Seeking information or pressing for action: analysing the function of parliamentary questions in a comparative perspective

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Abstract—In modern legislatures, political parties use parliamentary questions for two main purposes: to elicit information from the government and to press the government to pay attention to a specific issue. Although the literature agrees on the importance of both the information and agenda-setting functions, there is still little research on which of the two is prevalent and which conditions favour them. In particular, the differential strategy of majority and opposition parties deserves more attention: whereas opposition parties have strong incentives to exploit the conflict potential of parliamentary questions, majority MPs likely use these questions as an instrument to support the executive rather than as an attack tool. We study this matter by collecting comparable evidence on the policy content of parliamentary questions and Council of Ministers' meetings in two countries (Belgium and Portugal). One advantage of our study design is the possibility to test the reciprocal relationship between parliamentary questions and cabinet decisions, while controlling for attention in the media. Our preliminary findings suggest 1) that opposition parties do not tend to use parliamentary questioning to get the executive to release information immediately after a decision is taken, while Belgian majority parties do manage to divert attention away from issues recently decided upon by the executive; and 2) that parliamentary questions, from majority and opposition MPs alike, succeed respectively in anticipating and pushing issues into the cabinet agenda when also the media pay attention to them.

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Introduction

All modern parliamentary democracies provide for some kind of questioning, namely a set of formal tools allowing members of parliament (MPs) to elicit a response from the government. Yet, procedures vary substantially (Russo & Wiberg, 2010) and, what is more, even the same procedure may serve very different functions (Wiberg, 1995, p. 181). First, the textbook definition of parliamentary questions understands them as oversight tools. MPs use questions to control the conduct of government, that is, to force ministers to justify their actions or disclose relevant details.[2] Second, especially when the stage for questioning is under the media spotlight, they may be used to challenge the government and press ministers to pay attention to a specific issue (Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2010; Saalfeld, 2000). Third, parliamentary questions are used by MPs to maintain a relationship with their constituency by asking locally oriented questions (see e.g. Martin, 2011). Finally, ambitious MPs use the parliamentary questioning arena as a platform to gain personal publicity (Bailer, 2011).

In this paper, we focus on the first and second function: the use of parliamentary questioning as a means to oversee the actions of the government and influence its agenda. For analytical purposes, we present them separately but, from the outset, we need to stress that they share a common ground. First, both functions are performed by parties and not at an individual level. Second, they are the core tools to manage the confidence relationship between the legislative and executive branch. Controlling the government is one of parliament's main tasks: in the chain of delegation, parliament is the principal who controls whether its agent—the government—does not violate the legislative mandate (Saalfeld, 2000). For one, parliamentary questions offer MPs the possibility to hold the government *accountable* for its actions. In practice, this means that parliament is *reactive*: questions are asked after decisions are taken by the government as a means to "provoke responses in the form of information, explanation and justification" (Norton, 1993, p. 112). This is why parliamentary questioning is, in this meaning, referred to as an instrument of *ex-post* control (Rozenberg & Martin, 2011). Next to holding the government accountable, MPs may want to *press* the government to take action or simply consider urgent matters or neglected areas. When used this way,

[2] Also questions asked for purely informational reasons, thus bridging the information gap between legislative and executive branch, can be defined as accountability tools (Wiberg, 1995).

parliamentary questions are referred to as a means of *ex-ante* control (Rozenberg & Martin, 2011). Through parliamentary questions, MPs can attract attention for a certain topic and try to influence government's future actions. Here, MPs *proactively* signal problems and set the executive's agenda, rather than waiting until damage has been done. In a context where a large majority of the legislative initiatives voted upon by parliament are actually initiated by the executive (Döring, 1995), this is an important way for MPs to maintain some form of agenda-setting power. Questions are a useful tool, at times one of the few available if you are in the opposition, to direct governmental attention to issues that need to be dealt with (Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2010).

The literature agrees on the importance of both the information-seeking and agenda-setting functions of parliamentary questions. However, there is little large-N empirical research on which of the two is prevalent and the conditions affecting their relationship. This has mostly to do with the difficulty to detect these mechanisms at work through a quantitative research design. This paper suggests a way to circumvent this limitation by looking at agenda interactions between parliament and the executive. On the one hand, we scrutinize whether patterns of governmental issue attention transfer to parliament—indicating that parliament is responsive to government and thus fulfils its accountability function in the short term. On the other hand, we test whether parliamentary attention for specific issues, in turn, induces governmental attention for these same issues, which would suggest that parliament exerts some agenda-setting influence over the executive. In other words, we do not observe or prove causation, but rather focus on variations in issue attention and suggest the possibility of causation when attention patterns in one institution at time t_{-1} are significantly correlated with those at time t in the other.

A number of factors may affect the way the accountability and agenda-setting functions are concretely performed. This study derives from the existing literature three main moderators: whether the party of the questioner is in the majority or the opposition, the role of media and the effect of procedural differences. First, different incentives drive majority and opposition MPs to submit questions (Vliegenthart & Walgrave, 2011a). As a rule, questions sponsored by opposition parties are used as leverage to influence an otherwise inaccessible cabinet agenda and to challenge the cabinet to justify its decisions. In contrast, different channels (at times more informal) may be used by majority MPs to bring up issues to the executive's attention

and request information. That is why majority-sponsored questions are normally employed as credit-claiming devices, either before or after the executive made a popular decision on a specific area.

Secondly, we test to what extent media attention matters for the reciprocal day-to-day relationship between legislative and executive. In particular, we expect the impact of parliamentary questions (by majority and opposition MPs alike) on the ministerial council agenda to be larger when the media pay attention to the issue as well (Walgrave, Soroka, & Nuytemans, 2008). Constantly confronted with an extremely complex flow of problems calling simultaneously for executive attention, ministers are likely to use media coverage as a cue to decide which issues deserve to be prioritised and discussed in their weekly meetings.

Thirdly, procedural differences in the form of questioning have consequences for the incentive structures affecting the decisions of individual and collective actors (Wiberg, 1995). In this paper, we do not formulate specific hypotheses about the impact of procedures, but we discuss their implications for our findings. To check that our findings are not generated by a specific type of procedure but originate from a more generalised relationship between oversight tools and cabinet agenda-setting, we selected two country cases using two different forms of parliamentary oral questioning in plenary sitting. As we will spell out in the following, Belgian representatives are allowed to direct their questions to ministers during a weekly debate. Vice versa, Portuguese oral questions in the plenary are mainly directed to the Prime Minister who appears in front of the plenary every two weeks.

The remainder of the paper is organised as follows. We start by presenting the existing literature on agenda-setting and legislative oversight and their contributions to our understanding of the relationship between executive and legislative institutions. Next, we derive specific expectations on the mechanisms underlying the agenda-setting and accountability functions, considering the reciprocal net effect of parliamentary and executive agendas and how it is moderated. We then explain how we tracked policy attention across media, executive and parliament and highlight some procedural characteristics of Portugal and Belgium. Finally, we carry out a time-series cross-sectional analysis and discuss the findings while stressing their implications in a comparative perspective.

Theory

This study builds on a long tradition of research trying to understand the dynamics of issue attention in different political agendas—including parliamentary questions. Indeed, building on the work of Baumgartner and Jones in the U.S. (1993; 2005), scholars from a variety of countries have studied the 'politics of parliamentary attention', trying to understand how parliamentary attention affects, and is affected by, other political, societal and media actors. These researchers have shown that oral parliamentary questions—or, similarly, congressional hearings—are influenced, for instance, by party manifestos (e.g. Borghetto & Russo, 2018; Otjes & Louwerse, 2018; Vliegenthart & Walgrave, 2011a), protest (e.g. King, Bentele, & Soule, 2007) or, most notably, mass media coverage (e.g. Edwards & Wood, 1999; Soroka, 2002; Van Noije, Kleinnijenhuis, & Oegema, 2008). Furthermore, it was shown that oral questions, in turn, affect which issues are paid attention to by the media (e.g. Bartels, 1996; van Santen, Helfer, & van Aelst, 2013) or the president (Eshbaugh-Soha & Peake, 2005), and so on.

We build on the agendas framework to assess the reciprocal relationship between the topics addressed by MPs (in oral parliamentary questions) and *the executive* (during the Council of ministers). To our knowledge, the relationship between parliamentary and cabinet attention has seldom been the focus of scientific attention before. Several studies that were mainly interested in mass media effects on parliamentary questioning, have included ministerial attention to issues as a control variable. The results of these studies are mixed, though, in some instances reporting clear and strong effects from the executive on parliament (Vliegenthart & Walgrave, 2011b; Walgrave et al., 2008) while in other instances finding almost no effects at all (Vliegenthart, Walgrave, & Meppelink, 2011).[3] As a notable exception, Bartels (1996) explicitly looked at the relationship between Congress and the executive in the U.S. with regards to four issues, showing that both agendas influence each other, but that the impact of the executive on congress—which we would label 'accountability'—occurs for more different issues than the inverse impact of congress on the executive—which we would call 'agenda-setting'. In this paper, we zoom in on this issue and aim to get a more fine-grained

[3] This is remarkable, if we consider that parliamentary even standing orders do formally refer to this important relationship. For instance, the Belgian standing orders (article 124[1]) states that "If necessary, a second hour of questions is provided during the first plenary sitting following a meeting of the Council of Ministers".

understanding of the extent to which parliament successfully fulfils its accountability & agenda-setting function vis-à-vis the executive.[4]

As noted above, two moderators deserve special attention. First, we acknowledge the need to consider the differential strategies of majority and opposition MPs when it comes to parliamentary questioning. Scholars have emphasized the association between parliamentary questions and the goals of *opposition parties*. The instrument of questioning—originally designed to exert control over the government, whether ex-post or ex-ante—corresponds well with the goals of opposition parties who aim to demonstrate the incompetence of the government. MPs from majority parties are in a much more difficult position in this respect: attacking their 'own' government ministers could threaten the stability of the coalition (De Winter & Dumont, 2006). Political agenda-setting scholars use this as an argument to explain why opposition MPs, in their parliamentary questions, are more responsive to mass media coverage than MPs from majority parties (Green-Pedersen & Stubager, 2010; Sevenans, Walgrave, & Vos, 2015). News coverage often contains a lot of negativity and conflict, which offers ideal opportunities for the opposition to play the 'attack game' in the plenary meeting, but is less useful to government MPs who need to compromise between their role as an MP and their role as a supporter of the government (Thesen, 2013). That said, this does not mean that majority MPs do not engage in parliamentary questioning. MPs from majority parties in many countries ask just as many parliamentary questions as MPs from opposition parties—yet probably their incentive to do so is different. In their case, asking questions is probably more a matter of credit claiming of positive evolutions; or trying to pre-empt harm by tackling negative evolutions themselves, before the opposition can do so (Sevenans & Vliegenthart, 2016). We take these motivational differences into account when formulating our hypotheses.

Second, we take the mass media into account. The now widely accepted finding that news coverage is one of the most important political agenda-setters (Vliegenthart et al., 2016) is relevant to our study in two ways. First, we need media as a *control* variable, since it is possible that parliament and the executive are not just influencing each other but simultaneously

[4] We acknowledge that these functions may be fulfilled in other ways as well; for instance, it could be that a large share of parliamentary control happens in the specialized committees which—in contrast to the weekly plenary meetings—are not so visible.

responding to external events and the news coverage about these events. Second, we look at media as a possible *moderator* of effects, as it could be that the potential of parliamentarians to push issues onto the governmental agenda, for instance, depends on the extent to which they can generate media attention for these issues as well. We will now develop specific hypotheses.

Accountability

The accountability function of parliamentary questions is sometimes also referred to as a form of 'police-patrol' or even 'fire-alarm' oversight (Saalfeld, 2000), meaning that members of parliament, or third parties, are expected to monitor the government's actions and intervene—or push parliament to intervene—when they feel the rules have been violated. These terms nicely illustrate that MPs are not expected to respond to every single decision taken by the government. Instead, it is only when 'alarms go off' that the government should be held to account. In other words, it is probably mostly *negative* or *conflict-laden* government decisions which elicit parliamentary reaction.

It does not need much explanation that the use of parliamentary questions as an oversight instrument fits the goals of opposition parties well. They generally employ an attack strategy and are happy to confront the government with its mistakes. Our hypothesis is straightforward: we expect the opposition to be responsive to government decisions.

H1 (accountability): *After the ministerial council pays more attention to an issue, opposition MPs will ask more parliamentary questions about this issue as well.*

In contrast to opposition MPs, however, MPs from coalition parties are probably much less eager to draw attention to the government's weaknesses. Indeed, being member of one of the parties delivering (some of) the ministers establishing the government, they are expected to play a supportive rather than a critical role. How do these MPs combine their duties as a parliamentarian on the one hand, and their tasks as a loyal party member on the other hand?

We see two possible ways to reconcile both roles. For one, it could be that coalition MPs interpret 'accountability' in a less critical way, monitoring the government with a focus on its

accomplishments. They could use parliamentary questions to emphasize these positive evolutions, to claim credit for the good work of their ministers. In line with this reasoning, we would expect coalition parties—just like opposition parties—to be responsive to the government; in other words, we would expect there to be a positive influence from the executives' agenda to that of majority MPs. However, there are reasons to expect that this kind of questioning does not happen a lot. We know that political parties try to use parliamentary questions to generate media attention (van Santen et al., 2013). Questions that are positive and void of conflict, are much less newsworthy than questions focused on negativity and conflict, like those the opposition asks (Galtung & Ruge, 1965). This is especially the case when an 'ordinary' MP is actually repeating a decision taken by his/her minister, holding a more powerful office. It is unlikely that a journalist, who already covered a ministerial decision, is still interested in parliament's reactions (Bennett, 1990). Hence, this kind of post-hoc credit-claiming questions does not hold much media potential. At the same time, parliament itself has rules about the content of parliamentary questions as well, meant to encourage topical, societally relevant discussions and to discourage political promotion.

A second—and maybe more plausible—possibility for coalition MPs to deal with past government action, could be to leave the oversight function to opposition MPs, and to try and limit the damage by diverting attention away from controversial government attention. If a larger part of the agenda is occupied by new issues which are unrelated to previous ministerial decision-making, opposition claims about unpopular decisions will likely attract less attention. Here, the consequence is that executive attention for issues negatively impacts majority parliamentary attention for these issues. We formulate the following corresponding hypothesis:

H2 (diversion): *After the ministerial council pays more attention to an issue, majority MPs will ask less parliamentary questions about this issue.*

Agenda-setting

Whereas we expect coalition and opposition parties to employ *different* strategies when it comes to *responding* to the executive, we think they have *similar* strategies when it comes to

setting the executive's agenda. More specifically, we think that both MPs from coalition and opposition parties have incentives to try and influence the executive's agenda because the legislative power of parliament itself, over the years, has weakened. Officially, parliament is the directly elected 'principal' who designs legislation and controls its 'agent', the cabinet, which deals with the execution of this legislation. Due to several reasons, however, in reality it is the government that designs a large majority of the accepted bills (Saalfeld, 2000). Since it is extremely hard as an MP to get a personally drafted bill approved, a more productive strategy is probably to try and influence the legislative proposals of the government, for coalition and opposition MPs alike.

Although we anticipate that both types of MPs exhibit similar behaviour, we think slightly different motivations drive their actions. More precisely, MPs from government parties probably cooperate more directly with the government than opposition MPs, when trying to set the agenda. Indeed, one reason for government's power vis-à-vis parliament is information asymmetry: over the years, the complexity of policy-making has risen, leading to an imbalance between information-rich cabinets and information-poor parliamentarians (Saalfeld, 2000). Yet this information asymmetry is smaller for MPs from government parties, who are in direct contact with the different cabinets—in particular with those of their own ministers—than for MPs from opposition parties. As Wiberg (1995, p. 196) notes, ministers sometimes grant MPs from their own party to ask 'planted questions', where "*a minister or some of his or her staff may, for instance, draft a suitable question and hand it over to a loyal MP, who then puts the question in his or her own right*". This 'one-two pass' strategy is useful for the government to draw attention to problems the government is going to solve successfully. We could see it as a kind of anticipatory credit-claiming. Opposition MPs cannot use this strategy, but are by contrast more free to bluntly 'attack' the government; which government MPs are not allowed to do since it could threaten the stability of the government.

Limited existing evidence—although not differentiating between government and opposition strategies—suggests indeed that the executive responds to parliamentary questions, at least for some issues (Bartels, 1996; Walgrave et al., 2008). We try to reproduce these findings and propose the following hypotheses:

H3 (agenda-setting): *After opposition MPs ask more parliamentary questions about an issue, the ministerial council pays more attention to this issue as well.*

H4 (anticipation): *After majority MPs ask more parliamentary questions about an issue, the ministerial council pays more attention to this issue as well.*

In line with research on the mass media's agenda-setting power, we furthermore assume that chances that the government is responsive to parliamentary questions, are larger when the media have paid attention to the underlying issue as well. As Wolfsfeld posits in his Politics-Media-Politics model, many policy changes have their origins in politics, yet succeeded because media attention generated additional support (Wolfsfeld, 2013). To our knowledge, the extent to which the media reinforce agenda-setting effects from parliament on the government, has not been tested before. We hypothesize:

H5 (media moderation): *The agenda-setting effect of parliamentary questions (by majority and opposition MPs) on the ministerial council is larger when media pay more attention to the issue as well.*

Data & methods

The following analysis relies on data tracking policy attention in respectively parliamentary, cabinet and media agendas in Belgium and Portugal. Both countries are relatively medium-sized members of the European Union (around 11 million citizens) and feature a parliamentary system with a legislative branch elected through a proportional representation system. One of the main differences lies in the format of the governing coalitions. For the last three decades Belgium has been ruled by fragmented coalition governments (Deschouwer, 2012), whereas post-1974 Portugal has mostly seen the alternation in power of two parties, the socialists (PS, until the last political elections governing alone) and the social-democrats (PSD, typically in a coalition with the Christian democrats of the CDS-PP). Although we did not formalize this expectation in the theoretical section, the different government composition could have an impact on the functioning of cabinet decision-making. In particular, one- or

two-party cabinets in Portugal could be quicker to react to external events and adapt their agenda.

The parliamentary agenda is built using the topic of parliamentary oral questions. We chose oral and not written questions because our focus is on party strategies and written questions are, for the most part, not tightly controlled by party elites. Both countries allow for parliamentary oral questions in plenary sitting, although procedures differ. Belgian MPs may put questions to the government (Prime minister and ministers) at least once a week (Rule 124 of the Standing Orders). The Portuguese Rules of Procedures, after the relevant reform in 2007, provide for two distinct sessions of oral questions in the plenary: one, held every two weeks, with the Prime Minister; and one with each minister, scheduled once in every legislative term. While the former became institutionalised and is now a regular feature in the parliamentary agenda, question time with the ministers have been held occasionally and with only a few cabinet members. For this reason, we decided to consider only the debate with the Prime Minister and start our observation span in 2007.[5] A second difference is that Belgian questioners must notify in advance the subject of the question. On the other hand, the topic of questions to Portuguese Prime Minister depends on the type of format taken by question time. Half of the times it starts with the Prime Minister delivering a speech, followed by questions relatively pertinent to the topics raised therein. Half of the time, it starts with parliamentary questions followed by PM's answers on the fly. This latter type of questions is more likely to be aimed at attacking the executive on controversial topics or reveal the PM's lack of competence.

Tracking policy attention over time in the three institutions under study (parliament, executive and media) required the topic coding of relevant comparable documents in both country using the methodology and codebook developed by the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP, www.comparativeagendas.net). The present analysis relied on datasets collected and coded by the Belgian and Portuguese CAP teams.[6] Both datasets cover a period

[5] Other procedural differences between the two countries should be mentioned but are less relevant. Normally only Portuguese front-benchers can take the floor during question time, whereas all MPs can put questions in Belgium, but through the chairman of the parliamentary group. This means that, in both cases, parliamentary questioning in the plenary remains a time-constrained procedure strictly controlled by party elites.

[6] The Portuguese Project received the financial support of the Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia under the umbrella of two "Public preferences and Policy decision-making: a comparative analysis" (PTDC/IVC-CPO/3921/2012) and "Portuguese Parliament: Agenda-setting and Law-making" (IF/00382/2014).

of approximately 9 years, respectively from 1999 to 2008 for Belgium and from 2007 to 2015 for Portugal. As we said, the coded documents in the two countries are to a large extent comparable. Trained coders assigned one of 21 major topics (see Table 2 for the list of topics) to:

- each front page article of a major national newspaper to reconstruct the mass media agenda (19010 articles from *De Standaard* and 21769 articles from *Publico*);
- each parliamentary oral question put orally in the plenary for the parliamentary agenda (4257 *mondelinge vragen* and 1638 *perguntas no debate quinzenal com o primeiro-ministro*);
- each decision reported in the weekly press summary of Council of Ministers gatherings for the executive agenda (7139 decisions reported in the Facts (*Feiten* or *Faits*) and 8257 decisions in the *Comunicados de Conselho de Ministros*).

The three datasets were assembled in panel-data form for each country individually where panels are the 21 issues and time is the week where the dependent variables are measured. In line with our five hypotheses, we analyse the reciprocal effect of the parliamentary and executive agendas, controlling for and in interaction with the media agenda. Since the number of documents varies across weeks, we measured issue attention as the proportion of documents dedicated to a specific issue out of the total in that week. We use a weak understanding of causation as "temporal precedence". In other words, when – for example - we test the "effect" of the executive agenda on the parliamentary agenda, we refer, *ceteris paribus*, to the correlation between the share of attention (across all topics) in parliamentary questions in week t and executive decisions in week t_{-1}. The following analysis relies on time-series fixed effect models.[7]

Parliamentary oral questions were divided according to the position of the questioner's party either in the majority or the opposition. Table 1 reports the overall share of questions in the two countries. It shows that, in Portugal, majority-sponsored questions are a minority (16% of the total), whereas they are almost half of the total in Belgium (42%). Clearly, this results from the format of the government coalition. In Belgium, questioning is

[7] Hausman tests recommend the use of fixed over random effects. We also calculated the estimates of the same hypotheses but using time-series, cross-sectional ordinary least squares analyses with panel corrected standard errors (Beck and Katz, 1995). The main findings were not affected.

used by coalition parties, among other things, to keep tabs on the ministers appointed by their partners.

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Table 2 provides an overview of the distribution of attention in our four agendas in the two countries under study. Starting from parliamentary questions, both majority and opposition in Belgium devote more attention to the same group of issues: Justice & Crime, State operations, Transport and Health. The overlap between the two groups is not as neat in Portugal, but Macroeconomics, Social Policy and State Operations rank consistently among the top four. These results alert us about two relevant aspects of oral questioning. First, it is a dialectic game between majority and opposition and it responds to current events, which means that the two groups should often talk about the same issues. Second, Portuguese question time tends to deal with more general questions (e.g. about the state of the economy, macroeconomics, or the functioning of the administrative apparatus, government operations) than its Belgium equivalent. This originates from the fact that only the prime minister participates in Portuguese question time, which limits the technicalities of questions to be asked (he/she is likely to defer to the Transport ministers if asked, for example, about the state of the railway service). As far as the agenda of the Council of ministers is concerned, unsurprisingly "government operations" is prominent in both countries. Vice versa, the remaining topics ranks differently in the two cases, although attention is quite fairly distributed among them (if 1 represents perfect entropy, the normalised Shannon's H score is .84 in Belgium and .92 in Portugal). Finally, a cursory look at the distribution of issue attention in the media reveals that state operations, justice & crime, economic regulations and foreign policy rank high in both countries. Apparently, in spite of the different time windows of the two datasets, newspaper editors applied similar criteria to select the news that make it in the front page of the newspaper.

TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

Results

Table 3 presents the results for the models testing the first two hypotheses about the effect of the executive agenda, respectively, on issue attention for the majority and opposition parties. Before entering the discussion, it is necessary to point out that we fail to reject the

null hypothesis that all regression coefficients for the majority model in Portugal are equal to zero (the F-value is not statistically significant). This means that, probably due to the small number of questions asked by Portuguese majority parties (which corresponds to many zeros in our model matrix), the model has no predictive capability and has to be dropped.

In general, both opposition and majority questions are strongly path-dependent as indicated by the positive and statistically significant coefficients for their corresponding lags. When looking at the reciprocal effect between majority and opposition issue attention during question time, two observations are in order. First, there is no evidence that the majority picks up topics emphasised by the opposition in the previous session: as expected, they prefer to divert attention from topics where they have been targets of political attacks. Second, Belgian and Portuguese oppositions react differently to the lagged agenda of their respective majorities. Belgian opposition parties tend to follow up on majority topics (positive and significant coefficient), while in Portugal they prefer to focus on new issues (negative and significant coefficient).

As regards H1, stating that opposition MPs try to elicit information from the cabinet about its latest decisions, we do not find any supporting evidence. Both coefficients are positive but not significant at conventional level. One may wonder whether this is the consequence of methodological choices made in this paper. For instance, the chances are that, from a time perspective, considering a weekly lag is not long enough. If the goal is to force the executive to justify a controversial decision, opposition parties are aware that, in order to deliver a successful political blow to the majority, a range of conditions have to be in place (e.g. media attention). What is more, some of the decisions taken in the Council of ministers are only the first step in a longer decision-making process (e.g. a bill initiative has to go through the adoption procedure in parliament), leaving the opposition plenty of time to build a counteracting strategy. However, in the appendix, we ran the same models but introducing an interaction between media and executive agenda (both lagged values). The coefficients of the interaction terms are not significant. Similarly, using the month as aggregation criterion (instead of the week) does not affect the results. Apparently, in Belgium nor in Portugal, the opposition seems to hold the government accountable for its actions on a regular, week-to-week basis.

Remarkably, the diversion strategy of majority question time envisaged in H2 seems to hold for Belgium (the only model with predictive power). If the executive makes decisions

on specific topics, it is less likely that the majority will refer to them in the subsequent session of question time. A likely interpretation is that available time will be rather spent to introduce new issues that have not reached the agenda yet and that have newsworthiness. Alternatively, this might read as an attempt to lead attention away from government decisions that might be controversial and bring bad publicity. This effect does not apply to Portugal, however, where the effect of the executive on majority questioning is positive yet insignificant.

TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

Table 4 presents the results from the models testing the determinants of issue attention in the executive agenda, our second dependent variable. The first two columns report the results from the models containing only main effects - which allow testing H3(*agenda-setting*) and H4(*anticipation*) - while the remaining introduce interaction effects between media and, respectively, majority- and opposition-sponsored oral questions (always lagged version) – H5(*media moderation*).

First, as expected by H4, we find a significant and positive correlation between topic attention in majority questions and the subsequent executive agenda, but only in the case of Portugal. This result might originate from the comparatively higher salience of Portuguese question time, due to the presence of the Prime Minister. The latter might use so-called "planted questions" (Wiberg 1995: 196) - questions arranged with MPs from his/her own party/coalition - to inform the media about a decision to be taken in the coming Council of Ministers. In Belgium, H4 is not confirmed. Interestingly, interactions between media and majority issue attention (models 3 and 4) are positive and statistically significant in both countries. In line with H5, as media and parliamentary attention (as measured by majority-sponsored questions) on a topic simultaneously increase, it is more likely that the executive will pay attention to the topic in the next Council of Ministers. In other words, the target of parliamentary questions, the mass media, must already be receptive, for the anticipation effect to be effective.

H3 hypothesised that questions are used by opposition parties as a signalling device to force a neglected or controversial topic into the cabinet agenda. In Belgium and Portugal alike, coefficients are positive but not significant. This non-result is unsurprising. Simply addressing the cabinet on the floor has normally not enough leverage to spur a government reaction. Once again, media moderation matters. The positive and significant coefficients of

interaction effects in model 5 and 6 indicate (in the Portuguese case statistical significance is at 0.1 level) that, as media attention increases, so does the effect of opposition questions. What makes compelling opposition questioning from an agenda-setting perspective is their combination with media. Ultimately, question time debates are mainly about current events, but not all events make it to the front page of major newspapers. When they hit mass media and are picked up in nationally televised parliamentary debates, it is difficult for the government to remain silent.

TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE

Conclusion

This study set out to cast light on the relevant but, to date, relatively unexplored relationship between parliamentary control instruments and the conduct of government. Two control functions are considered: the ex-post information-seeking and the ex-ante agenda-setting functions. The question of which of the two mechanisms is prevalent and under which conditions was addressed through a large-N research design studying the reciprocal effect of issue attention in parliamentary oral questions and the agenda of the Council of ministers in two countries, Belgium and Portugal.

Our preliminary findings indicate that parliamentary oral questions on the floor mainly fulfil agenda-setting and anticipation functions and that their effectiveness depends on the simultaneous presence of media attention on the same issues. The accountability function of questioning is thus rather weak. For the most part, these results are in line with expectations drawn from the literature. Already in the early 1990s, Norton (1993, p. 109) had started questioning that idea that parliaments subject governments to "[…] *continuous and comprehensive scrutiny. Much of what government does, avoids parliamentary attention. When it is the subject of such attention, the attention is frequently sporadic and fleeting, affected by partisan considerations, pressures of time and lack of knowledge.*" Information-seeking mechanisms should be even less likely to observe in oral questions, where the time allowed for responses is limited. We expect to detect this mechanism in operation when looking at other channels, such as written questions, and longer time-frames (e.g. when decisions enter into force and are not merely announced in the Council of Ministers).

The agenda-setting finding is interesting and speaks directly to previous research on the close link between parliamentary questions and mass media (e.g. Vliegenthart et al.,

2016). Majority parties, mostly following the invitation of the executive, have incentives to submit questions on decisions to be taken by the next Council of Ministers, especially when they have reasonable expectations that the media will cover the issue in that week. On the other side, executives choose carefully the timing of their decisions and use majority "anticipatory" questions to present them to the wider public (through media coverage of question time). As for the opposition, we understand the finding that they can force issues in the cabinet agenda when their request is buttressed by media attention as evidence that the sentence "for government, there is no equivalent to the legal right of silence" (Norton, 1993, p. 112) holds especially true when the issue is newsworthy and politically relevant.

The political system of the two countries under study is somewhat different, with Belgian having much larger coalition governments than Portugal. This is reflected in our results about the behaviour of MPs from majority parties. In Portugal, where the small one- or two-government parties allow close cooperation between the government and majority MPs, 'anticipatory credit-claiming' is more prevalent than in Belgium. In Belgium, the stability of the government is often precarious, so majority MPs rather focus on diverting attention away from issues previously addressed by the government. Despite these differences, there are many similarities as well. The findings for opposition MPs—with regards to both accountability and agenda-setting—are identical. And, the media seem to play a comparable role in both countries as well, reinforcing the agenda-setting capacity of both majority and opposition MPs. This increases our confidence in the robustness of the results and we think they apply to many other European countries as well.

One limitation of our current study is that it does not allow to test whether the results from the time-series analyses are really driven by the mechanisms and motivations we propose in our theoretical framework. For example, we interpret the negative effect of government on majority MPs (in Belgium) as evidence of a 'diversion strategy'—where MPs try to lead attention away from unpopular ministerial decisions—but it may well be that other factors or motivations are driving these results. We therefore plan to refine our analyses in several ways. One idea, for instance, is to look at political parties separately in Belgium. The diversion effect for a specific issue should be largest for the coalition party that is in charge of the issue. Another option would be to try and grasp how controversial a ministerial decision was, for example by taking the tone of news coverage about the issue into account. These improvements can hopefully strengthen the conclusions we draw from the current paper:

that parliamentary questions, across the board, are used as agenda-setting rather than as accountability tools.

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Tables and Figures

Table 1 Distribution of question by majority and opposition

Country	Majority	Opposition	Total
Portugal	170 (16%)	864 (84%)	1034
Belgium	1459 (42%)	1979 (58%)	3438

Table 2 Average of weekly-issue attention by issue in parliamentary questions, cabinet agenda and media

Belgium

Topic	Parliamentary majority	Parliamentary opposition	Cabinet agenda	Media
Macroeconomics	6.58	7.28	4.68	4.25
Rights & liberties	3.02	2.58	2.59	3.78
Health	11.72	7.78	6.86	5.34
Agriculture	1.71	2.02	2.58	1.74
Labor & employment	7.68	6.62	7.18	4.86
Education	0.55	0.91	0.24	3.31
Environment	2.54	2.48	2.44	1.64
Energy	2.06	2.63	2.63	1.49
Immigration	4.80	6.27	1.64	2.57
Transport	11.99	8.99	3.47	3.69
Justice & crime	13.98	15.82	8.64	12.05
Social policy	4.25	4.30	4.23	1.64
Urban policy & housing	1.44	1.26	1.24	0.90
Economic regulation	6.31	3.94	4.62	8.62
Defense	2.88	3.34	4.46	5.40
Research	2.54	1.72	2.72	1.51
Foreign trade	0.89	1.16	1.31	0.76
Foreign policy	5.83	6.47	10.48	8.20
State operations	7.95	13.39	26.94	18.72
State property	0.00	0.00	0.23	0.41
Culture	1.30	1.06	0.84	9.13

Table 2 (continued)

Portugal

Topic	Parliamentary majority	Parliamentary opposition	Cabinet agenda	Media
Macroeconomics	37.06	27.20	5.37	8.32
Rights & liberties	0.00	0.69	0.84	3.21
Health	5.88	6.48	8.22	7.09
Agriculture	0.59	2.08	6.85	0.99
Labor & employment	5.29	4.63	3.90	3.48
Education	4.12	5.09	4.11	6.66
Environment	0.00	1.04	4.00	0.99
Energy	2.94	4.17	2.85	1.49
Immigration	0.00	0.35	0.95	0.80
Transport	4.71	4.40	8.96	5.07
Justice & crime	0.59	3.82	6.95	9.54
Social policy	9.41	6.71	2.00	1.79
Urban policy & housing	1.76	1.39	2.53	1.13
Economic regulation	2.35	9.03	9.06	11.60
Defense	1.18	1.39	2.85	3.02
Research	1.76	0.58	3.37	3.38
Foreign trade	7.65	0.58	1.05	1.16
Foreign policy	6.47	1.85	6.01	9.08
State operations	8.24	18.40	13.07	17.23
State property	0.00	0.12	5.58	1.03
Culture	0.00	0.00	1.48	2.95

Table 3 Determinants of issue attention in parliamentary oral questions

	Majority PQ		Opposition PQ	
	BE	PT	BE	PT
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Media(lag)	0.0648*	0.0517	0.0111	0.1112**
	(0.0346)	(0.0737)	(0.0305)	(0.0549)
Executive(lag)	-0.0370*	-0.0594	0.0115	0.0362
	(0.0219)	(0.0379)	(0.0193)	(0.0282)
Majority PQ(lag)	0.0357**	-0.0294	0.0570***	-0.0421**
	(0.0149)	(0.0235)	(0.0131)	(0.0175)
Opposition PQ(lag)	0.0174	0.0147	0.0349**	0.1465***
	(0.0169)	(0.0318)	(0.0149)	(0.0237)
N	4956	1911	4956	1911
R-squared	0.0032	0.0026	0.0064	0.0261
Adj. R-squared	-0.0518	-0.0607	-0.0484	-0.0357
F Statistic	3.7134***	1.1824	7.6061***	12.0330***

***p < .01; **p < .05; *p < .1

Table 4 Determinants of issue attention in the executive agenda

	Executive agenda					
	BE	PT	BE	PT	BE	PT
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Media(lag)	0.0861***	0.0626	0.0626***	0.0097	0.0438*	0.0210
	(0.0225)	(0.0450)	(0.0239)	(0.0458)	(0.0251)	(0.0501)
Executive(lag)	0.0449***	0.0658***	0.0464***	0.0654***	0.0454***	0.0655***
	(0.0142)	(0.0231)	(0.0142)	(0.0229)	(0.0142)	(0.0231)
Media(lag)*Majority PQ(lag)			0.3658***	0.9686***		
			(0.1270)	(0.1897)		
Media(lag)*Opposition PQ(lag)					0.4933***	0.4093*
					(0.1313)	(0.2175)
Majority PQ(lag)	-0.0043	0.0342**	-0.0307**	-0.0388*	-0.0034	0.0350**
	(0.0097)	(0.0144)	(0.0133)	(0.0202)	(0.0097)	(0.0143)
Opposition PQ(lag)	0.0154	0.0014	0.0153	-0.0012	-0.0240	-0.0364
	(0.0110)	(0.0194)	(0.0110)	(0.0193)	(0.0152)	(0.0279)
N	4956	1911	4956	1911	4956	1911
R-squared	0.0059	0.0091	0.0077	0.0233	0.0089	0.0111
Adj. R-squared	-0.0489	-0.0538	-0.0473	-0.0393	-0.0460	-0.0523
F Statistic	6.9843***	4.1273***	7.2569***	8.5629***	8.4280***	4.0148***

***p < .01; **p < .05; *p < .1

Appendix

Testing the determinants of issue attention in parliamentary oral questions

Interaction between media and executive

	Majority PQ		Opposition PQ	
	BE	PT	BE	PT
Media(lag)	0.0503	0.0540	0.0274	0.1529**
	(0.0401)	(0.0816)	(0.0354)	(0.0607)
Executive(lag)	-0.0524*	-0.0569	0.0289	0.0810**
	(0.0308)	(0.0533)	(0.0272)	(0.0397)
Majority PQ(lag)	0.0361**	-0.0294	0.0566***	-0.0422**
	(0.0149)	(0.0235)	(0.0131)	(0.0175)
Opposition PQ(lag)	0.0176	0.0148	0.0347**	0.1475***
	(0.0169)	(0.0318)	(0.0149)	(0.0237)
Media(lag)*Executive(lag)	0.1539	-0.0372	-0.1730	-0.6684
	(0.2159)	(0.5603)	(0.1904)	(0.4170)
N	4956	1911	4956	1911
R-squared	0.0033	0.0026	0.0066	0.0275
Adj. R-squared	-0.0519	-0.0613	-0.0484	-0.0348
F Statistic	3.0721***	0.9462	6.2497***	10.1485***

***p < .01; **p < .05; *p < .1

Monthly time aggregation

	Majority PQ		Opposition PQ	
	BE	PT	BE	PT
Media(lag)	0.1267**	0.1112	0.0407	0.1948**
	(0.0554)	(0.1019)	(0.0483)	(0.0891)
Executive(lag)	-0.0115	0.0853	0.0417	-0.0526
	(0.0389)	(0.0559)	(0.0339)	(0.0488)
Majority PQ(lag)	0.0380	0.1608***	0.0065	-0.0165
	(0.0250)	(0.0289)	(0.0218)	(0.0253)
Opposition PQ(lag)	-0.0170	-0.0522	0.0283	0.1447***
	(0.0290)	(0.0329)	(0.0253)	(0.0288)
N	1827	1260	1827	1260
R-squared	0.0046	0.0291	0.0026	0.0285
Adj. R-squared	-0.0593	-0.0395	-0.0613	-0.0400
F Statistic	1.9637*	8.7996***	1.1167	8.6377***

***p < .01; **p < .05; *p < .1