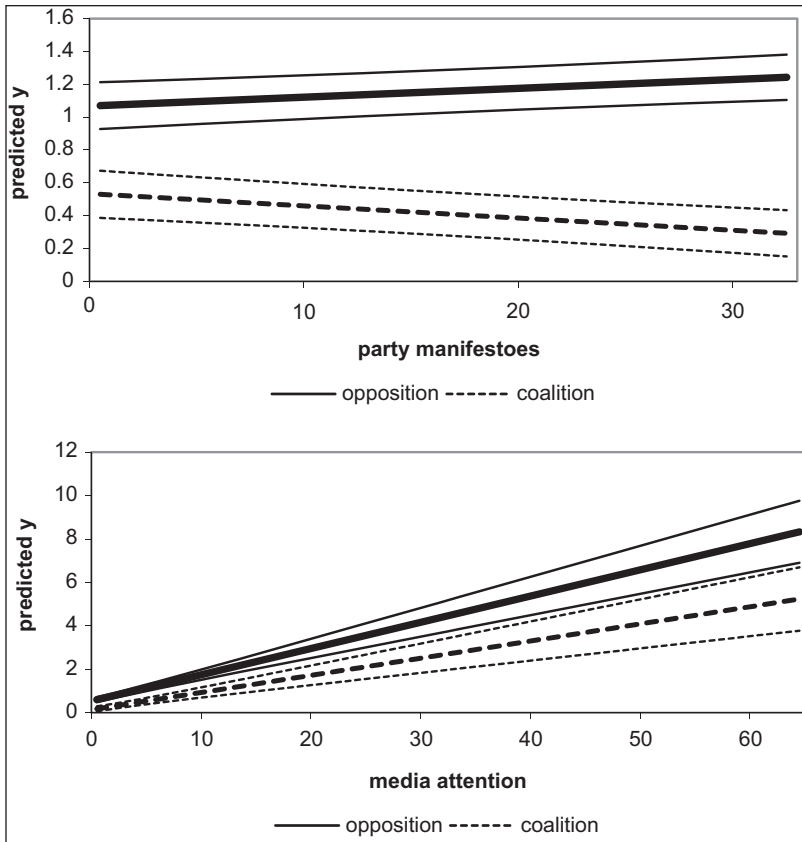


Figure 3. Interaction effects for Denmark

Estimations are based on fixed part of results—lines for opposition and coalition parties with $+1$ SE and -1 SE confidence intervals, all other variables held at their mean.

present the evidence. The main effect of issue ownership in Denmark becomes significant and negative when the interaction effects are included, and this sheds a different light on H3. Together with the interaction effect (see below), this basically means that Danish government parties that score 0 on the opposition variable avoid asking questions about issues they put forward in their manifestos. They systematically refrain from addressing matters their party manifesto spoke about. In the Belgian case, introducing the interaction effect between party position and issue ownership has a similar but much weaker effect on the main effect of issue ownership: Government party MPs do not

Table 4. Explaining Attention for Different Issues in Danish Oral Questions

Controls	
Lagged questions	0.0066 (0.0237)
Size party	0.2449 (0.7401)
Issue content	
Issue ownership (manifesto)	-0.0076 (0.0297)
Media	0.7285** (0.2486)
Constant	-5.6824 (42.2610)
R^2	.0457
N	1,716

Coefficients are unstandardized results from a pooled time-series fixed effects analysis. Standard errors are in parentheses.

** $p < .01$.

devote more but also not less attention to their party's typical manifesto issues. Figures 2 and 3 (upper graphs) graphically display the differences between coalition and opposition parties considering the effects of attention for issues in party manifestoes on attention in parliamentary questioning. Although in Denmark the difference between those two types of parties is larger from the outset, it further increases when considerable attention is devoted to an issue in party manifestoes. In the Belgian case, we see hardly a difference between coalition and opposition when no attention is devoted to the issue in party manifestoes, but it increases considerably when the issue receives ample attention.

The fourth hypothesis stated that more than government MPs, opposition MPs would draw on their party manifesto when formulating questions. As could already be derived from the discussion about government parties above, this is indeed the case. The evidence in Table 2 and Figures 2 and 3 suggests that, in both countries, opposition MPs use their manifesto more than government MPs as a beacon when grilling government. H4 receives clear support in both countries.

Finally, the fifth hypothesis held that opposition parties, more than government parties, would take their cues from the mass media. In both

countries, this hypothesis is clearly confirmed. Belgian opposition MPs use the mass media as a searching device that brings to the fore issues that nurture their attacks on the government. The interaction effect in Figure 2 (second part) shows that Belgian majority MPs too increase their questions on issues after media coverage, but the slope of the opposition MPs is steeper, leading to moderate differences at high levels of media attention. The Danish evidence is in line with the Belgian results. We find a positive interaction effect between being an opposition party and being reactive to media coverage. Again, also the main effect, which resembles the effect for government parties, is positive and significant. In Figure 3 (second part) this effect is dissected.

Conclusions and Discussion

This article set out to understand the questioning behavior by MPs in Belgium and Denmark. Our theoretical expectations, based on the idea that, first, MPs are rational actors putting forward issues that are favorable to them and their party and, second, that agenda-setting resources are always short in supply, are warranted by the evidence. Issues structure parliamentary behavior. In general, and across the two countries, a picture emerges of parliamentary parties whose questioning activities are driven by the available information in their environment (media), by the preferences they and their competitors hold (party manifestos), and by the institutional position in which they are embedded (government agreement and political position). Parties react to their environment, and the opportunities it offers for parliamentary activities, in a different way depending on the institutional position they occupy. MPs address specific issues and not others in an understandable way. Government and opposition parties behave differently and address systematically other issues at different times in their oversight activities; they relate differently to their party manifesto and to mass media coverage. The similarities between Belgium and Denmark outweighed the differences.

The main difference we found between Belgium and Denmark was the slight negative influence party manifestoes have on Danish government parties, whereas there is a nonsignificant effect in the Belgian case. We see several explanations for the divergent results in Belgium and Denmark regarding the way government party MPs carry out (Belgium) or ignore (Denmark) their party manifesto. As mentioned above, party manifestos have a different status in both countries. In Belgium, manifestos are instruments for party profiling and for claiming issue ownership; in Denmark, party manifestos are more a collection of ideas of the parties regarding all current political issues.

As a consequence, we suspect Belgian MPs, even when in government, use their manifestos as an ideological beacon (although much less than Belgian opposition MPs). This is most likely connected to the fact that Belgian government MPs invariably have to support very large coalitions counting many different parties (at least four parties during the research period). Parties tend to lose their distinctiveness in large governments accommodating all the time. Government MPs in Belgium use questions to control other parties' ministers and to sharpen their party's profile while using their party manifesto as a guide. That government MPs keep tabling questions on issues they care about is proof of a deeply entrenched distrust of their fellow government parties. In the Danish case, in contrast, the negative interaction between government status and questioning regarding party manifesto issues suggests that Danish government MPs mainly ask nonpolitical questions about topics that were not part of their party's manifesto and that could in no way threaten the stability of the government. Danish government MPs mainly address harmless local issues catering to their local constituencies or even personal issue. Danish government MPs are very loyal to their government, and party discipline—not only in voting but also in terms of the content of their interventions—is extremely high in Denmark (Jensen, 2000). Maybe this is linked to the minority cabinet system that makes governments inherently more fragile and thus requires more loyalty from its MPs (for a similar argument, see Damgaard, 1994, p. 56).

One of the goals of our study was to explore to what extent focusing on the content of questioning and drawing on agenda-setting data could further the knowledge of parliamentary questioning. Extant questioning research dealt with only the amount of parliamentary activities and did not systematically analyze its content. Previous work did not produce evidence as to why MPs address which issues at which time. The agenda-setting approach clearly offers more leverage. It offers a theoretical perspective and design that allowed us to start tackling the basic questions as to who in parliament does what, why and when. We showed that issue content matters. Just focusing on the number of questions MPs table only scratches the surface; under that surface, a lot of interesting patterns appear, and they are all associated with the substance MPs deal with.

As their time and energy are scarce and as the institutional slot provided by questioning opportunities imposes strong constraints, MPs (or their parties) carefully select the issues they want to address. The choice they make is conditioned by the surrounding political context and the issues that are discussed elsewhere. Other agendas of other institutions—government, parties, media, and so on—affect the topics MPs table questions about. Issues jump

from one agenda to the other, and the political system as a whole deals with issues in an integrated way. Institutions react to each other and imitate each other's issue attention. We would not have been able to lay bare these interactions and mechanisms and we would not have gained a better understanding of the dynamics of parliamentary control if we would not have analyzed the content of the questions. Only by focusing on issues was it possible to link agendas and institutional actors and to examine systematically and across an exhaustive range of issues how they interact. The agenda-setting perspective, hence, may not only help us to examine how policy change comes about and why periods of incrementalism and periods of frenetic activities alternate (Jones & Baumgartner, 2005) but also help us to understand how institutions work. Focusing on content is useful not only for scholars who are interested in specific policies but also for students of institutions. Through analyzing content they may better understand what goes on in the institutions they study. Content and institutions are inextricably connected. For example, our evidence that opposition and government parties, both in an institutionally different position, use the same institutional tool to put forward different issues with a different intent shows that studying institutions without taking into account the issues is only part of the story. We understand better what goes on in institutions when we study how they process concrete issues.

Our study also shows that focusing on issue content and agenda setting is useful from a comparative politics perspective. Institutions, in this case parliamentary questioning, work similarly and at the same time differently in different countries. Focusing on the issues that are being processed in these institutions helps us to lay bare these similarities and differences. The present case showed that oversight activities in the Belgian and Danish parliament are largely driven by the same mechanisms but that party manifestos and mass media coverage play a slightly different role in both institutions. Naturally, we need more data and more cases to further refine the present findings. We mainly found similarities between the Belgian and Danish questioning institutions, but when extending our approach to more diverse political systems, we expect to find more differences in how parliamentary questions are used in party competition.

Finally, the design we proposed in the present study to tackle parliamentary questioning can easily be applied to other political institutions. It would be revealing to investigate to what extent, for example, passing legislation is a function of government agreement, party manifestos, and media coverage as well. In closing, we argue the agenda-setting approach yields a generic theory and design to tackle many questions relevant to the comparative study of political institutions. We hope to have shown this is the case at least for parliamentary questioning.

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