

# Constituency Characteristics, Expertise, Civil Society Links and Parliamentary Questions: Evidence from Portugal

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## **Abstract**

*What determines the topic selected by MPs for their parliamentary questions in a non-preferential electoral system? This paper aims to contribute to current studies on parliamentary questions and political representation by examining the impact of three individual-level explanatory factors of topic selection: characteristics of electoral districts, expertise and personal characteristics of the MP. The institutional characteristics of the Portuguese political system represent a suitable case study to evaluate our hypotheses. Portuguese MPs have a national mandate and their re-election chances hinge on being reselected by the party elites (closed list PR with centralized candidate selection mainly by national party elites). This should make the odds of observing a direct link to their constituencies and a significant impact of personal characteristics lower in comparison with preferential systems. The paper tackles this question by drawing on a dataset comprising the population of parliamentary questions (more than 14,000) tabled by Portuguese MPs in the period from 2009 until 2015.*

**Keywords:** Parliamentary Questions; Constituency Characteristics; Issues; Portugal

## Introduction

How members of parliament (MPs) interpret their role and how this affects their individual behaviour have long been a topic of investigation in legislative studies (Strøm 1997, for a review see Andeweg 2014). Even after controlling for the incentives provided by the electoral system (research looked, for example, at how electoral systems shape party discipline when MPs cast their votes), a complex mix of interrelated factors affects the behaviour of individual MPs. First, MPs' decisions on specific issues may stem from their party membership, especially if their re-election depends primarily on the decisions of party leaders. Their second principal may be their electoral constituency, bringing to the fore geographic considerations. Finally, MPs' behaviour may respond to personal characteristics, such as beliefs derived from their belonging to a specific societal group (for instance, an ethnic group).

Recently, scholars used this analysis framework to explain variation in the content of individual MPs' agendas, namely how they distribute attention across issue matters. Parliamentary questions are one of the most well-known arenas where MPs disclose information on their issue interests. Parliamentary questions addressed by individual MPs to the executive, either in oral or written form – are one of a series of non-legislative activities, in the sense that they are not intended to create new legislation or change existing laws (Russo 2011). Unlike legislative activities, which are quite often strictly bounded by party discipline (Martin 2011a; Russo 2011; Louwerse and Otjes 2016), MPs use parliamentary questions to pursue a varied set of goals motivated by both partisan (executive scrutiny by opposition parties, raising awareness to issues) and individual factors (serving as additional publicity for members, signalling effort and productivity, strengthening bonds with constituencies, granting information to inexperienced legislators; Franklin and Norton 1993; Lazardeux 2005; Russo 2011; Kellerman 2016; for a systematic literature review, see Martin 2011a).

The goal of this article is to assess the individual and constituency factors affecting the choice of topics by individual MPs in their parliamentary questions.<sup>1</sup> Our

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<sup>1</sup> Parliamentary questions are a feature of the MPs non-legislative activities throughout Europe (Russo and Wiberg 2010). In Portugal, the democratic Constitution stipulates that MPs have the power to "make questions to the government or public administration about any of its actions and get an answer in reasonable time, except legal dispositions regarding State secrecy" (On Article 156, comma d),; our translation). However, while written questions, *perguntas*, have existed since 1976

empirical case is Portugal between 2009 and 2015. We chose to focus on three specific issues: employment, the environment and law and order. These issues cover two of the three categories of issues proposed by Soroka (2002) and implemented, for instance, on Walgrave, Soroka and Nuytemans (2008) study of the mass media's political agenda-setting power: prominent and sensational issues. Economic issues are, of course, of prominent nature, due to the direct impact that they have on the well-being of the population, especially in times of crisis, bailout and austerity; in turn, environmental and law and order can be framed as sensational issues, since they are not obtrusive to the majority of the political elite (i.e. not directly observed or experienced) and frequently become salient due to spectacular events (Walgrave, Soroka and Nuytemans 2008).<sup>2</sup>

The rationale under the choice of the time frame is twofold: first, we want to focus on a period in which economic issues were remarkably salient, and therefore picked the years of the acute sovereign debt crisis and bailout (2011-2014) in Portugal; second, the 2007 constitutional reform made the parliamentary questions more relevant than they have been before (Seguro, 2016), which means that a study of questioning behaviour made before that date would be biased by how discredited this tool was.

We believe that Portugal is a critical case for shedding light on this research question. First, the closed-list PR electoral system used in Portuguese legislative elections should create little incentives for MPs to cultivate personal votes (Carey and Shugart 1995; Lisi and Santana-Pereira 2014), and, therefore, to focus on constituency-salient issues instead of on national-salient issues. As in Italy during the 15th legislature (2006-2008), right after the 2005 reform introducing a closed-list PR electoral system in the country, a focus on issues that are relevant to

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(not only in the Constitution but also in the first draft of the Rules of Procedure), during the first two decades their use was rather limited. Up to 2007, this instrument was by and large discredited because the cabinet member receiving the questions could decide which of them to answer (Seguro 2016). Additionally, there was a limit to the number of questions each group could submit. Questions left unanswered were published periodically in the Official Journal of the Parliament but there was little expectation that the cabinet would eventually pick them up. The 2007 reform changed this (see Seguro 2016 and Freire, Borghetto and Santana-Pereira 2016).

<sup>2</sup>The typology proposed by Soroka (2002) also includes governmental issues - issues that have to do with governmental issues: unobtrusive and not contentious issues not connected with specific high-profile events but with the government doing business as usual. Walgrave, Soroka and Nuytemans (2008) provide as good examples of these issues defence and foreign affairs in a country such as Belgium (but that is not, surely, the case in the USA) or political system and government administration. We chose not to focus on this type of issue in this paper.

constituencies (as a way of constituency service), would not help MPs to achieve their individual goals of being re-selected, re-elected or acquire party or legislative offices (Russo 2011). This means that Portugal constitutes a rather robust setting to test district-level determinants of MP behaviour as opposed to contexts in which it is possible to vote for individual candidates instead of party lists. Second, however, it has been shown that there is significant variation in constituency focus (both in terms of attitudinal focus and hours spent in the constituency vis-à-vis in the Parliament) according to the level of district magnitude (Pillet, Freire and Costa, 2012; Freire, 2017). Thus, even within the case some variation is expected and that is yet another good reason to focus on Portugal. Third, apart from the closed list PR system, Portugal has a very centralized system of candidate selection, with a very strong role of national party elites in the process, within each party (Freire e Pequito, 2011; Pequito e Freire, 2011), one of the reasons why Shugart (2000) classify the Portuguese system as «extreme electoral system». And that is also another strong justifications for focusing on the Portuguese case.

While the majority of the literature on this subject has focused on electoral vulnerability and party characteristics as factors explaining the number and/or scope of parliamentary questions, we will focus on the individual MPs civic links, expertise and characteristics of the electoral district in which they were elected. We believe that this work will constitute a contribution towards a more nuanced understanding of why individual MPs choose to focus on some issues instead of others when addressing questions to the executive.

This article is organized as follows. In the next section, we discuss the relevant literature on parliamentary questions, their role and the factors underlying the amount of questions made by individual MPs and the issues those questions address. Then, we present the hypotheses that we aim to test in the Portuguese context, the data and methodological approach chosen. In the following section, we present a series of multilevel regression models aimed at assessing the explanatory power of our determinants of topic choice. The article ends with a discussion of the main empirical patterns observed and their implications for our knowledge of the individual determinants of MP behaviour in terms of executive scrutiny.

### **Factors of Parliamentary Questions' Quantity and Focus**

Parliamentary questions have been the focus of the study of individual MP behaviour in consolidated democracies, although to a lesser extent than other parliamentary activities, namely those of legislative nature. In order to control for the effects of systemic variation, most studies on the factors surrounding interpersonal differences in the use of parliamentary questions are case studies, focused on contexts such as the UK (e.g. Judge 1974; Franklin and Norton 1993; Bird 2005; Saalfeld 2011; Kellerman 2014, 2016, Bevan and John 2016), Ireland (e.g. Martin 2011b), Canada (e.g. Soroka, Penner and Blidook, 2009; Blidook and Kerby, 2011), France (e.g. Lazardeux 2005), Italy (e.g. Russo, 2011), Norway (e.g. Rasch, 2009), Switzerland (e.g. Bailer, 2011), Belgium (e.g. Dandoy, 2011; Vliegenthart, Walgrave, and Zicha, 2013), the Netherlands (e.g. Louwerse and Otjes, 2016) or the EU as a whole, by focusing on the behaviour of members of the European Parliament (e.g. Proksch and Slapin 2010; Jensen, Proksch and Slapin 2013). Comparative studies are rarer, being Vliegenthart and Walgrave (2011) and Borghetto and Russo (2017) notable exceptions. Research on parliamentary questions as dependent variables often adopt one of the following approaches: studying the factors explaining the number of questions posed by individual MPs, the topics selected by different MPs, and the focus of questions on the MPs' constituencies. In the next paragraphs, we discuss the main studies on these three sub-topics.

A considerable degree of attention has been paid to the factors influencing how many parliamentary questions are made by individual MPs. The literature shows that electoral vulnerability seems to be a factor of productivity, but not in all contexts. A recent study observed that the electorally vulnerable British MPs (i.e. those elected with narrower margins of victory) use questions to signal effort to their voters (Kellerman 2016), thus replicating the findings of Soroka, Penner and Blidook (2009) for Canada and Rasch (2009) for Norway. However, Louwerse and Otjes (2016) observe the opposite relationship: Dutch MPs with higher list positions (and therefore a less vulnerable position in electoral terms) ask more parliamentary questions than those lower on the list. Moreover, Lazardeux (2005) does not observe links between electoral vulnerability and number of questions

posed by the French parliamentarians. In that context, the informational role of parliamentary questions seems to be more important. Finally, a recent study of Fernandes et al. (2017) on Portugal found that electoral vulnerability has an impact on the focus of representation (distinguishing between district and party-focused parliamentary questions) but only if analysed in interaction with the time in the electoral cycle and party size.

A second relevant factor is the governing status of the party MPs are affiliated to. In Denmark, France and Belgium, MPs from opposition parties are more likely of resorting to written questions than those supporting the majority, since they see the parliamentary questions as a cost-free way of exercising oversight and scrutiny of the executives (Lazardeux 2005; Dandoy 2011; Vliegenthart and Walgrave 2011; Vliegenthart, Walgrave and Zicha 2013). Studies focusing on the European Parliament also showed that MEPs from national opposition parties are more likely to ask questions (Proksch and Slapin 2010; Jensen, Proksch and Slapin 2013). Soroka, Penner and Blidook (2009) make a more nuanced analysis and verify not only this trend towards higher productivity from the opposition MPs, but within the majority/opposition dichotomy it is possible to find differences between backbenchers and those linked to the government or shadow government: backbenchers are more productive than cabinet MPs when affiliated to opposition parties, and less productive than them when supporting the ruling majority (see also Bevan and John 2016).

In addition to the governing status of the party they belong to, there are other relevant party-related factors of MP productivity in terms of questioning: party size, party productivity, party cohesiveness, and modes of candidate selection. First, MPs from larger parties tend to have higher *per capita* scores in terms of number of questions posed (Dandoy 2011). In Canada, Soroka, Penner and Blidook (2009) observe not only this general linear trend, but also that the relationship between size and productivity tends to be positive just when the MPs party control less than 50 per cent of the opposition seats. Second, there is a positive relationship between the amount of questions posed by the MPs and those made by their party colleagues (and committee peers; Louwerse and Otjes 2016). Third, Dandoy (2011) finds that Belgian disciplined and cohesive parties are more active in questioning the government than other parties. Fourth and last, in the

Netherlands MPs from parties with centralized modes of selection are more active than those who have more control over the process (Louwerse and Otjes 2016).

Lastly, three other factors have also been identified as relevant: specialization in a few portfolios tends to depress productivity (Louwerse and Otjes (2016); the political culture seems to be an issue: the different political cultures of Flanders and Wallonia also lead to differences in terms of how productive MPs are (Dandoy 2011); and party and career orientation has an impact on the amount of questions posed by the members of the parliament's Swiss Lower House: junior legislators use this tool to underline their activity and commitment to political affairs (Bailer 2011).

A flourishing research agenda on parliamentary questions has been focusing not on the productivity of the MPs, but on the topics that they choose to address in their parliamentary questions.<sup>3</sup> Several studies deal with personal characteristics such as the MPs' gender (female MPs ask more questions about issues pertaining to women than their male colleagues; Bird 2005) and ethnicity (MPs who belong to minority groups ask more questions about immigration and diversity; Saalfeld 2011). Others focus on their performing tasks as party representatives, such as working inside parliamentary committees (questions tend to be within the jurisdiction of those committees; Proksch and Slapin 2010; Kellerman 2014) or the portfolios or shadow portfolios that they hold (Soroka, Penner and Blidook 2009).

Lastly, a growing number of studies is interested in understanding whether the issues raised by the parliamentary questions are salient for the constituency. For instance, Saalfeld (2011) observes that in the UK the MPs who represent constituencies in which there is a stronger presence of visible minorities also ask more questions about diversity and immigration. In Canada, Soroka, Penner and Blidook (2009) and Blidook and Kerby (2011) studied the link between a series of constituency characteristics and preferences and the number of questions made by the MPs elected in those constituencies focusing on salient issues directly connected with those preferences and characteristics. By adopting this substantive

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<sup>3</sup> Vliegenthart and Walgrave (2011) and Vliegenthart, Walgrave, and Zicha (2013) and Vliegenthart et al. (2016) found that the topic of questions tend to be influenced by the mass media, although parties react differently based on their position in government or in the opposition.



representation focus in the study of parliamentary questions, the authors observe that such representation is commonly observed, even though it varies from issue to issue, and often (but not always) MPs facing electoral pressure, or vulnerability (narrow victory margins) are more prone to engage in this mode of constituency representation via questions (Soroka, Penner and Blidook 2009; Blidook and Kerb 2011).

The rationale underlying the study of the issues covered by parliamentary questions serving as a way of building links with the constituency or effectively generating substantive representation, is the same we find on studies interested in the focus of the questions, regardless of their topic. A few analyses have operationalized "constituency-focus" via a direct or indirect reference to the constituency in the question (cf. Martin 2011b) and tried to identify the factors impacting the probability to adopt such focus. The electoral system, in terms of the distinction between closed-list PR and other ballot structures that grant voters more liberty to cast personal votes, is believed to be relevant in terms of the focus of parliamentary questions, with constituency-focused questions being more common, for instance, in Ireland than Italy (Martin 2011b; Russo 2011). However, electoral institutions are only part of the story, since even in a context in which the electoral system rules should not create incentives for MPs to cultivate personal votes – Italy during the 15th legislature (2006-2008), one-third of the questions were constituency-focused (Russo 2011). Other factors may therefore explain the odds of an MP to adopt such a focus.

In Italy, parliamentarians with prominent leadership roles, i.e. electorally less vulnerable, are less willing to do constituency service, since, unlike the others, they do not need to do so in order to enhance their odds of being re-selected by their parties (Russo 2011). However, that is not the case in the UK and Ireland, where the MPs' electoral vulnerability is not associated with different odds of posing constituency-focused questions (Martin 2011b; Kellerman 2016).

Second, government vs. opposition status is also believed to be a factor, but the results are not consistent: in Italy, MPs from (some) opposition parties are more likely to adopt a local focus (Russo 2011); in turn, Irish MPs supporting the government are more likely to pose questions focused on their constituencies (Martin 2011b). In the European Parliament, MEPs from national opposition



parties are more likely to alert the Commission to violations of EU law in their own member states (their constituencies) than their counterparts from parties backing up the national government (Jensen, Proksch and Slapin 2013).

Among the other relevant variables underlined by these studies, we find the nature of the political party (parties not claiming to be national and whose electorate is concentrated in a specific region are more likely to adopt a constituency focus; Russo 2011), political culture (the particularism in Southern Italy leads MPs elected in that region to pose more locally focused questions; Russo 2011), the position of the electoral district in the centre-peripheral cleavage (MPs from peripheral districts are more prone to adopt a constituency focus; Martin 2011b) or the existence of strong links between the MP and the district that elected her (parachuted MPs being less focused on the constituencies than those who were born and live in the constituency; Russo 2011).

## **Goals and hypotheses**

The goal of this article is to assess the personal and constituency-level factors explaining the choice of topics by individual MPs in their parliamentary questioning in Portugal between 2009 and 2015. We choose to focus on three specific issues: employment, the environment and law and order. In terms of factors, we aim at testing in the specific Portuguese context factors that were deemed relevant in other countries (namely factors associated with the MPs party service and the context of the constituencies they were elected in) as well as a new factor that, according to our knowledge, has not been studied: the links between the MPs and the civil society.

First, as we have seen above, both in national and supranational parliaments it is often the case that there is a consistency between the specialization of the MPs in specific topics, mirrored in their participation in specific committees, and the topics they choose to tackle in the parliamentary questions they pose (Proksch and Slapin 2010; Kellerman, 2014). Will this result, observed in the context of the British and European parliaments, hold in the remarkably different Portuguese context, especially in times of economic crisis in which economic concerns may blur the effects of specialization? Our main expectation is conservative: we

hypothesize that, indeed, MPs belonging to a specific committee will be more likely to make questions about issues addressed in that committee:

*H1 – Committee membership has an impact on the attention to a topic devoted by an MP via parliamentary questions*

This hypothesis encompasses three different expectations. MPs belonging to the “Committee for environment, territorial issues and local power” will be more likely pose questions about the environment, while those in the “Committee for employment and social security” will display a higher likelihood of making questions about employment and those engaged in the “Committee for Constitutional affairs, rights and freedoms” have higher odds of addressing issues concerning law and order in their questions.

Second, the social interactions the MPs embark on are expected to have an impact on the topic of questions they raise in the parliament:

*H2 – MPs’ engagement in civil society organizations of different nature will have an impact on the share of attention to specific topics in the parliamentary questions*

In particular, we expect that MPs involved in charities and volunteer associations should be more likely to focus on new politics issues (such as environmental issues). On the other hand, those entertaining economic and professional links with the business world should be more likely to address traditional left-right matters (such as employment matters). We do not expect any association between the two dummies and questions related to law and order.

Lastly, although the existing research points out that the constituency characteristics are associated to a higher likelihood of raising questions on issues made salient by those characteristics, this varies from issue to issue (Soroka, Penner and Blidook, 2009; Blidook and Kerby, 2011; Saalfeld, 2011). In the Portuguese context of 2009-2015, strongly conditioned by the sovereign debt crisis and the bailout granted by the *troika*, and market by a considerable degree of distrust in political institutions, it may be the case that MPs found the need to show

themselves aware of the constituency issues via the parliamentary questions they raise:

*H3 – The specific conditions of the constituency have an impact on the share of attention to a topic devoted by an MP in his/her parliamentary questions, especially those with a local focus*

Again, this hypothesis encompasses three different expectations. First, the more salient are environmental issues in the constituency that elected the MP, the higher is the likelihood of making questions about the environment. The same pattern is also expected in the case of the two other topics: on the one hand, the unemployment rate at the MP's constituency will be positively associated with the odds of addressing employment matters in parliamentary questions; on the other, MPs elected in constituencies with higher crime rates will be more likely to raise questions about law and order.

Table 1 summarises the expected impact of these three factors on the likelihood to ask a question on that topic.

**Table 1. Hypotheses tested**

	INTEREST GROUPS	COMMITTEES	SOCIAL INDICATORS
ENVIRONMENT	Civic groups +	“Committee for environment, territorial issues and local power” +	Environmental expenditure as a percentage of total municipal expenditure +
EMPLOYMENT	Interest groups +	“Committee for employment and social security” +	Unemployed persons registered at public employment offices as a percentage of resident population +
LAW & ORDER	<i>No effects</i>	“Committee for Constitutional affairs, rights and freedoms” +	Crime registered per thousands inhabitants +

## Data and methodology

To test the aforementioned hypotheses, this article relies on a novel data set combining information on the topic of all written parliamentary questions (“*perguntas ao governo*”) submitted by Portuguese MPs during the 11th (2009-2011) and 12th legislature (2011-2015) and on MPs’ biographies and professional careers.<sup>4</sup>

For the most part, interviews with MPs confirm that they are not constrained by party leaders when drafting and sending a written question to the government, so it is a good indicator of their range of interests (Borghetto and Lisi, 2017). In practical terms, we attribute a question to an MP only if he or she is the first signatory (more than one party member can be asked to sign the question). There are no formal rules regarding the order of signatories and every party applies a different internal policy. Even so, interviewed MPs affirms that, in the greatest majority of cases, the author of the content and who takes the initiative in the first place is also the first to sign (Borghetto and Lisi 2017). On the other hand, it is questionable whether a simple signature represents a demonstration of interest for the topic or simply a favour done to a party fellow. As a result, we consider only first signatories.

Our final data set contains 14346 questions, 5091 in the short 11th legislature and 9255 in the 4-year 12th legislature. Even after filtering out duplicated questions (for instance, the same question may be present three times when it is addressed to three ministers or it refers to three different cities), parties are responsible for a different share of questions: 70% of the questions are submitted either by the PCP (40%), the BE (25%) or the PEV (5%), while the authorship for the remaining questions is equally shared by the PS, PSD and CDS-PP (each  $\cong 10\%$ ).

Another point to take into account is that a number of MPs do not submit any question as first signatory in the course of the legislature.<sup>5</sup> As we do not know the reasons underlying the decision of remaining inactive (other priorities or tasks

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<sup>4</sup>Data were retrieved from the official site of the parliament, parlamento.pt. Data on MPs’ biographies were collected for the X and XI legislatures by Freire et al. (2009) and for the XII legislature by Freire et al. (2015). Gaps in these databases were filled by the authors.

<sup>5</sup>Even in this case parties differ substantially. The percentage of inactive MPs is 25% for the BE and CDS-PP, 34% for the PCP, 67% for the PS and 47% for the PSD.

inside the party?), we removed these cases as they could introduce unexplained noise in our analysis.

Our dependent variables are binary and take 1 if the MP asks at least one question on the topic (environment, economy, law and order) during a legislative session (each legislature is composed of four sessions, running from September to June). In other words, our unit of analysis is the MP/session dyad. Since a number of MPs are substituted in the course of the legislature either temporarily (e.g. because of an extended leave) or permanently (e.g. 230 MPs sit in the Portuguese Parliament but a total of 313 MPs served in the 12th legislature) and the time spent in parliament affects the likelihood of asking a question, we filtered out those that were present less than 80 percent of the duration of a parliamentary session. The final data set includes 214 MPs for the 11th and 222 for the 12th legislature.

The main policy content of each question was classified by two trained coders working separately using the 217 categories of the Portuguese policy agendas codebook (which can be aggregated into 21 macro topics like economy, transports, environment). Differences among coders were resolved through discussion with one of the authors. The three selected topics - crime, environment and unemployment - correspond to different combinations of policy agendas codes (see Appendix 1).

In order to distinguish constituency service from questions with a more general scope, coders were asked to classify questions based on whether the question had a local focus (using the method devised by Martin 2011b) and, if so, whether it concerned the constituency where the MP was elected. As a result, we have two dependent variables for each topic: general takes 1 if the MP asks a question on topic *i* in session *k*; local takes 1 if the MP asks a constituency-related question on topic *i* in session *k*. Table 2 reports descriptive statistics for the three issues and a residual category termed “other”. In all three cases, more than half of the questions are local in nature (for more information on the distribution of questions by type of focus across parties see Appendix 2).

TABLE 2 HERE

In this article we test the impact of three main sets of independent variables. Starting from MP-specific group-belonging attributes, CIVIC and INTGROUP takes the value of 1 when the MP was or is currently involved in/leading either civic groups (cultural, social, educational, environmental) or interest group (business, professional orders, trade unions). In turn, COMMITTEE tests whether membership on a committee pertinent to topic x significantly affects the likelihood to ask questions on the subject. As a result, it takes different values according to the question's topic: the "Committee for environment, territorial issues and local power" deals with environmental issues;<sup>6</sup> the "Committee for Constitutional affairs, rights and freedoms" deals with issues of law and order;<sup>7</sup> the "Committee for employment and social security" deals with employment-related issues.<sup>8</sup> It is a binary variable equals to 1 when the MP belongs to a specific committee.

PROBLEM uses local economic/social indicators to measure the relevance of the problem in the electoral district of the MP. Given the multidimensionality of each of the selected issues, there exist no perfect indicators of issue relevance. Furthermore, no local surveys are available to measure the perception of the public opinion regarding each issue. After a careful examination of data sets on Portuguese municipalities available on a yearly basis and spanning from 2009 to 2014, we decided to focus on the following three: unemployed persons registered at public employment offices as a percentage of resident population; municipalities' environmental expenditure as a percentage of total expenditure; crime registered per thousand inhabitants.<sup>9</sup> Since our dependent variables are aggregated by legislative sessions and our data are available by calendar year, we matched the two data sources as follows: yearly data from 2009 were used to predict behaviour during the parliamentary session starting in 2009 (running from the 15<sup>th</sup> October 2009 until the 15<sup>th</sup> September 2010); data from 2010 were applied to the 2010 parliamentary session; and so on for the remaining sessions.

We also included a battery of control variables which were found to have an impact on the likelihood to ask a parliamentary question (regardless of the topic)

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6Comissão do Ambiente, Ordenamento do Território e Poder Local (CAOTPL).

7Comissão de Assuntos Constitucionais, Direitos, Liberdades e Garantias (CACDLG).

8Comissão de Segurança Social e Trabalho (CSST).

9All data sets were extracted from [www.pordata.pt](http://www.pordata.pt).

in previous analyses. Most of these controls have directly or indirectly do to with the degree of electoral vulnerability of the MPs, which, according to some authors (Soroka, Penner and Blidook 2009; Russo 2011), but not others (Martin 2011b, Kellerman 2016) fosters not only more questions being posed but also a stronger focus on the constituencies and/or the issues that are salient in the electoral districts. To begin with, the variable PARTY\_POSITION is a dummy variable equals to 1 if the MP is currently a member of the national or local decision-making body of the party. Since Portuguese MPs selection and list position are mostly decided by these bodies, we expect high-ranking officials sitting in it to be less dependent on parliamentary activities to build a reputation and improve their chance of re-election. REPLACEMENT is a dummy variable taking 1 if the MP was not elected directly but entered parliament in the course of the legislature as a temporary or permanent substitute of another party member. This variable should positively correlate with the likelihood of asking a question: not-elected MPs should have more incentive to use parliamentary activities to improve their list position and increase their re-election prospect. The variable SENIORITY measures the number of times an MP was elected. We expect MPs who have served for many mandates and already consolidated a reputation in the eyes of party leaders (and among voters) should have less incentive to direct their efforts towards parliamentary questioning. Furthermore, we checked for the age of the representative by creating a dummy variable taking 1 if the MP is above 64, namely close to the retirement age (END\_CAREER). MPs at the end of their careers should be less concerned with reselection and, consequently, their reputation as hard-working MPs.<sup>10</sup>

OPPOSITION is a dummy variable equals to 1 if the MP was member of a party in the opposition and 0 otherwise. Since getting information from or influencing the agenda of members of the executive through more informal means is generally more difficult for opposition MPs, they should rely more heavily on parliamentary questions. This expectation is in line with previous studies on the matter (Lazardeux 2005, Dandoy 2011, Vliegenthart and Walgrave 2011;

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<sup>10</sup>We also ran a model with control for MP's GENDER (1 if female MP). Based on previous works (Bird 2005), we expected women MPs to focus on other topics than the ones we examine, so the correlation should be negative. None of the coefficient was significantly different from zero.



Vliegenthart, Walgrave and Zicha 2013; Proksch and Slapin 2010; Jensen, Proksch and Slapin 2013), and relevant to us because higher odds of making lots of questions have an impact on the odds of making questions about the three issues under analysis. The government vs. opposition status is also expected a higher likelihood of posing constituency-focused questions (Russo 2011; Jensen, Proksch and Slapin 2013; but see also Martin 2011b for an exception).

We also include a categorical variable capturing the MP's party membership (reference value is the Socialist Party, PS), in order to deal with all the party-related variables that may have an impact on the likelihood of a given MP posing a question and adopting a constituency focus. Since party preferences and party size are relatively stable over the course of the two legislatures, the resulting four dummies aim at controlling party group effects.

Finally, the variable *MAGNITUDE* measures the number of MPs elected by each constituency. District magnitude in Portugal presents a great variation, going from Portalegre electing 2 MPs to Lisbon electing 47.<sup>11</sup> *Ceteris paribus*, we expect MPs from smaller districts to be less likely to ask questions with a general focus and more likely to ask questions with a local focus, since they normally conduct more personal electoral campaigns (although in a case with slightly more incentives to cultivate personal votes - Ireland (Carey and Shugart 1995) - there is no relationship between district magnitude and focus on the constituency; Martin 2011b).

## Results

Table 3 presents the results of the analysis. Given the binary nature of our dependent variables we used logit regression. Additionally, we computed multi-way clustered standard errors (Cameron et al. 2011) since we have correlation at both a cross-section (MPs present in more than one legislative session, see also Blidook and Kerby 2011) and temporal (legislative session) level. The table includes six models resulting from two dependent variables (general and local) times three issues (environment, employment, law and order).

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<sup>11</sup>Since we do not expect a linear relationship between district magnitude and the likelihood to ask a question, we transformed district magnitude using the logarithmic function.

Starting from the overall goodness of fit of the models, environment-related models stand out as the most underspecified. On the contrary, the residual deviance of the employment(local) model is the lowest and almost half of its “general” model value, which is evidence that our set of predictors performed better in this case. Another noteworthy result is that for all issues, models with a “local” dependent variable share a higher goodness of fit (see AIC and BIC).

In line with H1, committee membership is the strongest predictor of the likelihood to ask a question on a specific topic. This finding is robust across most estimated models. Holding all else equal, on average the odds of asking a local question on work-related matters for a member of the “Committee for employment and social security” are nearly five times as high as the odds for a member of any other committee. This finding hints at the existence of an effective socialization process of MPs in the Portuguese parliament which leads to different profiles of specialization.

H2 finds partial support too. The estimated coefficients of PROBLEM are positively signed and statistically significant at a conventional 0.05 level for environment(local), employment(local) and law&order(general). The relevance of the problem in the district where the MP was elected appears to positively affect the likelihood of questions focused on that topic. What we observe is that the geographic scale of problems varies across issues. While environmental and employment questions are more often directed to raise attention or gather information on specific local cases, law & order questions are more frequently framed as general questions.

As regards H3, we do not find any correlation between the networks of social and professional interactions entertained by an MP and his/her propensity to ask questions focused on one of the three issues considered. This may suggest a separation between the range of issues addressed as a parliamentarian and the interests in the outside world. On the other hand, the use of binary proxies to measure attributes that present so many nuances begs for caution when interpreting the results.

Beyond our main covariates, most other predictors of the rate of non-policy focused activity display only a limited effect. The estimated coefficients of MAGNITUDE are all negatively signed and (mostly) statistically significant. This

suggests that no matter the focus of the question, all else equals, MPs elected in larger districts are less likely to ask questions on one of the three topics. Other career-specific covariates such as occupying a party position, entering parliament as a replacement, being a long-serving legislator or close to retirement are also (but for a few exceptions) not statically significant. It might be taken as evidence that the patterns observed at a more general level present policy-specific trajectories. Finally, as expected, being member of an opposition party increases the odds of asking a question regardless of the topic. Remarkably, coefficients are significant only for general questions. The division between opposition and majority becomes more blurred when tested in models dealing with local questions.

### **Preliminary conclusions**

What determines the topic selected by MPs for their parliamentary questions in a non-preferential electoral system? This paper represents a first attempt at answering this question by testing hypotheses at both individual and constituency level. Even in a country with strong party discipline and centralised processes of electoral (re)selection, we found some (although weak) evidence that MPs do perform substantive representation of their own constituency. Yet, the strongest predictor of topic selection is committee membership. As expected, sitting in a committee fosters MP's specialisation and decreases incentives for MPs to probe into new policy areas. Rather, it might be more conventional to ask a colleague in the relevant committee to sponsor the question and add the name as a co-signer.

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**Table 2. Distribution of questions by topic and focus**

Topic	PQs out of total	Percent of all PQs	Local PQs	Percent of local per topic
Law and order	720	5	438	61
Environment	637	4	416	65
Employment	925	6	458	50
Other	12064	84	6250	52

**Table 3. Explaining variation in topic selection**

	Environment (general)	Environment (local)	Employment (general)	Employment (local)	Law&Order (general)	Law&Order (local)
CONSTANT	-0.80 (0.82)	-0.63 (1.05)	-2.48 (1.19)*	-2.46 (1.69)	-2.90 (0.59)***	-2.87 (1.00)**
CIVIC	-0.58 (0.39)	-0.53 (0.44)	0.09 (0.57)	1.27 (0.75)	0.07 (0.34)	0.65 (0.34)
INTGROUP	0.04 (0.72)	0.10 (0.62)	-0.64 (1.37)	1.24 (0.89)	-0.06 (0.80)	0.22 (0.40)
COMMITTEE	1.12 (0.30)***	1.03 (0.31)***	1.30 (0.36)***	1.72 (0.63)**	1.07 (0.35)**	0.71 (0.51)
PROBLEM	0.10 (0.08)	0.15 (0.08)*	0.04 (0.07)	0.20 (0.10)*	0.03 (0.01)*	0.03 (0.02)
PARTY_POSITION	-0.07 (0.41)	-0.38 (0.48)	-0.12 (0.59)	-0.48 (0.75)	0.35 (0.42)	0.35 (0.47)
MAGNITUDE(LOG)	-0.55 (0.21)**	-0.70 (0.20)***	-0.18 (0.15)	-0.91 (0.29)**	-0.46 (0.10)***	-0.47 (0.16)**
REPLACEMENT	-1.04 (0.60)	-1.05 (0.64)	-0.06 (0.55)	-2.45 (0.88)**	-0.53 (0.17)**	-0.37 (0.25)
OPPOSITION	0.83 (0.32)**	0.25 (0.35)	0.98 (0.34)**	0.40 (0.55)	0.86 (0.33)**	0.80 (0.35)*
SENIORITY	-0.06 (0.09)	-0.03 (0.11)	0.01 (0.13)	-0.65 (0.25)*	0.04 (0.08)	-0.09 (0.09)
END_CAREER	-1.22 (0.59)*	-1.60 (0.70)*	-0.70 (0.87)	-2.02 (1.22)	-0.68 (0.82)	-1.44 (0.98)
BE	2.00 (0.67)**	2.40 (0.49)***	4.09 (0.62)***	5.62 (1.07)***	1.22 (0.59)*	0.39 (0.46)
CDS	0.93 (0.34)**	0.28 (0.41)	0.89 (0.48)	2.30 (0.99)*	1.02 (0.51)*	0.43 (0.40)
PCP	2.41 (0.48)***	2.02 (0.55)***	3.30 (0.79)***	6.97 (1.45)***	2.94 (0.48)***	2.46 (0.62)***
PSD	-0.21 (0.27)	-0.27 (0.29)	0.31 (0.33)	0.32 (0.81)	0.21 (0.38)	-0.06 (0.34)
AIC	931.63	810.37	786.40	346.62	773.55	635.93
BIC	1004.05	882.79	858.82	419.03	845.97	708.34
Log Likelihood	-450.82	-390.19	-378.20	-158.31	-371.78	-302.96
Deviance	901.63	780.37	756.40	316.62	743.55	605.93
Num. obs.	923	923	923	923	923	923

Notes; clustered standard errors in parentheses \*\*\*p < 0.001, \*\*p < 0.01, \*p < 0.05

## APPENDIX 1

Topic	Minor topic	Title of minor topic
Law&Order	1200	General Crime and law
	1201	Agencies Dealing With Law and Crime (includes Executive Agencies, Police and Weapons Control)
	1202	White Collar Crime and Organized Crime
	1203	Illegal Drug Production, Trafficking, and Control
	1204	Court Administration
	1205	Prisons
	1206	Juvenile Crime and the Juvenile Justice System
	1207	Child Abuse and Child Pornography
	1210	Criminal and Civil Code (Includes Specific Crimes Not Mentioned Elsewhere)
	1211	Riots and Crime Prevention
	1227	Police and Other General Domestic Security Responses to Terrorism (e.g. Special Police)
	1230	Uprisings and insurrections
	1299	Other - Crime and law
Environment	700	General Environment
	701	Drinking Water Safety, Water Supply, Water Pollution, and Water Conservation
	703	Waste Disposal
	704	Hazardous Waste and Toxic Chemical Regulation, Treatment, and Disposal
	705	Air pollution, Global Warming, and Noise Pollution
	707	Recycling
	708	Indoor Environmental Hazards
	709	Species and Forest Protection (including hunting)
	710	Marine environment, oil pollution, coastal areas and coastal area protection, water courses pollution.
	711	Land and Water Conservation (includes Environmental Issues Related to Agriculture)
	798	Environmental Research and Development
	799	Other - Environment
Employment	103	Unemployment rate
	500	General Labor and Employment
	502	Employment Training and Workforce Development
	503	Employee Benefits
	504	Employee Relations and Labor Unions
	505	Fair Labor Standards and Labour Law

Topic	Minor topic	Title of minor topic
	506	Youth Employment and Child Labor
	599	Other - Labor and Employment
	1309	Social Insurance
	1330	Complementary Social Insurance Regimes

## APPENDIX 2

