

EVADING BREXIT: DAVID CAMERON'S USE OF EVASION IN PARLIAMENTARY CONTEXT

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A common stereotype is that politicians do not give direct answers. Previous studies have shown that if the question is uncomfortable for the politician to answer, it is highly likely that the politician will evade in their response. This has been studied in the context of political interviews in the past, but how does it apply to parliamentary context?

The focus of the study is David Cameron's evasive responses to questions regarding Britain's EU membership and the infamous "Brexit" referendum. To what extent did Cameron evade these questions during Prime Minister's Questions over the Spring and Summer of 2016?

BACKGROUND

Bull et al. (1996) stated that instead of only having their own face to protect and promote, politicians also have two other faces: the face of their party and the face of supporting or not supporting significant others. If a question threatens any of these faces, the politician's response is likely to be evasive. According to Bavelas et al. (1990) politicians are often put in situations where they are expected to answer questions which are so hostile that there are no possible positive responses to them. In situations like this the only way out is through evasion.

Prime Minister's Questions, or PMQ, is a weekly session where Members of Parliament can present their questions to the Prime Minister. The purpose of the session is to offer information to MPs, and for Parliament to hold the Government accountable for its actions. The session is widely known for its dramatic and verbally aggressive nature. Bull & Wells concluded in their 2012 study that the exchange and politeness in PMQs differ from other sociolinguistic settings because during these sessions, face-threats towards the conversational partner are not avoided, but in fact intentionally intensified.

DATA & METHOD

- 112 question-and-answer pairs from PMQ transcripts available through the *Hansard Online* archive

The framework was adapted from Parameswary Rasiah's 2009 paper, which is one of the first studies on evasion within Parliament. The method involves categorising the questions and answers according to the type of the question and level of directness or

evasion of the response. Evasive responses were categorised in four sub-categories based on the level of evasion: subtle, medium-level, substantial, or full. In addition to this I chose to categorise the questions as neutral, positive or negative based on their attitude towards the European Union membership.

FINDINGS

Cameron evaded 45% of the questions. 11 questions were completely ignored by him, categorised as full evasion. The rest of the evasive responses simply performed a different task from what was requested by the question.

Evasion through time period

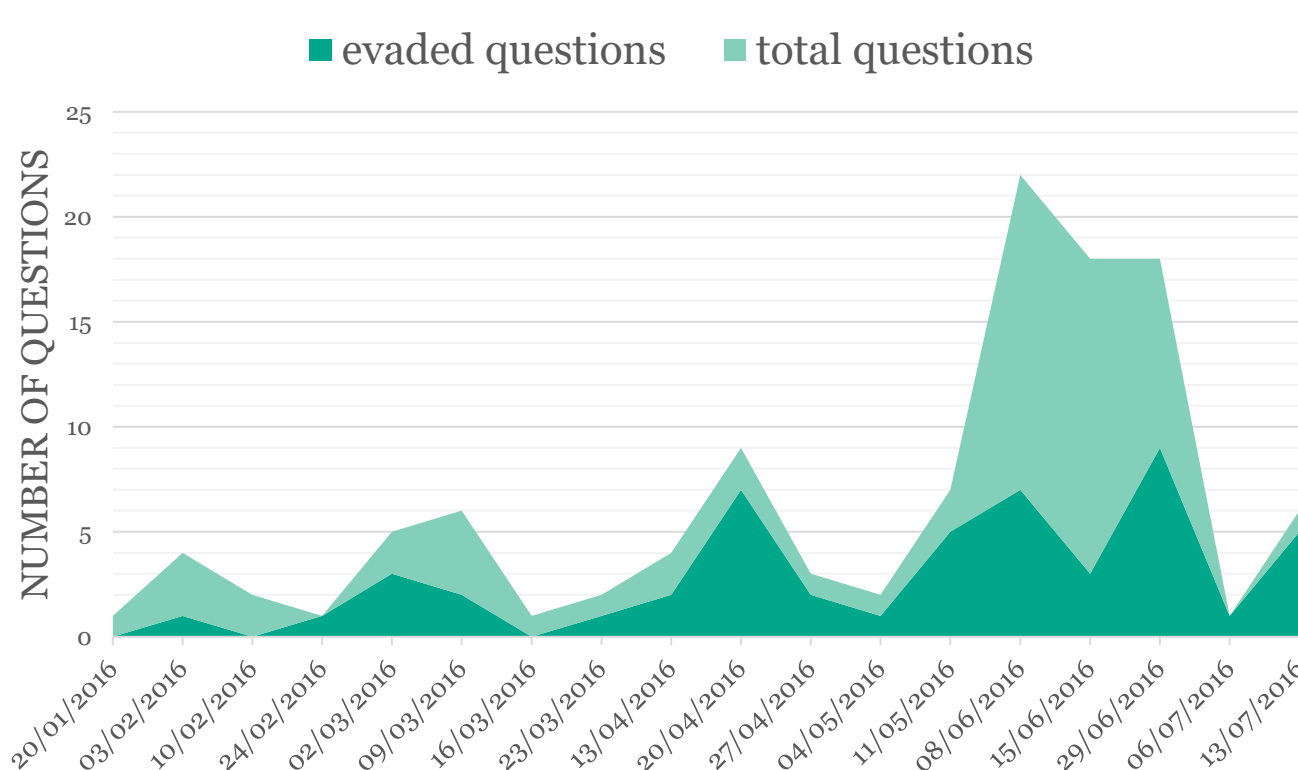


Figure 1. Relevant questions and evasive responses per each session.

Interesting about these findings is the fact that over the few weeks around the referendum, which was held on June 23rd, 2016, the number of relevant questions increased notably, but the number of evasive responses did not.

The reason for this development could be that Cameron faced less challenging questions in the PMQs right under the referendum. The attitude analysis reveals that the number of EU-positive questions peaked right before the referendum, which suggests that MPs used their floor to promote the "remain" campaign, instead of challenging Cameron. If a question advanced Cameron's agenda of remaining in the EU, there was no need for him to evade. EU-positive questions could be face-threatening to Cameron as well, but the results show that Cameron evaded only 36% of EU-positive questions, while over 2/3 of EU-negative questions were evaded.

74% of the evasive responses shifted the agenda of the exchange. Most commonly Cameron would shift the agenda to promote either the "remain" campaign, or the actions of the Government. The higher the level of

evasion, the more likely was the response to perform an agenda shift.



Christopher Hope, (2018), No title [ONLINE]. Available at: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/personalfinance/tax/10122005/Well-cut-taxes-so-companies-move-to-Britain-says-David-Cameron.html> [Accessed 19 April 2018].

CAMERON EVADES – SO WHAT?

To understand the effect of Cameron's 45% evasion rate, it is important to remember the context. For a parliamentary session, an evasion rate this high is problematic. The adversarial nature of PMQ makes it difficult for the Prime Minister to answer all of the questions without exposing themselves or the Government to face damage. However, if the head of Government does not answer the questions presented to them during a session which is held in pursuit of ensuring the accountability of the Government, it undermines the purpose of the session. What's the point of PMQs, if the Prime Minister will not answer the questions? This supports the importance of studying evasion not only in the context of political interviews, but in parliamentary setting as well.

Sources

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