Project Report on Prime Minister’s Parliamentary Questions

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Introduction

This document reports on the data collection and analysis of Prime Minister’s Questions, collected as part of the UK Policy Agendas Project (www.policyagendas.org.uk). The report describes this agenda setting venue and briefly reviews the literature on parliamentary questions and what research questions follow from it. We set out our data and methods. The final parts of the report describe the data, especially differences according to party, then analyses the different parts of the agenda that reflect control by the party leaders or more by backbenchers (the unnumbered and numbered questions).
Prime Minister’s Questions

PMQs are a parliamentary convention where the Prime Minister answers questions in the House of Commons from Members of Parliament (including the Leader of the Opposition, in addition to other backbenchers from all parties). First introduced in 1961 PMQs, have become a weekly centrepiece of British political life. Since 1997 PMQs have been held as a 30-minute session every Wednesday at 12:00 GMT while the House of Commons is in session. PMQs are a prominent and dramatic venue for agenda-setting for the government and opposition parties.

There are two types of questions. First, the numbered questions that are submitted to the speaker in writing prior to PMQs each week. These questions are known both by the government and other ministers and can be called on in any order as the speaker sees fit. They are generally, but not always, the purview of backbenchers from any and all parties giving them a chance to speak that generally would not be afforded to them otherwise. Second are the unnumbered questions, which come from the opposition leaders as well as more senior MPs from each party. Therefore the numbered agenda is filtered through the speaker while the numbered agenda is not, at least in the sense that the speaker does not know what question is coming when they call on an MP to ask an unnumbered question.

The procedure of PMQs is as follows and is controlled by the Speaker of the House of Commons. The first numbered question (number one) selected by a random ballot of backbench MPs is a standard question asking about the Prime Ministers engagements for the day. After this the MP can ask a supplementary question that relates to prime ministerial responsibilities or otherwise to most aspects of government pol-
icy. A series of unnumbered questions from the opposition party follows, as well as the leader of any other major party. From 1997 to 2008, questions were asked by the Conservative leader and followed by questions from the Liberal-Democrat leader. Normally these leaders were given four and two questions respectively although some variation did occur. Unlike the MP asking the first question, as well as other question askers that follow, opposition leaders are given a certain degree of latitude in their question asking. The Speaker allows opposition leaders to respond to the Prime Ministers answers as well as offer opinions related and unrelated to the question being asked. While a question is always asked, a large portion of the official text can be unrelated to that question and questions themselves are often rather broad, such as asking the Prime Minister to justify the government or specific and unrelated, such as offering condolences for a deceased constituent. The questions of other MPs must be far more directed and shorter, with the Speaker interrupting long questions or highlighting that only one question can be asked to speed up proceedings.

**Literature**

The main way in which political scientists approach the actions of legislators is through an analysis of their careers and how they represent their constituencies, which has been applied to the UK Parliament (Norton and Wood, 1993), and which applies too to parliamentary questions (see Bertelli and Dolan, 2009). But the wider policy agenda might not so closely link to these representative concerns, where the
actions of MPs reflect wider shifts in the policy agenda.¹ Nor does the policy focus draw on academic work on the classification of questions and their comparison across countries (Russo and Wiberg, 2010).

The agendas data address a different literature, which is about the importance of a venue of decision-making and the way in which members of parliament can hold the executive account. Questions in particular over opportunities for political parties to coordinate responses on the big issues of the day, in particular members of the opposition parties, which is of particular importance in the British system (Whitaker and Richard, 2006). In the case of PMQs, what counts is the ability of the opposition party to move the government party or parries onto policy topics that it does not want to address, which may be closer to what the media is highlighting. In fact, a combination of media attention and PMQs on a topic the government does not feel comfortable about could help shift the public agenda. This relates to the wider literature on legislative agenda setting (Bräuninger and Debus, 2009), and recent work also linking agenda setting to parliamentary questions (Vliegenthart, Walgrave and Meppelink, 2011). Other scholars working with policy agendas have argued that the growing competition over issues creates more of an opportunity for political parties to use venues such as parliamentary questioning to expand issues and to challenge the government (Green-Pederson, 2010): ‘increased issue competition among political parties provides the explanation for the increase in non-legislative activities’ (348). Other empirical work using policy agendas data in Belgium shows that the topic choice of questions is conditional on other influences such as in the

¹It might be possible to link the topic of representation to age and constituency characteristics, but this might not address core aspects of representation.
media, and more so if it is the opposition party asking the questions (Vliegenthart and Walgrave, 2011).

The Data

The data comprise questions asked to the prime minister from May 1997, i.e. the start of the Labour government, until October 2008. This generates 8,885 cases. The Prime Ministers Questions were manually coded by two coders and also by computer-assisted software (see the document ‘The Use of Computer Assisted Coding for Political Debates: British Prime Ministers Questions 1997-2008). They were coded by the date, topic, subtopic of the question and the party of the questioner, whether a government or opposition party. We divide up the cases into totals per quarter, which amount to a total of 887.

Results

Party differences by topic

In this section, we examine trends in the data in key major topics. In Figure 1 we present parliamentary questions on the economy. Here we show the trends in the total number of questions asked, which shows a gradually declining or static attention to questions during Labour’s period of office, which then increases rapidly with the onset of the financial crisis in 2008. The bulk of questions come from the opposition, the Conservatives, by a ratio of 2:1 which shows how the Opposition want to lead
on this issue and put pressure on the government. Conservative MPs ask an average average 8.3 questions a quarter on the economy whereas Labour asked 3.9 (t=4.35, p=0.00).

In Figure 2, we present the results on health. Here there is considerable volatility with Government and main opposition party swapping levels of attention at different periods. Overall, there is no difference in the number of questions that these two parties ask (t= -1.0112, p.=.159). Conservative questioning spikes at particular periods of time where it appears that MPs are seeking to corner the government on this issue.

In Figure 3, we present questions on agriculture, which shows largely a flat line which is expected from this non-core policy topic. MPs will not want to ask questions about a topic that is not going to draw attention to them and in the media. But there was a time when this unimportance of agriculture ceased: the BSE (Bovine spongiform encephalopathy) crisis, otherwise known as the ‘mad cow’ disease, which came to a head in 1999 with the slaughter of a large amount of the UK cattle population. Conservative MPs naturally posed questions about this topic as is shown by the progressively larges spikes in 1998, 1999 and 2001. Unsurprisingly Conservative Party MPs ask more questions than Labour, respectively .66 and 2.0 per quarter (t=2.78, p=0.004). There is a similar pattern of smaller spikes for the Liberal Democrats.

In Figure 4 we present the important area for representation on the national interest, that of defence, which is where we expect spikes of interest given the changing international situation. During this period, there was the build up to the war with Iraq and the war itself in 2003. As before, the Conservatives ask more questions
than Labour, respectively the large numbers of 10.0 and 7.1 per quarter respectively
(t=-3.52, p.=.0005), which could reflect the issue priority of the Conservative Party,
or more likely as with the economy, the pressing for party advantage. There is a
more complex pattern with international affairs, represented in Figure 5, with no
large spikes in interest in 2002 and 2003, perhaps reflecting the turbulent nature of
this period of international affairs, where there are a high number of 19 questions
per quarter overall. There is no difference between Conservative and Labour here,
with respectively with 7.8 and 8.06 questions per quarter (t=-0.305, p.=0.38).

In contrast, Labour MPs lead Conservatives in some areas where the party owns
the issue. Figure 5 shows the differences for topic 4, Labour and Employment, where
Labour ask more questions, about five times as many at 4.66 a quarter attributed to
Conservative MPs at .91 (t=6.783, p.=0.00). However, there is no difference for topic
2 on minority rights, with the Conservative Party at 3.25 and Labour on 2.57 (t=-
1.0112, p=0.159), in spite of some Tory spikes - see Figure 6. There is no difference
between the parties on education (t=0.1696, p.=.4330), nor for social welfare, which
is surprising. For social welfare, Labour has an average of 3.68, Conservatives have
3.4 (t= 0.5055, p=0.3078). Labour MPs ask more on the environment, topic 7, at 1.7
compared to .69 for the Conservative Party (t= 4.978, p=0.000), though it is hard
to find a pattern in Figure 7. There is also no difference in the number of questions
over crime, topic 12, even though the numbers are high at 7.11 for Labour and 7.38
for Conservative MPs (t=0.30, p= 0.383).

Overall, it is hard to conclude that Labour members of parliament of the leaders,
when in government, emphasises a distinct set of issues, which it owns. This is in
contrast to what we find with the queen’s speeches over the post-war period (John, Bevan and Jennings, 2011). The main differences are with the Conservatives over the economy because it is a core policy issue, and perhaps because of issue ownership for defence. The other more plausible interpretations is that opposition MPs pose Prime Ministers Questions with a more policy focus than government MPs, stressing issues such as the Iraq War and the recent economic crisis to noticeably higher degree, mainly to keep the government on its toes whereas the government MPs are less likely to home in on these sensitively issues and to ask questions that support the government. We can see this process at work when we look at the distinction between numbered and unnumbered questions.

The numbered questions

The procedure of PMQs allows for questions to be be put by the opposition party leader and other senior MPs, the unnumbered questions, which is the form of combat that attracts media attention, and is a real test of strength for the prime minister and the leader of the opposition. The unnumbered questions reflect a considered way in which the opposition and other parties can pose questions, and it is interesting to see whether the topics of these questions are different from those that come from the backbenchers, with the numbered questions, who may be less strategic in this way and more sensitive to issues in constituencies rather than in the media. Of course, they both trend together with a correlation of .70 (p=0.00) as they both reflect the issues of the day; but there are more fluctuations in the unnumbered questions than in the numbered ones, which suggests the impact of events and the way in which the
opposition challenges the government. Numbered questions has a standard deviation of 5.04, whereas unnumbered is 8.52. There are more unnumbered questions, which reflects the format of the session as unnumbered questions and answers are shorter.

Figure 9 shows the difference for the economy, and also pulls out the numbered questions (the large majority) that are from the Conservatives as the opposition. Figure 10 shows the pattern for defence which shows little difference between the two format in terms of variation in coverage as both trend together. This suggests that for some issues what the party leaders are doing is organising questions and what emerges from the back benches is not that different- or that both are reflecting the same external pressures.

One area where there is some considerable volatility in the unnumbered questions is topic two, Civil Rights, Minority Issues, Immigration and Civil Liberties, which may reflects the way in which the official party leadership seeks to respond to media attention, and which shows the spike in attention at particular periods, as show in Figure 11. There is a similar pattern for Agriculture as in Figure 12 where the spike of 2001 is wholly explained by unnumbered questions coming from the opposition concerned about the crisis but where the backbenchers who were not playing this strategic game. Over crime, topic 12, there is similar difference from the backbenchers: here the opposition concern with the issue rose at the end of the period much more than the backbenchers - see Figure 13. But in other areas there is no difference, with similar patterns between the two, such as in health as shown in Figure 14.
Conclusion

The variations shown in the policy agenda of Prime Minister’s Questions reveal the extent to which this venue is subject to the cross-pressures of agenda change and from the exigencies of party politics in a parliamentary system. What is noticeable is the difference between the government and opposition on key policy areas, not according to traditional party preferences or issue ownership, but how they manoeuvre for advantage to take advantage of issues that are to the government’s discomfort. This pattern is revealed by the difference the variations in responding to issues in the unnumbered questions, such as on the Iraq war, agriculture and crime. Here the oppositions and other senior party leaders use their control over the content of the questions for their own tactical ends. Backbenchers may use the questions for other matters that worry them, that might be come from what is on the policy agenda, but is less volatile than the official agenda.
References


Figure 1: Parliamentary Questions on the Economy, Topic 1
Figure 2: Parliamentary Questions on Health, Topic 2
Figure 3: Parliamentary Questions on Agriculture, Topic 4
Figure 4: Parliamentary Questions on Defence, Topic 16
Figure 5: Parliamentary Questions on International Affairs, Topic 19
Figure 6: Parliamentary Questions Labour and Employment, Topic 5
Figure 7: Parliamentary Questions Civil Rights, Minority Issues, Immigration and Civil Liberties, Topic 2
Figure 8: Parliamentary Questions on the Environment, Topic 7
Figure 9: Numbered and Unnumbered Questions: the Economy
Figure 10: Numbered and Unnumbered Questions: Defence
Figure 11: Numbered and Unnumbered Questions: Civil Rights, Minority Issues, Immigration and Civil Liberties
Figure 12: Numbered and Unnumbered Questions: Agriculture
Figure 13: Numbered and Unnumbered Questions: Law, Crime, and Family Issues
Figure 14: Numbered and Unnumbered Questions: Health