

The determinants of party issue attention in time of crisis: what drives question time in Southern Europe

Enrico Borghetto (Universidade Nova de Lisboa)

Federico Russo (Università del Salento)

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Introduction

According to the party issue-competition literature, political parties compete by drawing attention to certain issues while ignoring others in the attempt to shift the content of the competition on their favorite ground (Budge & Farlie, 1983; Petrocik, 1996). While issue competition is usually studied at election time, recent works also started shedding light on how and why parties select issue emphases between elections (Klüver & Sagarzazu, 2015; Vliegenthart & Walgrave, 2011; Vliegenthart, Walgrave, & Zicha, 2013). Two main rationales are expected to simultaneously drive political actors' attention while fulfilling their representative role. On the one hand, they are supposed not to drift too much away from the thematic emphases presented in their electoral platforms, the closest thing to a "contract" between party representatives and their voters. On the other, they should pay attention to external events (more or less unexpected at the time of drafting their manifesto) that are likely to dynamically shape the opinions of voters. The main goal of this article is to explain how a disruptive external event such as the economic recession that severely hit Southern European Countries (SECs) has impacted on these two strategies of selective issue emphasis during the entire electoral cycle. The empirical analysis will focus on one of the most important means for parliaments to monitor executives, namely the periodic round of oral parliamentary questions directed on the floor to the Prime Minister and the cabinet.¹

The theoretical framework relies on two distinct but related traditions of research on agenda-setting. The first tradition suggests that parties and electoral changes are central to explaining policy change. By summing up party (or coalition) preferences, electoral programs represent a good predictor of the issues parties will fight for in the aftermath of elections.² The second tradition treats the flow of incoming information about public problems as the main determinant of agenda-setting.

¹ For the sake of brevity, in the following we will refer to oral questions put to the government on the floor with the name of its British version, "question time", although procedures may differ extensively.

Parties try constantly to adjust to signals coming from society about the most salient issues of the day, although reactions can be more or less disproportional due to cognitive limitations and institutional frictions.³

The research design of this article takes advantages from the outbreak of a severe and persistent economic crisis in SECs in order to compare the agenda-setting behavior of parties in exceptional times when the relevance of economic issues increased dramatically. By worsening unemployment and hindering economic growth, the crisis assumed all the characteristics of a prominent issue (Soroka, 2002) which is difficult for parties to avoid. First, we expect that, as a general pattern, parties reacted to this constricted agenda by increasing their responsiveness to public opinion, while decreasing the matching with electoral priorities. In addition, we analyse how party characteristics affected the extent parties listen to voters' priorities or stick to their manifesto issues. We focus on two dimensions of variation: party institutional position in government or opposition; and their categorization as niche or mainstream.

By analyzing how parties choose the issues to focus on during question time, this article makes three major contributions to the literature. First, it provides further evidence that integrating the two agenda-setting perspectives under a common framework increases the explanatory power of issue competition models (Klüver & Sagarzazu, 2015; Vliegenthart et al., 2013). What is more, it expands this research agenda, by testing whether niche and mainstream parties implement different issue emphasis strategies also after elections. Secondly, it advances the literature on the political consequences of the crisis in SECs' countries, which has been mainly concentrated on its electoral consequences (Bellucci, Costa Lobo, & Lewis-Beck, 2012; Bosco & Verney, 2012). Only a few studies have focused on party strategies beyond the electoral campaign and they analysed voting patterns (De Giorgi & Moury, 2015). Third, we contribute to previous analyses on non-legislative activities, by providing a novel comparative dataset of parliamentary oral questions which covers almost 10 years (approximately since the beginning of 2003 up to the end of 2014) and four (so far unexplored) countries: Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain. The four parliamentary systems differ along the political and institutional dimensions. Yet, they followed remarkably parallel paths after the outbreak of the crisis. All of them had to implement unpopular austerity policies, much to the discontent of their voters and citizens in general. While in Greece and Portugal these domestic reforms were officially agreed with international lenders in exchange for bailout loans, Spain

2 Comparative Manifesto scholars (CMP) are among the most productive and well-known contributors to this tradition (Budge, Klingemann, Volkens, Bara, & Tanenbaum, 2001). Their works have analyzed the link between manifesto agenda and legislative agenda (Klingemann, Hofferbert, & Budge, 1994), budget outlays (Budge & Hofferbert, 1990) and government policy intentions (McDonald & Budge, 2005). Probably for lack of comparable data, they have not explored the relationship between electoral agenda and non-legislative agenda.

3 This tradition has been advanced, for instance, by scholars working under the umbrella of the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP) (C. Green-Pedersen & Walgrave, 2014; Jones & Baumgartner, 2005).

received financial help to support its ailing bank system and, finally, Italian cabinets embarked on austerity programs without a formal external supervision. The political price of these decisions was everywhere high. Bad economic record played in the hands of challenger parties, which presented themselves as preferential channels of citizens' dissatisfaction. As foreseen by the economic voting literature, in each post-crisis election incumbents were ousted.

The article is organised as follows. In the first paragraph we outline our theoretical framework combining the two accounts on the determinants of issue competition dynamics and we derive hypotheses on the impact of the crisis on party strategies. Next, we discuss the procedures regulating parliamentary questions in the four cases under study, followed by a detailed illustration of our research design. Finally, we present the results of our empirical analysis and discuss their implications for the theoretical debate on issue competition among political parties.

Literature review and hypotheses

The idea that parties compete for votes through selective issue emphasis is now well established in the political party literature. The salience-based theory of party competition expects political parties to rationally compete by emphasizing topics different from their opponents rather than talking past each other on the same topics (Budge, 2015; Budge & Farlie, 1983; Schattschneider, 1960). A number of studies have confirmed the importance of selective issue emphasis considerations in political parties' strategic behaviors. However, until recently, these analyses have mainly focused their attention on the dynamics of issue competition taking place in the run up to elections and failed to explore its occurrence throughout the whole electoral cycle. This ends up offering a partial picture of party competition. Parties build their electoral fortunes also between elections by attempting to drag the party system agenda towards those issues that are advantageous to themselves.

There are two competing hypotheses on the reasons accounting for issue selection strategies. The first expects a connection between the electoral and post-electoral phases of issue competition. For instance, scholars have investigated the link between election programmes and government spending (Budge & Hofferbert, 1990; Hofferbert & Budge, 1992) to test for a party mandate effect. On a similar vein, the idea that parties keep their electoral promises implies a correlation between the issues prioritized in manifestos and in parliament. The reasons for addressing those issues in electoral manifestos may still be valid after elections and guide party strategies. Vliegthart et al. (2013) distinguish three motives underlying party preferences on which issue

s to prioritize: ideology, reward and damage. First, in some cases, the association between a party and an issue is historically rooted in the party's origin and ideology, so much that it is difficult for a party to sever this linkage or another party to challenge its dominance (Stefaan Walgrave, Lefevere, & Tresch, 2012). During the legislative mandate, Green parties will keep on championing those environmental battles on which they built their electoral manifestos. Secondly, parties may decide to address specific issues in return for electoral support. No matter whether their platform commitments responded to the priorities of their traditional supporters - thus consolidating their vote bank - or the public at large - in the hope of reaching new voters - (Klüver & Spoon, 2014; Spoon & Klüver, 2014; Wagner & Meyer, 2014), they might anticipate a reward for showing consistency in their thematic emphases before and after elections. Finally, partisan actors can rationally use selective emphasis to damage their competitors. They draw attention to topics where their competitors are divided, inconsistent or have a bad record as administrators (at the local and/or central level). This is arguably the most limited use of party emphasis. It pays out only if the weaknesses of the opponent remain more or less the same after election.

According to a second strand of the literature, parties' electoral profile is not a good predictor of the kind of topics addressed in the course of the mandate. Rather, parties are constantly listening to signals about public problems coming from society and shift their emphasis dynamically to respond to the major issues of the day (Stimson, Mackuen, & Erikson, 1995). The importance of "information" for policy change has been at the centre of an extensive research agenda (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993, 2015; C. Green-Pedersen & Walgrave, 2014; Jones & Baumgartner, 2005). Ideology still plays a role in how parties filter the multitude of signals and how they react to it. However, parties will still be drawn to attend to salient issues, regardless of who "owns" them. They expect a reward from "riding the wave" (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1994), even at the cost of sacrificing their image of consistency in the minds of the voters. Finally, flexibly responding to voters' policy priorities means talking about the scandals and crises which intersperse political life. Parties will invest in these issues if they expect a damage for their opponents.

All in all, these two perspectives talk about the same phenomenon, issue competition, but weigh differently the party and voters' components. In the first "electoral" perspective, parties are the main agenda-setters and have their internal reasons for rhetorically manipulating specific issues. The "riding-the-wave" perspective gives primacy to voters' priorities and expect parties to constantly adjust to them. It must be noted that these two approaches do not contradict each other. On the one hand, it is possible for parties to revise their manifesto priorities from election to election to better reflect changes in public opinion. On the other hand, nothing precludes parties from weighing both factors when deciding on which issues to question the government.

The argument of this article is that information has an impact on how parties weigh one logic with respect to the other. There are times when the magnitude of problems afflicting society is overwhelming and parties have to restrain their role of agenda-setters and, to some extent, become agenda-takers. On such prominent issues, whose consequences are directly perceived by citizens, the role of media is considered negligible (Soroka, 2002). The current economic crisis represents a case in point. In times of extreme economic downturn, economic and social concerns become prominent and oust other issues in voters' agendas (Singer, 2013). This, on its turn, influences the scope of the representatives' agendas. Differently from "ordinary" times, when parties are more in control of their agenda, during an economic crisis, ignoring economic and welfare issues could be too costly from a political point of view. As a result, the responsiveness to voter's priorities should increase. On the contrary, we should expect a greater mismatch between priorities in manifestos and priorities during question time. As we have already mentioned, manifestos can be updated to mirror alterations in the public agenda. Even so, years can pass between elections. During these intervals, electoral agendas remain fixed while things can change dramatically in the public agenda. An additional argument can be brought in support of our prediction: manifesto drafters cannot afford to easily shed issues that are normally associated with the history, identity or record of the party. At some point, crisis-related economic and welfare issues can gain recognition in manifestos (Greene, 2015; Singer, 2011), but they will have to vie for space with other characteristic issues.

H1: "In times of crisis political parties pay more attention than before to voters' priorities and less than before to the policy issues emphasized in their manifestos"

These expectations can be refined by considering the characteristics of the party. With regard to the impact of the crisis on the responsiveness to voters' priorities, we distinguish between parties in government and in opposition. As expected by the economic theory of voting, the climate of social discontent created by crises is expected to play to the advantage of challenger parties. Since they are not required to deliver policy solutions on those issues that they decide to emphasize during question time, they have greater freedom to be responsive to the electorate's priorities and are able to maintain for a longer time the emphasis on crisis-related issues. Another reason to politicize these issues is specific to Southern European countries. Although austerity was implemented differently across countries, all executives had their hands tied (to some extent) in the core area of public spending or committed to painful reforms of their welfare systems. This made them more vulnerable to opposition's accusations since they could not rely on counter-cyclical measures and, as a result, were less successful in depoliticising the crisis issue. On the other hand, incumbent parties

are expected to modify only marginally their issue emphasis in response to public opinion. They will not be able to avoid altogether references to crisis matters, but they will also try to emphasize and claim credit for policy accomplishments in other areas. As a result, before and after the crisis, their issue attention should keep on being as diverse as the range of activities undertaken by the cabinet (Christoffer Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2010).

H2: "In times of crisis only opposition parties pay more attention than before to voters' priorities"

To better understand the influence of the crisis on the congruence between manifesto priorities and party issue attention in parliament, we focus on the distinction between niche and mainstream parties. According to Meguid (2005) niche parties - unlike mainstream parties - reject the traditional class-based dimension of party competition, raise issues which often do not coincide with existing lines of political division and limit their issue appeals. Furthermore, it has been shown that they value policy over office. This should make them less prone to "riding the wave" on public priorities, while making them more faithful to their programmatic platforms (Adams, Clark, Ezrow, & Glasgow, 2006). Our expectation is that the severity of the crisis should mitigate this rigidity. Using question time to address their "niche" issues should not be a viable strategy in times of economic hardship. The context does not allow disregarding economic and welfare issues, even if this implies addressing topics typically emphasized by their mainstream competitors. Conversely, we do not expect alterations in the issue emphasis of mainstream parties in response to the crisis.

H3: "In times of crisis only niche parties pay less attention than before to their manifesto's priorities"

Question time in the four countries

To measure parliamentary attention in parliament the present analysis relied on the most politically relevant form of oral questioning that is available in each country, usually referred to by the name of its British version as "question time". The reasons for an MP to ask a specific question are the most various, ranging "from highly focused issues – for instance obtaining an official commitment about the funding of a school – to very large issues – for instance sympathising after a natural catastrophe in a foreign country" (Rozenberg & Martin, 2011, p. 394). Only in extremely rare cases, asking a question is sufficient on its own to lead to the adoption of a legislative act or the dismissal of a cabinet. In a theoretical agenda-setting cycle, non-legislative activities would be located at the very first steps of a process (which culminates with the public decision being taken). Yet, in the presence

of certain conditions, such as their being televised or the provision of follow-up discussions on the floor, they may generate cascading effects over the whole policy-making process. At a minimum, all questions focus on a topic and, as a result, it can be said that they all contribute, in a more or less intentional way, to shape the overall “party system agenda” (Christoffer Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2010), the list of “hot topics” under debate in parliament at any given time. No single party actor is entirely in control of the party system agenda (Ibid.), since this is affected also by actors outside of the parliamentary arena such as the media and interest groups. At the same time, all party actors are to some extent affected by the issues making up the party-system agenda, since it might be risky or counterproductive not to have at the very least a position on each one of them.

Putting questions to the government may be one of the institutionalised channels available to parties to influence the party-system agenda and emphasise issues that are advantageous to them. This can be done, among others, by politicizing issues which are momentarily out of the public spotlight or bringing new issues into the debate. Question time has some properties which make them arguably a better instrument to shape the party-system agendas with respect to written questions. First, they are mostly about general issues, they are scheduled at regular intervals and they are shown on television. These characteristics make question time by and large an inter-party repeated game, a fundamentally strategic tool to table new topics or drawing attention to issues. What is more, TV coverage ensures that questions and the unfolding debates engage actors outside of the parliamentary arena (Salmond, 2014). Second, since available time is constrained, the selection of questions is under the supervision of the party whip, if not entirely pre-arranged at the level of party group (Rozenberg & Martin, 2011). This should reduce – but not entirely rule out (Rozenberg, Chopin, Hoeffler, Irondelle, & Joana, 2011) - the use of oral questions for reasons of self-promotion or constituency service (which are more typical of written questions).

Before moving on to testing the hypotheses, it is fundamental to look more in depth the main procedural properties of question time in the four countries under exam. As the literature on parliamentary questioning amply documented (Russo & Wiberg, 2010; Rozenberg et al., 2011), each country institutionalized question time differently, so part of the observed cross-country variation is expected to originate from institutional design. What is more, the comparison proposed here is also longitudinal, contrasting the period before and after the outbreak of the crisis. This calls for a particular attention to changes in the rule of the game within the same country.

The Italian question time is officially referred to as “parliamentary questions with immediate answer” (*interrogazioni a risposta immediata*). For the sake of the present work, only question time

in the lower house (Chamber of Deputies) will be examined⁴. It has been established since 1993 and it was last reformed in 1997. It is generally held once a week, normally on Wednesdays and, depending on the topic of the tabled questions, it envisages the intervention of either the President/Vice-President of the Council or the minister/s in charge of the portfolio under debate. Each parliamentary group is allowed one question per session. The latter is put by an MP, who has the obligation to submit it one day in advance through the president of his/her parliamentary group. Questions are expected to be concise (less than a minute) and address a topic of general interest. The cabinet representative is conceded a three-minute answer, followed by a two-minute reply by the questioner.

In Portugal, some form of question time (*Debate com o Primeiro-Ministro*) has been in place since the onset of the democracy. Yet, at least until 2000s, it remained one of the “most criticised scrutiny device” because of “its occasional occurrence, its lack of flexibility, and the government’s right to choose the questions it wishes to answer” (Leston-Bandeira, 2004, p. 80). A major upgrade of the rules occurred in 2003, with the introduction of a specific prime ministerial debate to be held in the first week of the month on a date agreed by the Speaker, the cabinet and the Conference of Leaders. The 2007 reform (and its partial revision in 2010) made the debate more frequent (twice a month) and it envisaged the possibility to choose among two debate formats: the first (type A) allowed the PM to speak first and then receive one round of questions on matters related to his/her intervention; the second (type B) left MPs free rein to ask one round of questions. Both the PM (type A) and MPs (type B) have to communicate the general topic of their speeches with at least a 24-hour advance. Time is allocated among parliamentary groups proportionally to their size and can be used all in one round or partitioned.

The Spanish Cortes have their version of “question time” taking place every two weeks on Wednesday mornings (*Preguntas orales em pleno*). The definition of debatable topics is left rather open and should be communicated in writing to the Bureau of Congress no later than 48 hours before the debate. It lasts generally a maximum of 4 hours, which constrains the number of questions to be asked (a ceiling of 25 was set after 2011). The distribution of questions across parliamentary groups has undergone alterations over the years, although the general rule is for each of them to be allocated a number of slots somewhat proportional to its strength.

In Greece, the most the most “politically visible” forms of questions are parliamentary interpellations (*Επερωτήσεις*, in Greek) and Timely Parliamentary interpellations (*Επίκαιρες επερωτήσεις*, in Greek). The above are questions directed to the government, the PM and its

⁴ The Rules of procedure of the Senate introduced a procedure named in the same way, but the content of the questions is predetermined by the conference of party group-leaders.

ministers, with respect to their policies and actions. They are usually referring to political issues considered of major importance, and are (supposed) to be debated at least at the presence of the minister concerned. Although not always *directly* controlled by the leadership of the parliamentary parties, they are often co-signed by a group of MPs, rather than one individual. Which means that (with the exception of the interpellations filed by the governing party's MPs) they are meant to represent the official party line. Beyond interpellations there are also ordinary questions (*ερωτήσεις*) which are addressed to ministers by individual MPS regarding any public issues. The Ministers are required to reply in writing within 25 days. In any case, at the beginning of every weekly session, some questions are listed on the daily agenda and discussed.

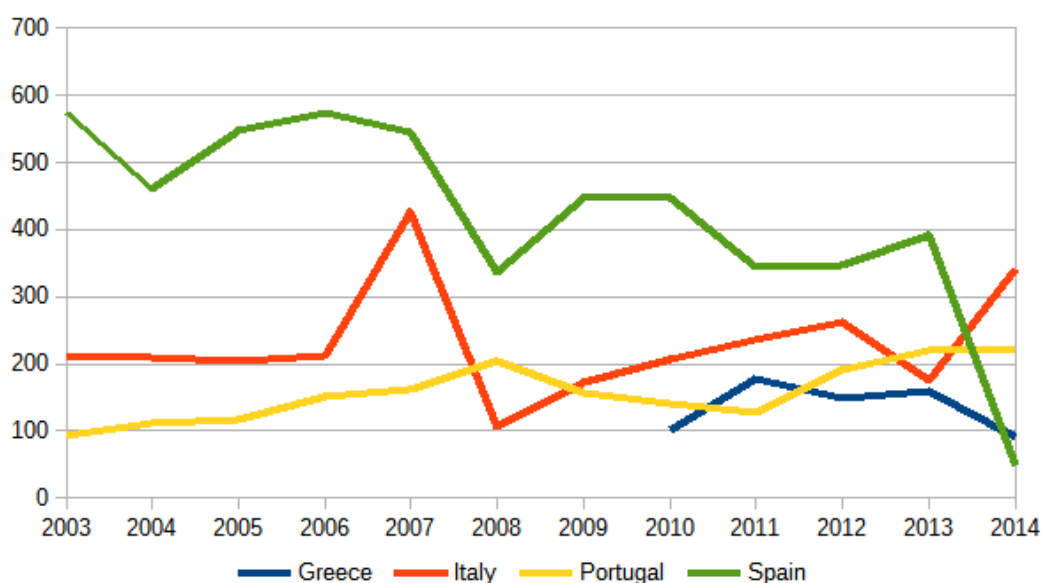
From this summary of procedural rules, it becomes evident that the four countries considered differ not only in the way question time is conducted, but in the level of institutionalisation of this scrutiny device and the frequency of its use. As regards the former aspect, Portugal is clearly the country where question time underwent most changes over the studied time period. The current format was introduced only in 2007. It largely originated from the willingness to empower the opposition after criticism mounted against rules allowing the cabinet to choose the topic of debate and which questions to answer (Filipe, 2009). Both in Spain and Italy these procedures had more time to set in and become engrained in the working practice of the assembly.

Also the number of questions varies substantially across countries and longitudinally (see Figure 1). Portugal, where only Prime Ministerial question time was included, displays clearly a lower frequency of questions. The PM appeared in front of the Parliament only 6/7 times a year up to 2007. The reformed Standing Orders made question time a fortnightly appointment, although the obligation for the PM to attend the plenary has not been rigorously respected⁵. By contrast, question time is scheduled with more regularity in Italy⁶ and Spain. These two countries share also the tendency to ask less questions in election years, which is probably due to the parliament adjourning its regular activities when elections are held. Our data-set cover a shorter period for Greece, because on the official parliamentary website questions are archived only since 2010. The number of questions asked in the period under analysis has remained rather stable.

⁵ Figure 1 shows that Portugal presents a peak in questioning activity, corresponding to the period immediately following the reform of the Standing Orders. Reporting on the 2007 reform, an expert witness acknowledged that: "The prime ministerial debates system was the most important change and the one with most impact upon the public image of the parliament" (Filipe, 2009: 6). Arguably, this created incentives for both the Prime Minister and opposition leaders to make the most of the publicity derived from attending question time.

⁶ In the Italian case, the peak coincides with a single year, 2007, when MPs asked a notable number of 497 questions. The extreme fragmentation of the party system, and the chaotic phase of political crisis, are the most likely explanation for this figure.

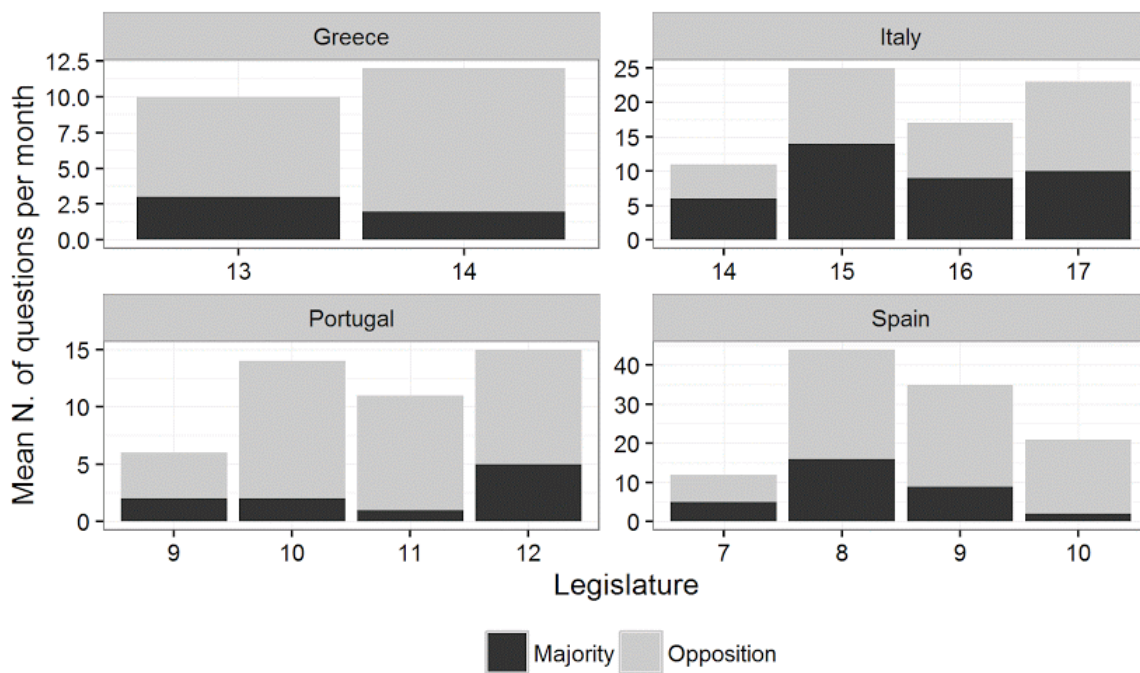
Figure 1. Number of questions considered in our analysis by country and year.



The stacked bar plot in figure 2 shows for each legislature the average number of questions per month and their distribution between government and opposition. Differently from its Westminster version, questions put to ministers by members of the governing coalition are not rare. The proportion of questions asked by majority MPs is quite remarkable in Italy⁷ and not negligible, but highly variable, also in Spain and Portugal. Understanding whether these were “friendly” questions pre-arranged for credit-claiming on the part of the minister or they were used by coalition partners to keep tabs on ministers belonging to different parties is beyond the scope of this work.

⁷ According to the data, almost 2/3 of the 30 average monthly questions in the XV Italian legislature were put by members of the coalition majority. For sure, this figure seems to originate from the conjunction of the high party system fragmentation characterising the XV legislature (especially in the majority) and the possibility for each group to ask one question, no matter the size.

Figure 2. Questions asked by majority and opposition parties



Data and methods

What drives the issue content of party parliamentary activities and did it change because of the crisis? As elucidated in the theoretical section, we are interested in assessing the impact of the crisis respectively on party responsiveness and on party mandate. By party responsiveness, we mean the congruence of voter and party attention in parliament across different issues. On the other hand, party mandate refers to the congruence between the party issue attention profile in electoral platforms and party attention in parliament.

Measures of voter's priorities, of party electoral priorities and of party parliamentary priorities were extracted from three different data sources. More precisely, party attention in parliament relies on the issue coding of each parliamentary oral questions tabled on the floor over our study period using the coding scheme developed by the Comparative Agendas Project [CAP]

(<http://www.comparativeagendas.net>). The final dataset contains 10401 oral questions to the government tabled on the floor between 2003 and 2014. Details on the title, date and sponsor were collected from the official websites of the four parliaments (dati.camera.it, www.parlamento.pt, www.congreso.es, www.hellenicparliament.gr). Each question was then assigned to one of the 213 topic codes (aggregated into 21 major topics) by human coders. The data analysed in this article were collected by the relevant national teams of the Comparative Agenda Project with the exception of the Greek data which were originally coded for this special issue.⁸

In order to map party issue attention at electoral time, we relied on the content analysis of electoral platforms carried out by the Comparative Manifesto Project [CMP] (Volkens et al., 2015). Their unit of analysis is each part of a manifesto sentence with a discernible policy content (the so-called quasi sentence). This was attributed to a policy area by human coders using a predefined codebook. Both CAP and CMP share an “emphasis-based approach” (Budge, 2015), namely they study variations on the distribution of attention by comparing the share of mentions topics receive across manifestos (CMP) and agendas (CAP).⁹ On the other hand, their coding schemes differ both in terms of range of policy topics considered and for the CMP distinction between positive and negative references to a topic. Since our main interest lies on measuring the saliency of a topic for a party and not its position, we summed the percentages of pro and con mentions when this distinction was made.

Finally, voters’ priorities were estimated using Eurobarometer data (EB). Since 2003, EB surveys have included closed-ended questions about the two most important issues [MII] facing the respondent’s country at that moment. Although there have been marginal changes in the wording of specific questions (e.g. environment and energy) and some have been recently dismissed (e.g. defence and foreign affairs) while others have been added (e.g. government debt), this is arguably the most valuable and consistent source of comparative data on voter’s preferences available for the four countries under exam.¹⁰ The first EB included in our dataset dates back to November 2003, while the last was published in June 2014.

Assessing to what extent the issue content of party questioning was driven by voter’s issue priorities or rather by the party electoral profile required a careful matching of the issue categories used in our

8 In particular, Spanish data on questions have been already presented in a book (Chaqués-Bonafont, Palau, & Baumgartner, 2015) and are available at the official webpage of the Spanish Policy Agendas Project, while Italian, Portuguese and Greek data have not yet been published.

9 The CAP approach envisages the coding of each document or activity traceable to a given agenda. For example, the topic coding of each law allows to trace attention in the law-making agenda, coding the topic of all newspaper articles permit to reconstruct the media agenda, and so on.

10 Data are available in an aggregated form from the webpage of the Eurobarometer Interactive Search System using the following query: http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/cf/showtable.cfm?keyID=2212&nationID=4,8,12,5,&startdate=2003.11&enddate=2014.11

three data sources. Table 2 illustrates the result of this matching exercise, which resulted in the creation of 8 broad categories: crime, economy, education, environment, foreign affairs, immigration, unemployment and welfare. There were data-source-specific categories that could not fit these scheme (see the Online Appendix for a detailed list of both included and excluded topic). As regards the MII, only one category was left out, transport, but this item was anyway included only in the first five EB's surveys available (issued from November 2003 to April 2006) and it never receives more than 1% of the total attention.¹¹ The matching with the CMP codebook led to the exclusion of 15 out of 56 categories (27%). Finally, 44 out 213 CAP codes (21%) could not be associated with one of the 8 common categories, which meant that on average 19.8% parliamentary questions per country had to be dropped.¹²

Different temporal aggregation criteria could be used ranging from the most specific (questions are made on a weekly, biweekly or monthly base) to the more general (manifestos are presented at the end of each legislative term). We opted for using intervals between EB publications, which is on average six months. Considering semester intervals offers a reasonable compromise, because it averages out certain contingent peaks of attention which are typical of parliamentary questioning.

We test our “riding-the-wave” hypothesis by examining the congruence between voters' issue priorities in the semester EB data are released (t_0) with the issue content of parliamentary questions for each party in the same semester. On the other hand, to test our “electoral connection” hypothesis, we compare for each interval the congruence between party attention as found in the latest relevant party manifesto and party attention as measured in parliamentary activities.¹³

In order to understand how the *crisis* affects the two relationship under study we resort to a continuous measure inspired by the most recent versions of the Economic Discomfort Index, popularly known as Misery Index (Barro, 1999; Lovell & Tien, 2000; Welsch, 2007), which combines data about unemployment, economic growth and economic stability in a single index to capture the subjective well-being of citizens. To build our version of the index we collected data on unemployment rate (Eurostat), GDP growth (OECD) and 10-years government bond yields (Eurostat) for the four countries under analysis per each of the semesters between 2003 and 2015. Before combining these indicators each of them was standardized (with mean equals to zero and

11 We also excluded all residual categories such as “Other”, “Don't know” and “None”.

12 Dropped observations were concentrated in five major topics (“Civil Rights, Minority Issues, and Civil Liberties”, “Transportation”, “Space, Science, Technology, and Communications”, “Government Operations”, “Cultural policy issues”).

13 In two cases political elections occurred between the publication of EB surveys (Spain 2004 and Portugal 2005). To account for these cases, when the party maintained representatives in the new parliament but changed the manifesto profile, the same party appears as two distinct observations within the interval, but with alteration of the time-varying attributes. The latter are not only issue attention in manifestos, but also issue attention in parliamentary questions, government status and party size.

standard deviation equals to 1) to avoid giving a disproportionate weight to the indicator with the largest standard deviation. The Misery Index for country i in semester j is thus given by the following formula:

$$Misery\ Index_{ij} = Z_{Unemployment\ ij} + Z_{BOND10\ Yieldsij} - Z_{GDP\ Growthij}$$

There is much discussion on how the concept of niche party should be operationalized: the main distinction concerns whether the status of niche party should be thought as an essential feature of a given party (Meguid, 2005) or it is better conceptualized as a (time-variant) property of each party's programmatic supply (Meyer & Miller, 2015; Wagner, 2011). Proponents of the second option additionally divide on the opportunity to consider nicheness as either a dummy or a continuous variable. Notwithstanding these differences, the operational definitions proposed in the literature lead to highly correlated measures. In this paper we relied on the continuous and election-specific measure developed by Meyer and Miller (2015), though we transformed it into a dichotomous variable to facilitate the interpretation of our models. In particular, we assign the status of niche to any party having a value of the Meyer and Miller index greater than 0.

Finally, *Party cabinet* distinguishes between party in government and in opposition, an information retrieved from the ParlGov dataset.¹⁴

Models and discussion

In the following analyses we model the proportion of parliamentary questions devoted to each issue by any party in a given semester. The unit of analysis is then the triple party-semester-issue. Our dependent variable is a proportion, varying between zero and one. In this case the applicability of the classical linear model is limited by two factors: first, its assumptions are likely to be violated; second, the models would yield nonsensical predictions when the values of the predictors are particularly low or high. In alternative, we estimated a fractional logit model (Papke & Wooldridge, 1996): this strategy makes use of logit transformation of the response variable, for which a binomial distribution is assumed. This estimation strategy has a considerable advantage over running a linear regression on the (logit) transformed dependent variables, as it properly handles both zeros and ones. The analysis was implemented through the Stata command (`glm, family=binomial, link=logit`) (Baum, 2008). An additional issue of our models is the non-independence of the observations, which can lead to overoptimistically small standard errors. To avoid this problem, we took into

¹⁴ Döring, Holger and Philip Manow. 2015. Parliaments and governments database (ParlGov): Information on parties, elections and cabinets in modern democracies. <http://www.parlgov.org/>

account the clustered nature of our dataset by computing clustered standard errors. It is not obvious on which variable the observation should be clustered: we estimated all the models clustering on the dyad party-semester, but the results are substantively unaltered also clustering on the dyad country-semester or party-issue. As an additional robustness check, we also estimated linear regression models using the original dependent variable with the same clustered standard errors: once again, the results are comparable to those presented here. The coefficients reported in table 1 are logits, whose interpretation is not intuitive. For aiding substantive interpretation, we computed the marginal effect of the main independent variables on the values of the dependent variable.

Before testing our hypotheses on the role of the crisis we checked whether our assumptions that both electoral manifestos and citizens' priorities are generally taken into account by parties. This is done in model 1 (Base model). The results are remarkably clear, as both CMP and MIP have a positive and statistically significant impact on issue attention during question time. When it comes to substantive interpretation of the model, the marginal effects presented in table 2 suggest that, on average, a 1% increase in manifesto attention leads to a 0.35% increase in question time attention. At the same time, a 1% increase in citizens' priorities is associated with a 0.15% increase in the dependent variable¹⁵. Several studies have found a relationship between external sources of information (generally media attention) and parliamentary attention (Soroka, 2002; S. Walgrave, Soroka, & Nuytemans, 2008), and a few of them have simultaneously acknowledged a role for party preferences (Christoffer Green-Pedersen & Stubager, 2010; Vliegenthart, Walgrave, & Meppelink, 2011; Vliegenthart et al., 2013). However, up to now those phenomena had been only observed in single country studies. Our model confirms that both external pressures (here measured with citizens' priorities) and party manifestos are important predictors of parliamentary attention, and generalize this finding to the context of Southern European Countries.

15 These two marginal effect cannot be directly compared because in the Eurobarometer surveys respondents could choose up to two most important problems, if they wished so.

Table 1. Predictors of Parliamentary Attention during Question Time

	Base model (1)	Crisis All (2)	Only Opposition (3)	Only Majority (4)	Only Mainstream (5)	Only Niche (6)
Electoral Manifestos (EM)	4.136*** (0.317)	4.376*** (0.324)	4.240*** (0.377)	5.668*** (0.561)	5.438*** (0.415)	3.598*** (0.495)
Most Important Problem (MIP)	1.755*** (0.196)	1.634*** (0.211)	1.941*** (0.256)	0.632 (0.357)	1.410*** (0.241)	1.668*** (0.393)
Crisis	-0.0315*** (0.00752)	-0.0213 (0.0146)	-0.0342 (0.0181)	0.00631 (0.0216)	-0.0289 (0.0191)	0.00659 (0.0217)
Niche	0.0491* (0.0236)	0.0421 (0.0234)	0.0069 (0.0285)	0.145*** (0.0393)		
Majority	0.0607* (0.0259)	0.0766** (0.0248)			0.0121 (0.0307)	0.133* (0.0561)
Crisis*EM		-0.352*** (0.105)	-0.227 (0.119)	-0.579*** (0.159)	-0.490** (0.150)	-0.314* (0.147)
Crisis*MIP		0.168* (0.0656)	0.136 (0.0761)	0.229 (0.125)	0.199* (0.100)	0.161 (0.0948)
Country (ref: Greece)						
<i>Italy</i>	-0.267*** (0.0730)	-0.265*** (0.0682)	-0.387*** (0.0685)	0.0704 (0.133)	-0.316** (0.0999)	-0.105 (0.0937)
<i>Portugal</i>	-0.246*** (0.0688)	-0.241*** (0.0641)	-0.341*** (0.0652)	0.0897 (0.125)	-0.306** (0.0953)	-0.0639 (0.0905)
<i>Spain</i>	-0.253*** (0.0643)	-0.241*** (0.0609)	-0.371*** (0.0593)	0.178 (0.125)	-0.299*** (0.0882)	-0.16 (0.0878)
Constant	-2.663*** (0.0623)	-2.675*** (0.0609)	-2.593*** (0.0645)	-2.900*** (0.124)	-2.639*** (0.0817)	-2.742*** (0.0847)
Log pseudolikelihood	-841.986	-840.704	-586.177	-252.952	-552.387	-287.098
<i>N</i>	3592	3592	2528	1064	2376	1216

Clustered standard errors in parentheses

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$ **Table 2. Average effects of Electoral Manifestos and Most Important Problems on the predicted level of issue attention (model 1)**

	Marginal effect	Std. Err.	z	P-value
Electoral Manifestos (EM)	0.349	0.026	13.25	0.000
Most Important Problem (MIP)	0.148	0.016	9.07	0.000

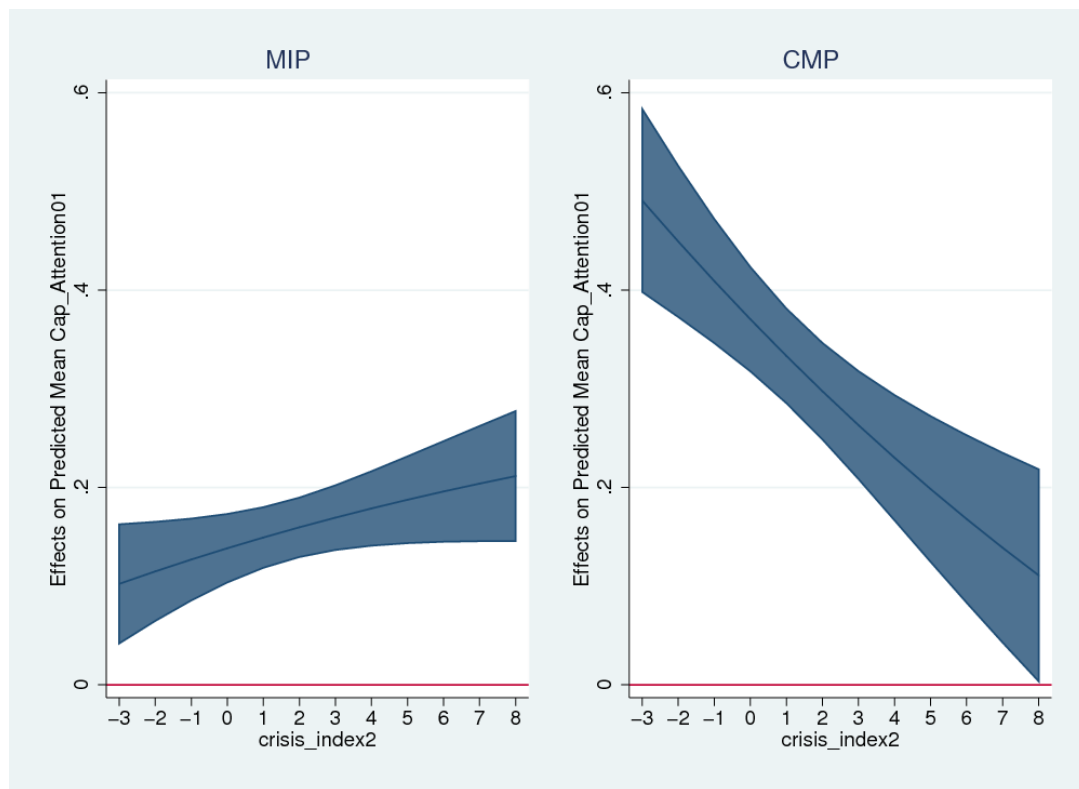
The second model (Crisis) directly tests our first hypothesis: in order to do so it includes two interactive terms to understand whether the impact of manifestos and citizens' priorities is mediated by the crisis. In this model the coefficients of the original independent variables, indicating their

impact on the dependent variable when crisis is set at zero (its mean value), is unaltered. As already shown in model 1, in average economic conditions both manifestos and citizens' priorities are valid predictors of issue attention during question time. However, the interactive terms have opposite signs, and both are statistically significant. When economic conditions worsen, the manifesto gradually lose importance while citizens' priorities gain more weight. The effect of both variables on issue attention, at different values of the crisis index, is graphically shown in figure 3. It should be noted that attention in manifestos remains a significant predictor of issue attention in parliament no matter the economic conditions: nonetheless, this effect is maximum when the economy is in good shape and minimum when the crisis hits the most. Naturally, parties can include in their manifestos crisis-related issues, but this process of adaptation is hindered by two factors. First, the state of the economy can worsen in-between elections, and parties can update their electoral program only with a certain lag. Secondly, parties might find inconvenient to completely alter the content of their manifestos from one election to the following one: in other words, manifestos could be sticky. Estimating the relative weight of these two factors is beyond the scope of this article. With regard to citizens' priorities, our model suggests that when economic condition worsens parties take them even more seriously. The slope of the marginal effect is less than impressive, but the interaction term is still different from zero. In times of crisis parties are more responsive to citizens' priorities than in normal times. In summary, we can conclude that hypothesis 1 is clearly and completely supported by our data: the crisis can be conceived as a mediator of party behavior, weakening party mandate and reinforcing dynamic responsiveness.

Models 3, 4, 5 and 6 are run on sub-samples consisting respectively of niche, mainstream, opposition and majority parties. By doing so we wanted to check whether the general model could be applied to different kind of parties. In particular, we searched for evidence that under difficult economic conditions (h2) only opposition parties would pay more attention to voters' priorities and that (h3) only niche parties would pay less attention to their manifestos. Splitting the sample is a preliminary analysis that helps evaluating whether different kinds of relations between our variables hold in different sub-populations of cases. Neither of those hypotheses found support in the data. For all kind of parties, in the average economic conditions, both manifestos and citizens' priorities remain important predictors of parliamentary issue attention. The only exception regards majority parties, which appears to be less responsive to popular priorities (the coefficient of MIP is positive but fails to reach statistical significance). When it comes to interaction effects, the sign of all coefficients remain unaltered, though they do not always reach the conventional levels of statistical significance. The coefficient of the interaction between crisis and manifestos, indicating a decreasing importance of manifestos under difficult economic conditions, is always significant but

in the model with only opposition parties. By contrast. The coefficient of the interaction between crisis and citizens' priorities reaches statistical significance only in the model including mainstream parties.

Figure 3. Marginal effect on Most Important Problems (MIP) and Electoral Manifestos(CMP) on Parliamentary attention at different levels of the crisis index.



Conclusion

This article analysed how party mandate and dynamic responsiveness shape the issues addressed by parties during question time in the major Southern European Countries, Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain. In particular, it assessed whether an exceptional external event, such as the economic crisis which severely hit these countries since 2008, is able to modify the strength of these two mechanisms. Combining party manifesto data, Eurobarometer surveys, data on parliamentary questions and several economic indicators, it offered considerable support to the claim that both manifestos and citizens' priorities are relevant predictors of how parties distribute attention among various issues in parliamentary questioning. Moreover, by looking at how these relations are

modified by economic conditions, it argued that the crisis has reinforced dynamic responsiveness at the expense of party mandate. The claim made by Comparative Agendas scholars that external events weakens the link between electoral promises and party behaviour is thus supported by the data.

This article engages with the party issue-competition literature which sees the prioritization of certain issues as a means to win electoral support. Parties are found to balance their attention between issues on which they have campaigned and issues that becomes salient afterwards, but dramatic external events are able to shift such equilibrium. When something dramatically affects citizens' priorities, parties are ready to dynamically adapt their behaviour to appear responsive. Previous literature has shown that parties concentrate their parliamentary attention to the issues which dominate the media agenda, a strategy that is called "riding the wave" in the political communication literature. Likewise, parties are willing to ride the wave of public opinion.

In this regard the nature of the party (mainstream or niche) and its institutional position (majority or opposition) does not make any discernible difference. It should be noted that in this article we did not compare the impact of party mandate and dynamic responsiveness in different types of parties. Rather, we checked whether the crisis had a differential impact according to some party characteristics, founding no evidence in support of this claim. The consequences of the crisis impacted on a similar way to different kind of parties, obliging them to adjust their strategies.

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