

Questions to the PM vs. Questions by the PM: An Examination of the State and Nature of 'Punch and Judy' Politics during PMQs.



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Media Perceptions of PMQs

‘...like a fight over a bag of boiled sweets in a boys' school playground, circa 1950...PMQs is puerile, point-scoring, yah-boo nonsense, which has done more to debase the reputation of politicians than anything else – and that includes spin doctors, leaked emails and fiddled figures’ (Jackie Ashley, *The Guardian*, 18/07/02)

Public Perceptions of PMQs

- ‘Prime Minister’s Questions should be for the PM to be able to answer what the government’s policies are not for point-scoring’ (Hansard Society, 2014a: 31)
- ‘I don’t think it serves any purpose any more – it is supposed to hold the PM to account but now it is just a pantomime’ (Hansard Society, 2014a: 5)

Leader Perception of PMQs

‘...we need to change, and we will change the way we behave. I’m fed up with the “Punch and Judy” politics of Westminster, the name calling, backbiting, point scoring, finger pointing’

(David Cameron, quoted in *The Guardian*, 6 December 2005).

Academic Perception of PMQs

‘PMQs can be swiftly dismissed as an effective means of holding the prime minister to account’ (Bennister and Kelso, 2015).

‘...boorish willy-jousting’ (Childs, 2015)

‘Prime Minister’s Questions should be for the PM to be able to answer what the government’s policies are not for point-scoring’ (Allen et al., 2014: 31)

Q) Is this correct? Is this correct for all time periods?

Why Important? 1

- 54 percent of the general public report having watched and/or heard PMQs in the last 12 months (Hansard Society, 2014b: 65).
- If watched/heard PMQs in full, then more likely to find it informative, exciting, and are less likely to be put off politics than those who only watched/heard clips in part or not at all (Hansard Society, 2014b: 70).

Why Important? 2

- Salmond (2014) unplanned robust debate is a good thing for public engagement even if it ↑ antipathy to politicians because it ↑ partisanship and turnout.
- However, what happens if you want both higher engagement + a more sanguine view of leaders? Perhaps if behaviour was not so ‘yah-boo’, ‘party political point-scoring’ at PMQs we could still have interest and engagement and a better view of politicians themselves. But what is the behaviour like?

Some Existing Research on PMQs

- Interruptions ↑ over time (Cumberbatch et al. 1992; Shephard, 1999; and Bates et al. 2014)
- ↑ partisanship post-cameras (Shephard, 1999)
- N of Qs ↓ due to interruptions (Bates et al., 2014)
- Attacks ↑ over time (Waddle & Bull, 2019)
- Non-replies to questions is lowest for Blair and Cameron, but...Thatcher and Brown provide fullest answers (Bates et al., 2014)

Problems: Controls for PMQ Length?

- Counts do not control for PMQ length and yet it varies over time on average:

Blair: 4045 words

Brown: 4391 words

Cameron: 4700 words

May: 6275 words

Measuring 'Punch and Judy' PMQs

- Total quantity of questions asked by MPs (including the PM)
- How many questions does the PM ask?
- How many of these are directed at the opposition? (content analysis)
- What proportion of PM replies are critical of the previous government? (content analysis)

Questions Directed at the Opposition

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman opposes our changes on a benefit cap, yes? Just nod. **(13 Oct 2010: Col. 323.)**

PM Critical of Previous Government

The Prime Minister: ...I will not be wandering round my constituency in a stab-proof vest. That is what it came to under the last Government. Gun crime went up, violent crime went up, reoffending of prisoners went up, every prison place cost £45,000, more than 10% of prisoners should not have been there because they are foreigners, half of them are on drugs and 40% of them commit a crime on the way out of prison. That is the record that we have inherited, and that is what we will be clearing up.
(07 Jul. 2010: Col.365)

Data = 1st Year/Session of Each PM

Total Number of PMQs

	<u>PMQs (PM present)</u>	
Blair (05/97-10/98)	50	(49) (98%)
Brown (07/07-07/08)	36	(34) (94%)
Cameron (06/10-07/11)	41	(38) (93%)
May (07/16-04/17)	25	(24) (96%)

Average Number of Questions Asked per First Session of PMQs by PM

<u>PM</u>	<u>Order Paper Qs</u>	<u>Total Qs</u>	<u>PM Qs</u>	<u>PM Qs/Total Qs (%)</u>
Blair	10.68	43.74	1.42	3.2%
Brown	11.25	39.42	1.92	4.9%
Cameron	13.85	39.98	4.54	11.4%
May	14.52	40.32	2.88	7.1%

Average Number of Questions Asked Weighted per 1000 Words

<u>PM</u>	<u>Order Paper Qs</u>	<u>Total Qs</u>	<u>PM Qs</u>
Blair	2.65	10.84	0.36
Brown	2.57	9.00	0.44
Cameron	2.95	8.52	0.97
May	2.33	6.44	0.45

Average Number of Questions Asked per PMQ* by the PM: All PM Qs vs. Questions Targeting Leader of Opposition (LO) vs. Questions Targeting Opposition (O)

<u>PM</u>	<u>PM Qs</u>	<u>PM Qs to LO (%)</u>	<u>PM Qs to O (%)</u>
Blair	1.60	0.10 (6.3%)	1.00 (62.5%)
Brown	0.90	0.60 (66.7%)	0.30 (33.3%)
Cameron	5.60	2.90 (51.8%)	1.50 (26.8%)
May	3.10	1.10 (35.48%)	0.60 (19.4%)

Note: *Data are for the first ten PMQs fronted by each PM (skipping those cases where the PM was absent).

Average Number of Questions Asked per PMQ* by the PM per 1000 Words: All PM Qs vs. Questions Targeting Leader of Opposition (LO) vs. Questions Targeting Opposition (O)

<u>PM</u>	<u>PM Qs</u>	<u>PM Qs to LO</u>	<u>PM Qs to O</u>
Blair	0.41	0.02 (4.8%)	0.26 (63.4%)
Brown	0.22	0.14 (63.6%)	0.07 (31.8%)
Cameron	1.22	0.65 (53.3%)	0.32 (26.2%)
May	0.50	0.18 (36.0%)	0.10 (20.0%)

Note: *Data are for the first ten PMQs fronted by each PM (skipping those cases where the PM was absent).

**Average Number of Questions Asked per PMQ* by the PM: All PM Qs vs. Blaming
Previous Government (BPG) vs. Critiquing Opposition (CO)**

<u>PM</u>	<u>PM Qs</u>	<u>PM Qs BPG (%)</u>	<u>PM Qs CO (%)</u>
Blair	1.60	1.00 (62.5%)	0.20 (12.5%)
Brown	0.90	0.30 (33.3%)	0.40 (44.4%)
Cameron	5.60	2.50 (44.6%)	0.60 (10.7%)
May	3.10	0.00 (0.0%)	0.70 (22.6%)

Note: *Data are for the first ten PMQs fronted by each PM (skipping those cases where the PM was absent).

**Average Number of Questions Asked per PMQ* by the PM: All PM Qs vs. Blaming
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Average Number of Questions Asked per PMQ* by the PM per 1000 Words: All PM Qs vs. Blaming Previous Government (BPG) vs. Critiquing Opposition (CO)

<u>PM</u>	<u>PM Qs</u>	<u>PM Qs BPG</u>	<u>PM Qs CO</u>
Blair	0.41	0.26 (63.4%)	0.05 (12.2%)
Brown	0.22	0.07 (31.8%)	0.09 (40.9%)
Cameron	1.22	0.55 (45.1%)	0.13 (10.7%)
May	0.50	0.00 (0.0%)	0.12 (24.0%)

Note: *Data are for the first ten PMQs fronted by each PM (skipping those cases where the PM was absent).

Correlation Between Net Public Opinion Approval of the PM
and the Total Number of Questions Asked by the PM

<u>PM</u>	<u>PM Qs v. Net PM Approval</u>	<u>(N)</u>
Blair	0.02	(49)
Brown	-0.18	(34)
Cameron	0.39*	(38)
May	0.17	(24)

Note: Data uses IPSOS MORI net public opinion approval ratings of the PM known at the time of PMQs. Data excludes the odd occasion when the PM is absent. **P<0.01 *P<0.05.

Conclusion

Has 'Punch and Judy' politics eroded?

- Questions the PM asks? NO (↑ last 2 PMs)
- Questions directed at the opposition? NO (↑ last 2 PMs)
- Questions critical of the opposition? NO (↑ cyclical: highest following change of govt.)

Recommendations

If we want both higher engagement + a more sanguine view of leaders?

↓ Opposition Leader questioning & free up more time for backbench questioning.

Consider rules/Speaker interventions to stop PM questioning and blaming without answering.

Word of Caution

- Too much emphasis is placed on 'holding the government to account'.
- Legislatures perform a myriad of functions (Packenham, 1970; and Norton, 1993)
- PMQs is important for other reasons such as tension release, constituency representation.

Thanks

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