

Explaining the Use of Parliamentary Questions by Parliamentary Party Groups

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Abstract

This paper shifts the analysis of parliamentary oversight tools to the level of the political party, asking how political parties make use of written parliamentary questions. We theorize that the use of parliamentary questions is related to the (electoral) competition between political parties as well as executive-legislative relations. We provide an empirical test using the lower house in the Netherlands (1994-2014). Our analysis shows that opposition parties and in particular populist parties are the most frequent users of parliamentary questions. Issue saliency and the policy distance between the party asking the question and the minister answering it, also play a major role. We find some evidence of parties targeting electoral competitors, but also parties that they do not compete with at all in the electoral arena.

Paper prepared for the 12th Workshop of Parliamentary Scholars and Parliamentarians, Wroxton, United Kingdom, 25-26 July 2015. We thank Senna Maatoug for her input in an early stage of this project.

1. Introduction

The core argument of this paper is that we need to understand parliamentary oversight, asking parliamentary questions in particular, as *party political* behaviour. Existing studies have focused extensively on the use of parliamentary question as an electoral tool for individual MPs (Bailer 2011; Mayhew 1974; Russo and Wiberg 2010; Saalfeld 2011) as well as the relationship between the parliamentary and media agenda (Van Aelst and Vliegenthart 2014; Vliegenthart and Walgrave 2011; Walgrave and Vliegenthart 2010, 2012). We shift the attention to the level of the political party: how do they make use of parliamentary questions as a strategic political tool?

Parliamentary party groups use parliamentary questions not because they are usually interested in the answers the government provides, but in order to further their own interests. One motivation might be the issue competition between parties: they ask questions about the issues that feature prominently in their manifestos (Green-Pedersen 2010). We extend this understanding of parliamentary oversight by looking at factors relating to party competition as well as executive-legislative relations.

Parliamentary tools such as questions are used in the permanent election campaign between parties: 'parliamentary questions are the continuation of election campaigns with different means'. In line with theories on issue ownership, we expect parties to focus on topics that they focused on in their manifesto (Inglehart and Klingemann 1976). They would direct more questions to electoral competitors, parties that appeal to the same voters. Populist parties can be expected to be more active, as they stand to benefit from exposing failures of the existing elite (Otjes, Louwense, and Timmermans 2015).

Parliamentary behaviour has also been shown to relate to the relations between the executive and legislative (King 1976). We expect that opposition parties are more active than government parties (Martin 2011b; Sánchez de Dios and Wiberg 2011), focussing mainly on issues that show high divisiveness within the government (coalition). From a policy distance perspective we expect parties to target ministers that they most disagree with. Coalition parties will focus their questions on their coalition partners in order to keep tabs on them (Kim and Loewenberg 2005).

We aim to contribute to understanding parliamentary behaviour in the context of (electoral) party competition (Bardi and Mair 2008; Green-Pedersen 2010). The

combination of the phenomenon of parliamentary questions and the case of the Netherlands are ideal to explore the dynamics party competition in parliament. Reversely, our study shows that the concepts from the study of parties' *electoral* behaviour can be extended into parliament. Our study enriches our understanding of how parties use parliamentary tools to further their electoral aims.

In the remainder, we will first explain why we think that studying the use of parliamentary questions is particularly relevant for those interested in applying concepts from the party competition literature to parliament. Next we develop our hypotheses, borrowing from the existing work on oversight tools, recent advances in the study of party behaviour and the growing literature that works on the nexus between these two literatures. Next, we will justify our choice for studying the Netherlands. We then discuss our methodology, our results and come to conclusion about our hypotheses.

2. Understanding and Explaining the Use of Oversight Tools

Parliaments are expected to play a number of roles in a parliamentary democracy. Parliaments are legislatures that can propose, amend and pass legislation, they important representative and deliberative functions, and, finally, parliaments are expected to provide parliamentary oversight over the government. Parliaments have an oversight function: they are expected to assess and judge the appropriateness of government action (Auel 2007, 500). MPs have a number of oversight tools at their disposal: parliamentary inquiries, oral questions and written questions.

This article examines written questions. These tools are often considered symbolic because they are relatively weak. All an MP can do is asking the government to respond to his or her question concerning some societal issue. The government is generally required to provide a written answer, but this can be as short as one word. We are interested in written questions, however, because they are not necessarily structured by the parliamentary agenda. All other tools MPs have to their disposal are limited by the parliamentary agenda, for example oversight tools such as oral questions or parliamentary inquiries or legislative tools such as amendments. There is a limit on the number of oral questions that can be asked during parliamentary question time. An MP cannot *out of the blue* propose an amendment to the nation's tax code. That really depends on whether the speaker, and in most parliamentary systems the government, are willing to allocate time for a debate on the

issue. Even parliamentary speech is strictly regulated in most parliamentary systems: agenda setting is usually strictly controlled by the government and even in parliaments with strong agenda-setting powers, the majority usually has control over the schedule (Döring 1995). Parliamentary questions represent an almost unconstrained form of parliamentary behaviour, at least in those systems where there are no limits on the number and subject of the questions that can be asked. This allows us to see how parliamentary parties act when unconstrained by the parliamentary agenda.

2.1 Issue Saliency

Students of parliamentary party behaviour have studied parliamentary oversight from the perspective of issue competition (Green-Pedersen 2010; Vliegthart and Walgrave 2011). Issue competition is an important concept in the field of party competition (Budge 2015; Petrocik 1996; Robertson 1976). The key argument comes from Robertson (1976), who showed that parties do not necessarily take positions on issues, but promise voters that they will prioritise some issues over others. This is particularly true for valence issues on which (almost) everybody agrees: high employment, economic growth or environmental protection. Some parties have a stronger reputation on such issues: they ‘own’ certain issues (Petrocik 1996). As Carmines (Carmines and Stimson 1989, 6) succinctly put it: ‘[a]ll successful politicians instinctively understand which issues benefit them and their party and which do not. The trick is to politicize the former and deemphasize the latter.’ A simple, cheap and effective way to maintain issue ownership and direct attention to issues that the party is competent on, are parliamentary questions (Green-Pedersen 2010, 350): they provide a way for opposition parties to force the government to talk about issues that the opposition considers itself and not the government competent on.

According to this model, green parties will ask questions about the environment and radical right-wing populist parties will ask questions about immigration. This is not necessarily just motivated by an issue competition strategy. Parties that talk a lot about issues in their manifestos and in parliamentary questions may simply be intrinsically motivated to solve those policy issues. Radical right-wing populist MPs may genuinely want to solve what they perceive as an immigration crisis and may see parliamentary questions as a step in that process. Parties may also

ask questions that they own in order to maintain issue ownership: they may be used to mark a party's territory vis-à-vis other parliamentary parties. Moreover, they may be used to signal to interest groups, party activists, journalists and voters that the MPs are 'working' on those issues. This brings us to our hypothesis:¹

1. **Issue Saliency Hypothesis:** the more attention political parties spend on an issue in their election manifesto, the more parliamentary questions political parties will ask about that question.

2.2 Government-Opposition Dynamics

Existing studies suggest a difference in how government and opposition parties use parliamentary questions (Green-Pedersen 2010; Martin 2011a; Sánchez de Dios and Wiberg 2011): parliamentary questions are primarily used by opposition parties. Government and opposition parties have opposed interests: the government parties (usually) want to remain within the coalition and are unlikely to 'rock the boat' by asking parliamentary questions. Opposition parties on the other side have an interest in exposing policy failures of the government: this draws negative attention to the government (Vliegenthart, Walgrave, and Zicha 2013, 394).

Moreover, MPs are more likely to undertake activity when they are dissatisfied: government MPs who are more likely to be content with the actions of the government, and are therefore less likely to scrutinize their actions. Even if government MPs have genuine policy concerns due to their closeness to the government they can use informal means to obtain information or bring government attention to issues. Therefore one would expect government MPs to be far more passive in terms of parliamentary actions than opposition MPs:

2. **Opposition Party Hypothesis:** opposition parties will ask more parliamentary questions than government parties.

The fact that opposition parties ask more questions than government parties does not mean that government parties do not use the tool at all. Coalition parties will

¹ As our measurement will focus on the issues that are salient to parties, rather than the more specific question which issues they 'own', we phrase our hypothesis in terms of the former.

focus their questions on their coalition partners in order to monitor them (Kim and Loewenberg 2005; Maatoug 2013). They are unlikely to scrutinize their own ministers strongly: they are more likely to be satisfied with the policy he or she proposes and has the more options to address issues informally. Moreover, they do not want to tarnish the reputation of their own ministers, who are likely to be prominent candidates in the next election:

3. **Coalition Party Hypothesis:** coalition parties will ask more questions to ministers who are not a member of their own party, compared to ministers of their own party.

The idea of issue competition introduced above essentially sees parliamentary behaviour as the continuation of election campaigns. MPs are likely to scrutinize the government on the issues that they ‘own’ forcing the government parties to speak out on issues that they do not own. In coalition systems, however, which issues damage parties in parliament may be different from the issues that hurt them in the electoral arena. As Schattschneider (1960, 69–70) noted “the effort in all political struggles is to exploit cracks in [one’s] opposition while attempting to consolidate one’s own side.” Opposition parties are likely to want to drive a “wedge” in the coalition by drawing media and political attention to issues that divide the coalition (Van de Wardt, De Vries, and Hobolt 2014). Parliamentary questions can be a way to direct attention to such wedge issues. Coalition parties on the other side have an interest in drawing attention away from these issues. They are more likely to ask questions on issues where coalition parties are united:

4. **Government Issue Divisiveness Hypothesis:** opposition (government) parties will ask more (fewer) parliamentary questions the more (less) government parties are divided on an issue.

2.3 Populism

Parliamentary questions are oversight tools, used to scrutinize government behaviour. They can be used to express concerns and criticise those in power. Some parties are more likely to voice their opposition to policies that are unpopular and will attempt to signal to voters that they care for their concerns instead of seeking

government responsibility (Mair 2009): populist parties. We understand populism with reference to two claims (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008; Jagers and Walgrave 2007; Mudde 2004, 2007; Taggart 2000). First, the actions of government should reflect the general will of the people. The people are considered by populist to be virtuous, pure and homogeneous (Taggart 2000). Second, the current ruling elite deprives the people of their right to rule. They no longer represent the people. Populists seek to 'give back the government' to the people (Taggart 2000).² While populism sometimes is regarded as a characteristic that parties have or not have (Rooduijn 2013), we think of populism in terms of degrees (Jagers and Walgrave 2007; Rooduijn and Pauwels 2011). Some parties might be more outspoken in their populist stances (e.g. PVV) than others (e.g. SP) and there may be variation over time in the extent to which parties are populist.

There are different reasons why we expect populist parties in particular to employ oversight tools more: first, as anti-elite parties they wish to bring to light the failures of the incumbent government, to show that the current political elite is inept and corrupt. Moreover, populist parties have a particular interest in showing that they (unlike other parties) are responsive to voters: as parliamentary questions are relatively costless tools that can be used to respond to issues that voters care about independent of the parliamentary agenda. Therefore, we propose that:

5. **Populism Hypothesis:** the more populist the rhetoric of a political party is, the more parliamentary questions they will ask.

2.4 Inter-party Competition

Parliamentary questions are a way to direct negative attention to other political players. This means that we can approach it as campaigning behaviour. We borrow from the literature on negative campaigning in multiparty systems to examine which enemies parties choose to 'go negative on' (Walter 2012). First, one may propose that parties attack competitors who appeal to the same voters, in order to hurt opponents close to their position. At the same time, going negative against electorally proximate

² Populism has a chameleonic quality (Taggart 2000), which means that it can be combined with both left-wing and right-wing ideas. Interestingly, the Netherlands, actually, has seen both left- and right-wing populist parties, the left-wing SP and the right-wing populist PVV and LPF (Otjes and Louwse 2015).

parties may turn-off sympathetic voters. Parties may also simply disagree with the policy that the ideologically distant parties are implementing. Evidence is complex. The best research suggests that parties and in particular smaller parties tend to focus on ideologically close parties, but also that when one controls for this effect parties spend more attention on the largest party on the other side of the left/right dimension (Walter 2012).

We propose to clarify some of these discussions by distinguishing between ideological and electoral similarity. We propose that parties attack other parties that have a *similar* electorate and parties that have a *different* policy platform. The first reflects the strategic advantage of attracting attention to the weaknesses of a competitor and the second reflects genuine ideological opposition to the other party's policy:

6. **Programmatic Difference Hypothesis:** the greater the policy distance between a parliamentary party and a minister's party, the more questions the parliamentary party will direct to that minister.
7. **Electoral Similarity Hypothesis:** the more a party's electorate overlaps with the electorate of a minister's party, the more parliamentary questions the parliamentary party will direct to that minister.

3. Case Selection

This case studies the usage of parliamentary questions by members of the Dutch lower house (*Tweede Kamer*). We approach parliamentary questions from a party perspective, despite the fact that a recent studies see parliamentary questions as a form of individual representation (Bailer 2011; Russo 2011; Saalfeld 2011). In order to ensure that the effects we study are attributable to parties and not the result of individual incentives for MPs, we select a parliament where we know that electoral incentives do not affect parliamentary behaviour: the Netherlands. In a previous study, Otjes and Louwse (2014) have established that the Dutch *Tweede Kamer* offers such a case. This is the case for three reasons: the electoral system, the single district system and the behaviour of voters. The *Tweede Kamer* is elected in a single, national district, through an open list system. Voters have a single vote, which they have to cast for a single candidate. Votes are aggregated per party in the single district. A party's seats are filled by the candidates in order of the number of votes

they received, but only if they received more than 25% of the electoral quota. If there are still seats left those go to the MPs in order of their list position. Even though, every vote cast is a personal vote, these votes hardly affect who is elected: between 2002 and 2010, almost 80% of the votes are given to the *first* candidate on the list and more than 90% of the personal votes are given to candidates who would have been elected anyway based on their list position. Therefore, personalised electoral incentives are absent in MP behaviour.

4. Data and Methods

We make use of the official record of parliamentary questions and answers, as published on *Officiële Bekendmakingen* (2015). The dataset runs from 1994 to the end of 2014; we exclude the very short 2002-2003 parliament as normal parliamentary operations were hardly established by the time the government resigned. The metadata of the official records include the questioners (MP) and responders (minister), as well as a topic classification and the date the question was asked and answered. The files were downloaded and pre-processed with purpose-written scripts³.

Our unit of analysis is the party-minister pair per parliamentary period, for example the number of questions the Labour party asked to the Minister for Defence in the 2003-2006 parliament. We include all parties for which data is available, which excludes split off parties (as they are not included for our electoral and manifesto-based measurement) and some smaller (or short-lived) parties, which were not included in the surveys used.

Our dependent variable, **the number of questions** asked, is measured in two ways. Firstly, we look simply at the number of questions asked by each party to each

³ We used the *Aanhangsels van de Handelingen* ('Supplement to the Official Records') that included both question and answer for all written questions. We excluded *Mededelingen* ('Announcements') that stated that questions would be answered at a later stage (or that questions were retracted). Note that the metadata do contain some errors, particularly when the questioner or responder was incorrectly identified or not all of the actors were identified. We matched the names in the metadata against a list of MPs and ministers obtained from the Parliamentary Documentation Centre (Parlementair Documentatie Centrum 2010). Still, errors will remain, but are unlikely to affect our analysis greatly because of the large volume of questions in the dataset.

minister⁴. Our statistical model will take differences in the length of parliamentary terms and ministerial tenure into account. Secondly, we look at the share of questions to a particular minister asked by each party. By focusing on the share of questions to each minister, we exclude variation between ministers, which is not the focus of our analysis. Previous analyses have shown that media attention has a large impact on the topics covered in parliamentary questions (Van Aelst and Vliegenthart 2014; Vliegenthart and Walgrave 2011). The second way to measure our dependent variable effectively controls for this.

Our measure of **Issue saliency** is based on manual coding of party manifestos for each election from 1994 to 2012. Each paragraph in the manifesto was classified according to one of the categories of the Comparative Agendas Project. Work was done by trained coders. Only those coders were allowed to participate who had reached a Krippendorff's α of at least 0.80 in their training work. The coding work was done in two coding rounds: first, the coders assigned each paragraph to one of twenty-one substantive categories (healthcare, defence etc.). These codes were then reviewed by an expert coder. Next, the codes were split into around 10 subcategories per main category (e.g. hospitals or military installations). This second coding round was meant to assess the correct coding in the main categories as well. Inconsistencies were reviewed by an expert coder as well. In a subsequent step, we determined which of these CAP subcategories corresponded to each minister's portfolio. For each party we added up total attention to these issues, which effectively means that we arrive at a measure of how salient the each minister's portfolio was to each party.⁵

Opposition party, our second independent variable, is simply a dummy variable that equals one when a party was in opposition. We do not code the Party for Freedom (PVV) as an opposition party during the 2010-2012 term, as it acted as a support party to the minority right-wing cabinet Rutte-I. **Question Asked to Party Colleague** equals one when the MP asking the question and the Minister answering it belonged to the same party.

Government Issue Divisiveness captures government parties' issue differences on issues relevant to a minister's portfolio. These scores are based on the

⁴ A single question can address multiple ministers, in which case it is counted as $1/n$ -th of a question, where n is the number of ministers. In (the infrequent) case of multiple parties asking a question, the question was counted for each party.

⁵ Our main analyses exclude six cases with very high saliency scores (> 25), but the results are similar when including these.

Chapel Hill Expert Surveys (2006 and 2010), with each minister matched to one or more of the dimensions available in that survey (Bakker et al. 2012). We calculate the (seat share weighted) mean absolute difference between each party's policy position and the (seat share weighted) mean position of the government parties. If all government parties share the same policy position on a dimension, Government Issue Divisiveness (GID) will equal 0; if two equally large government parties would position themselves on opposite ends of the 0-10 scale, the GID score would be at its theoretical maximum of 5.

The level of **Populism** of each party is assessed based on their manifesto. We use a dictionary approach which captures the share of populist words present in the manifesto (Pauwels 2011). Most mainstream parties are very close to 0; the largest score is 4.6 for the Freedom Party (PVV) in its 2006 manifesto.

The **Programmatic Difference** between the party of the MP asking a question and the party of the Minister answering it is based on Chapel Hill Expert Survey estimates (2006 and 2010). As with Government Issue Divisiveness, we matched each minister's portfolio to one or more CHES dimensions. We calculated the absolute difference between the MP's party and the Minister's party on that dimension, which ranges from 0 to about 7.

We measured the **Electoral Competition** between the MP's party and the Minister's party in terms of their overlapping electoral appeal. We use the 'probability of a future vote' (PTV) scores available in the Dutch Parliamentary Election Study (DPES). Each respondent was asked how likely he was asked to vote for each party in the future, on a 11-point scale from 'certainly never' to 'sometime certainly'. If the voting probabilities of two parties correlate strongly, we can argue that these parties are fishing in the same electoral pond. The strongest correlation of 1 will be obtained when the party of the MP and that of the minister are the same. This is quite a bit higher than most other correlations observed. Therefore we transform this variable by ranking them (for each government party) and mapping these ranks on a scale from 1 (highest correlation of PTVs) to 0 (lowest correlation of PTVs).⁶

We control for **Party Size** (in seats), because we expect larger parties to ask more questions just because they have more MPs available to put in work. At the same time, Party Size is likely to be related to some of our independent variables,

⁶ We also replicated our analyses with the original correlation measure. The results are weaker and generally not significant.

such as being an Opposition Party and Question Asked to Party Colleague. One of our models also contains a variable that indicates the **Portfolio** of the (junior) minister, which is manually coded.⁷

Our analysis of the data has to take the dyadic (party-minister) structure of the data into account. Therefore we run multilevel regression models with three nested levels: the parliamentary term, the party asking the question and the individual level. As we discussed above, we have two versions of the dependent variable. The first is simply the raw count of votes,⁸ which is modelled through a Poisson regression with an offset term for the number of days the minister was in office during that particular term, to account for between-term differences (some parliaments were longer than others) and between-minister differences (some ministers resigned early or took office later). We include Portfolio dummy variables to capture differences in the popularity of asking questions to each ministerial department (as a result of media attention, for example). We deal with overdispersion in the model by including an individual-level random effect, which is the recommended approach for multi-level models (Lee and Nelder 2000).

Our second model captures the share of questions to a particular minister asked by each party. We model this using a binomial link in which the number of questions asked by the party is the number of successes and the number of questions asked by another party is the number of failures. We include the number of parties in a parliamentary term as a control variable here, because as the number of parties increases, the average share of questions asked by each party automatically drops. Overdispersion is addressed by including an individual-level random effect.

4. Results

On average, parties ask about 25 questions to each (junior) minister during each of our terms (see Table 1). Taking into account the length of each term, this amounts to just over 10 questions per year. There is, however, huge variation: some ministers are not being asked anything by some parties, while the Minister for Health

⁷ The names and exact responsibilities of ministries changed over the years, but we tried to keep them constant. There are 14 categories for this variable.

⁸ Because a question can be asked to multiple ministers (see above), some of the counts contain fractions, which we round to the nearest whole numbers. The same is true for the binomial link models.

received over 118 questions *per year* from the Socialist Party (SP) during the 2010-2012 parliament. Expressed in terms of the proportion of questions to each minister, the average party asked 11% of the questions to each minister, ranging from 0 to 45 per cent. As an example, our highest value is 45, which means that between 2003 and 2006 the Labour party (PvdA) asked 45 per cent of all the questions for the then junior minister for Social Affairs, Mark Rutte.

Figure 1 provides some initial idea of the source of that variation. We present a simple analysis in which continuous variables have been split into three groups (Low, Medium and High) of equal size, to get some initial idea about the size of the differences. We focus on the proportion of questions that each party asked of a minister. Issue Saliency seems to have a modest effect on the proportion of questions asked, with ministers on a high saliency portfolio for a party asking 12 per cent of questions against 10 per cent for low saliency portfolios. This provides some initial confirmation of our Issue Saliency hypothesis.

According to our descriptive data, opposition parties ask a lower proportion of questions (10%) than government parties (13%). As we will see below, this can be explained by party size: opposition parties are generally smaller and therefore ask fewer questions. If we take size into account, we will see that opposition parties actually ask more questions than government parties, in line with our expectations.

For government parties, we see very little difference in the proportion of questions asked to ministers from the same party and ministers from other parties. We also observe no difference in the proportion of questions asked depending on how divisive the government parties are over the issues under a minister's remit. Our subsequent analyses will show that this is true both for government and for opposition parties.

Populism seems to have a relatively large effect with low and medium levels of populism resulting in asking just over 10% of the questions compared to 12% for highly populist parties. Programmatic differences also seem to play a distinct role, with medium or higher differences between party and minister resulting in about 1.5 percentage points more questions asked.

We find a somewhat surprising pattern for the Electoral Competition variable, that is the extent to which the party asking the question and the party of the minister answering it are in direct electoral competition. The descriptive data suggests that the number of questions asked follows a U-shaped pattern: it is highest for the pairs of

strongest competition or the weakest competition, but is quite a bit lower for parties in the middle. Our subsequent multivariate analysis show that the pattern is perhaps not as strong as the descriptive data suggests, but there is support for the general idea of asking more questions to close competitors as well as distant parties.

Party size is included only as a control variable; Figure 1 clearly shows the reason: small parties are on average responsible for only 4% of the questions to a minister, compared to 18% for large parties.

The next step in our analysis is to test the statistical significance of these relationships in a multivariate regression model. As explained, we run two models: one with the dependent variable being the proportion of questions to a minister being asked by a certain party (Table 2, Model 1) and another with the raw number of questions asked as the dependent variable (Table 2, Model 2). The findings are quite similar between models, so we will focus on Model 1 in our discussion of the results. Figure 2 presents expected values of the dependent variable for different values of our independent variables, keeping all other variables at their mean. This helps to interpret the size of the effects found.⁹

Most of the results are in line with the descriptive analysis. The percentage of questions asked increases from just over 7% for non-salient issues to just over 10% for very salient issues. This might seem a modest difference, but it does represent a 45% increase in questions when moving from the minimum to the maximum level of saliency. This shows that parties consistently prioritise some issues over others, both in their manifesto and in their parliamentary questions.

Our models show that opposition parties ask a larger percentage of the questions (9%) than government parties (5%). This is different from our descriptive findings, which can be explained by the fact the regression models control for Party Size. When we compare opposition and government parties of equal size, the opposition party is expected to ask considerably more questions. We do not find a

⁹ Note that these 'effect plots' only take into account the fixed effects of the model, not the random effects.

difference in the proportion of questions asked to ministers from the same party and from different parties.¹⁰

We hypothesized that opposition parties would use questions to attack the government on issues it is most divided on. We find no support for this hypothesis. On the contrary, if anything opposition parties seem to ask fewer questions on issues the government parties are divided on. Perhaps this has to do with the measure we are using, which relates to government parties' differences in policy positions on the portfolio of the minister in question. Many high values obtained relate to socio-economic portfolios during cabinets in which both the Labour party (PvdA) and Liberal party (VVD) participated. It seems reasonable that many opposition parties would like to attack those governments on those issues, but then it seems equally likely that (left wing) opposition parties would question right-wing governments on those issues. We do not find support for the hypothesis of a general effect of government issue divisiveness on the number of question asked to a minister.

Populism is significantly related to the number of questions asked. Non-populist parties are on average responsible for only 7% of the questions to a minister, according to our model, which increases to over 16% for the most populist party in our dataset.¹¹ This provides strong evidence for the Populism hypothesis: SP and PVV are generally among the most prevalent questioners in the annual reports prepared by the parliament. Similarly, Otjes et al. (2015) found that populist parties can be characterised as 'radical opposition', which focuses on scrutiny (asking oral and written questions and voting against legislation) rather than policy making (introducing Private Member's bills, motions, and amendments).

Programmatic Differences between the party of the MP asking a question and the minister answering it, also play a role in explaining the proportion of questions asked. Parties ask more questions to ministers they disagree with (9%) than to those they agree with (7%). This effect is moderate in size and statistically significant.

¹⁰ As our model controls for being an opposition or government parties, the coefficient for 'Question Asked to Party Colleague' can be interpreted directly as the effect for government parties.

¹¹ When we include populism as a squared term, we find that the proportion of questions increases most strongly between levels of populism of 0 and 1.5, after which it is roughly the same. This reflects that both the more moderate populist Socialist Party (SP) and the full fledged populists of the PVV are strongly active in asking parliamentary questions.

The effect of electoral competition is not statistically significant in our main model. As the descriptive data showed a large, but non-linear, effect, we also ran a model specification with a squared term for Electoral Competition (not reported). Here we find some evidence of parties targeting ministers of parties that are very much (8.6%) or not at all their electoral competitors (7.7%), compared to parties that rank somewhere in the middle (7.3%). This effect is found in both the binomial and Poisson models, but it is only statistically significant in the latter. This presents some, albeit tentative, evidence that parties target their 'natural opponent' in political terms (for example, the VVD and the Greens, D66 and the Protestant GPV) as well as their 'electoral opponent' that they might be most likely to win votes from.¹²

All in all, we find strong support for the Issue Saliency, Opposition Party, Populist Party and Programmatic Difference Hypotheses and tentative support for the Electoral Competition Hypothesis. We find no support for the Coalition Party and Government Issue Divisiveness hypotheses.

5. Discussion and conclusion

Our analysis suggests that the use of parliamentary questions can be explained both by factors within parliament, particularly executive-legislative relations, as well as the (electoral) competition between parties. Opposition parties use parliamentary questions as an opportunity to flag important issues. Populist parties use this opportunity even more so, which fits with their 'radical style' of opposition. We also observe that parties use questions to strengthen their substantive profile, by focussing on issues that are salient to them, which in turn might strengthen their issue ownership on those topics. This confirms earlier work by Green-Pedersen (2010) on the Danish case. Moreover, parties seem to prioritise questions to ideologically distant government ministers, which probably further strengthens their own stance on the issue in the eyes of the public.

We find limited evidence of party using questions strategically to attack electoral competitors. There is some support for the hypothesis that parties ask more questions to parties they are in electoral competition with. On the other hand, the analysis suggests that parties also target party ministers that are distant in electoral terms. Perhaps this effect picks up on differences between parties that are not easily

¹² We replicated this effect when excluding party-minister dyads which belonged to the same party.

captured by our Programmatic Difference variable. For example, parties like the social-liberal D66 and the Protestant GPV might have similar positions on some issues, but because of their large differences on some salient (ethical) issues, the conservative Protestants seems to target ministers from that social liberal party.

Contrary to our hypothesis, opposition parties do not focus their questions on wedge issues, topics that divide the government parties. In fact, this finding is in line with the observation of Van de Wardt et al. (2014) that opposition parties exploit issues on which there is dissent *within* government parties, but not necessarily when there is dissent *between* government parties. We are currently unable to assess the former, we also find that dissent between government parties is no reason to ask more questions on an issue.

In line with Maatoug's (2013) analysis of parliamentary questions in the Netherlands, coalition parties seem not to be using parliamentary as tools to 'keep tabs' on their coalition partners. They seem to be asking as many questions to their own ministers than to the ministers of other parties. Perhaps this is a paradoxical consequence of ministerial portfolio allocation: parties will generally try to obtain portfolios that are salient to them, which in turn might be a reason to ask more parliamentary questions about this issue to signal the importance of the issue to voters. Alternatively, government parties might simply have better tools at their disposal for intra-coalition checks, such as the allocation of junior ministers or bargaining delays in parliamentary committees (Kim and Loewenberg 2005; Martin and Vanberg 2004).

All in all, we find more support for the use of parliamentary questions to strengthen a party's own (policy) profile rather than to weaken the position of an opponent. Of course, the effectiveness of these strategies depends on whether there is an audience for parliamentary questions. It is difficult to strengthen 'issue ownership' if nobody knows about the questions. Analyses of the relationship between media coverage and parliamentary questions suggests that coverage informing (oral) questions is generally more extensive than coverage on the questions itself (Van Aelst and Vliegthart 2014). Still, even written questions do get reported regularly. Some MPs purposely follow through on a line of questioning, asking tens of questions on the same specific issue to 'mark their territory' within parliament as well as in media coverage (Schweers 2012; Visscher 2006, 95). Further research could expand on this relationship between the media dimension of parliamentary questions and the party

political side. If issue ownership is an important reason for parties to table questions, under what circumstances do they succeed in receiving the media attention necessary?

Our analyses focus on the case of the Netherlands, in which the party dimension is arguably more important than the individual level in explaining the use of parliamentary questions. While parties have been shown to matter across Western Europe (Green-Pedersen 2010), we should test whether our expectations hold in systems in which individual-level explanations of parliamentary questioning are also pertinent.

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Tables and figures

Table 1: Descriptive statistics

<i>Variable</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Min.</i>	<i>Median</i>	<i>Max.</i>
Questions	1462	25.47	33.35	0.00	15.00	274.00
Proportion of Questions	1462	0.11	0.09	0.00	0.09	0.45
Issue Saliency	1462	3.77	3.50	0.00	2.92	24.13
Opposition Party	1462	0.68	0.47	0.00	1.00	1.00
Question Asked to Party Colleague	1462	0.11	0.32	0.00	0.00	1.00
Government Issue Divisiveness	1462	0.77	0.28	0.17	0.71	1.35
Populism	1462	0.59	0.84	0.00	0.30	4.61
Programmatic Difference	1462	2.24	1.61	0.00	2.07	7.60
Electoral Competition	1462	0.50	0.34	0.00	0.45	1.00
Party Size	1462	16.47	14.16	2.00	11.00	45.00

Note: The table only includes valid cases used in the regression analyses.

Table 2: Regression models explaining questions asked by parties to ministers

	Model 1	Model 2
<i>Dependent variable:</i>	<i>Proportion</i>	<i>Count^a</i>
<i>Statistical model:</i>	<i>Binomial</i>	<i>Poisson</i>
(Intercept)	-3.93*** (0.67)	-7.16*** (0.32)
Issue Saliency	0.02*** (0.00)	0.10*** (0.01)
Opposition Party	0.78** (0.24)	0.66** (0.24)
Question Asked to Party Colleague	-0.10 (0.07)	-0.06 (0.09)
Government Issue Divisiveness	-0.00 (0.11)	-0.07 (0.14)
Government Issue Divisiveness * Opposition	-0.14 (0.14)	-0.09 (0.17)
Populism	0.26** (0.09)	0.24** (0.09)
Programmatic Difference	0.04** (0.01)	0.04* (0.02)
Electoral Competition	0.10 (0.07)	0.04 (0.09)
Party Size ^b	0.66*** (0.07)	0.59*** (0.07)
Number of Parties	-0.05 (0.06)	
Portfolio dummy variables		(incl.)
Log Likelihood	-4962.44	-5444.25
N	1462	1462
N groups: Questioner Party:Period	54	54
N groups: Period	6	6
Variance: Observation.(Intercept)	0.24	0.44
Variance: Questioner Party:Period.(Intercept)	0.30	0.27
Variance: Period.(Intercept)	0.00	0.08
Variance: Residual	1.00	1.00

*** p < 0.001, ** p < 0.01, * p < 0.05

^a Model includes an offset term for the length of ministerial tenure during the parliament

^b Divided by 10 for model identification

Figure 1: Descriptive bivariate relations

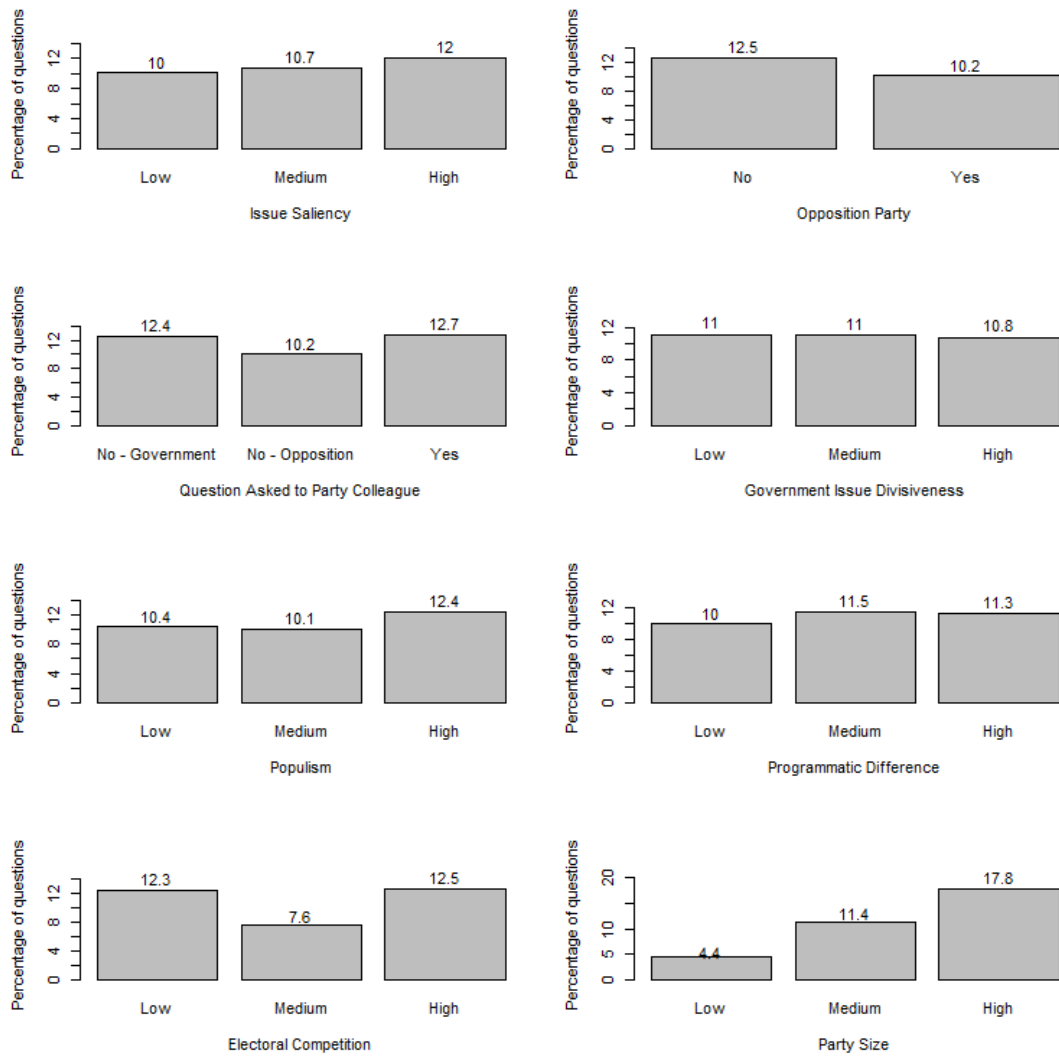
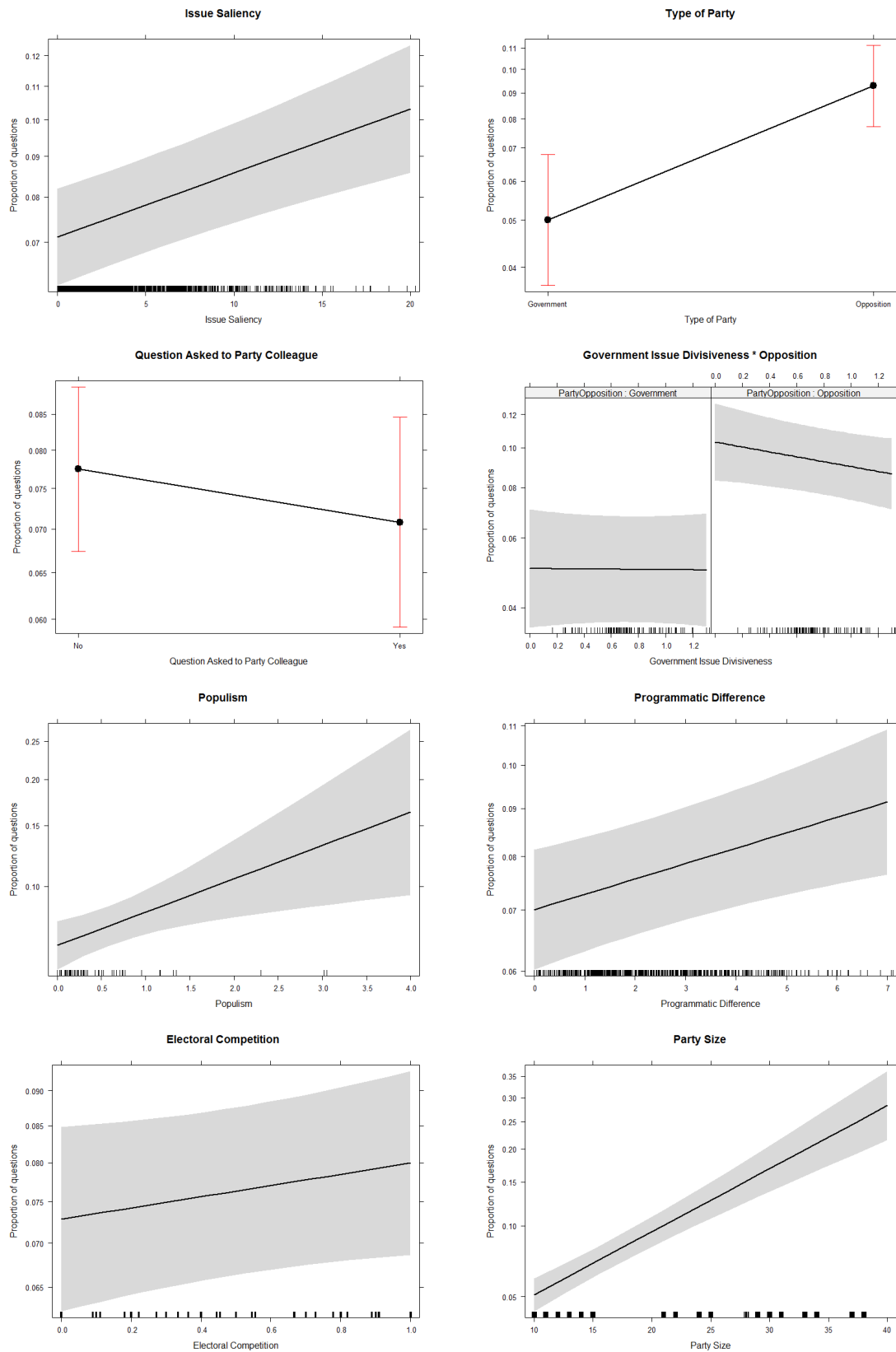


Figure 2: Expected values of proportion of questions asked



Note: The graphs display the continuous independent variables between the 20% and 80% quantiles. Shaded areas/bars display 95% confidence intervals.