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**Citation for published version:**

Bevan, S & John, P 2016, 'Policy representation by party leaders and followers: What drives UK Prime Minister's Questions?', *Government and Opposition*, vol. 51, no. 1, pp. 59-83.  
<https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2015.16>

**Digital Object Identifier (DOI):**

[10.1017/gov.2015.16](https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2015.16)

**Link:**

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

**Document Version:**

Peer reviewed version

**Published In:**

Government and Opposition

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# Policy Representation by Party Leaders and Followers: What drives UK Prime Minister's Questions?

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## Abstract

This paper demonstrates how party leaders (frontbenchers) and backbenchers use their access to UK Prime Minister's Questions (PMQs) to represent the policy agenda. Building on comparative research on parliamentary questions and agenda-setting as well as taking account of the particular context of PMQs, we argue that party leaders and followers draw attention to different kinds of policy topics with the express purpose of influencing the government. Based on a content analysis of over 9,000 questions between 1997 and 2008, our analysis demonstrates how the posing of questions affects subsequent agenda, varying according to whether questions come from the front or backbench, from government and opposition and from different parties. The findings demonstrate that PMQs helps both the opposition and backbenchers draw attention to issues that the government and opposition party leadership does not always wish to attend to.

Keywords: Prime Minister's Questions, agenda-setting, party politics, backbenchers, United Kingdom

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UK Prime Minister's Questions (PMQs) is potentially one of the most important means for the opposition to challenge the government on the major issues of the day. During PMQs opposition Members of Parliament put questions to the prime minister in full view of the public and expect well-briefed answers in return. However, the value and the purpose of PMQs has increasingly been called into question by recent research (for a summary see Bates et al, 2012) and even internal government debates (see UK Parliament, 1996) contain comments about the shallowness and shortcomings of PMQs. As it currently stands PMQs is widely believed to show off the rhetorical skills of the leaders of the main political parties attracting the attention of the media rather than to hold the government of the day to account.

Even though there is a theatrical aspect to PMQs, we argue that the practice can still ensure the government addresses concerns that it might not otherwise wish to talk about and therefore is an important venue for ensuring accountability and responsiveness. As a result of the topics stressed in PMQs, the government has to confront the difficult issues of the day, which can advantage the opposition by putting the government on the defensive regardless of the completeness of the government's answers. Due to these efforts, the party or parties in control of government respond to other parliamentary and consider issues way beyond what they offered in their party platforms. This practice can be observed for parliamentary questions in other national settings (e.g. Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2010). Moreover, recent research on Denmark and Belgium has identified a link between the topics of parliamentary questions and the government's agenda in other decision-making venues (Seeberg, 2013; Vliegenthart, Walgrave and Meppelink, 2011; Vliegenthart and Walgrave, 2011).

In this paper we focus on the issue content of PMQs in the United Kingdom (see Bates et al, 2012) following similar work on parliamentary questions in other national settings (e.g. Soroka, Penner and Bidook, 2009; Vliegenthart and Walgrave, 2011). By examining the effect of government and opposition questions as well as frontbench and backbench questions by the opposition on one another we offer a new account of the determinants of the parliamentary agenda that complements existing work. Furthermore, by employing a large N analysis of all PMQs from 1997 to 2008 we are able to assess the general agenda-setting effects of questions over time responding to the call for more in depth empirical analyses of PMQs made by Bates et al (2012, p. 24). Our analyses demonstrate that PMQs are an outlet for the opposition and backbench opposition MPs (King 1976) allowing them to put pressure on the government to respond to issues they might rather avoid. As such we throw more light into the practice and impact of questioning, adding to recent work on legislatures (Bates et al, 2012; Martin 2012).

To advance this argument, the paper first briefly outlines the procedure of PMQs for the period of our analyses (1997-2008) followed by a review of the literature on agenda-setting through parliamentary questions. The paper then describes the data and methods used, before reporting the findings from graphical and statistical analyses. The conclusions draw out implications for the study of parliamentary representation.

### **What are Prime Minister's Questions?**

Prime Minister's Questions (PMQs) is a parliamentary convention whereby the prime minister answers questions in the House of Commons from Members of Parliament (including the leader(s) of the opposition, in addition to other backbenchers from all

parties). PMQs is perhaps the most public opposition platform given its prominence in the media and that it follows a regular weekly cycle. Questions for other ministers tend to specialise on specific topics, and other means of challenging the government, such as Opposition Days and debates promoted by private members, do not typically get such attention and are not able to put the government on the spot in the public glare in the same way as PMQs. Overall, PMQs is one of the procedures that reveals the power of the institution of Parliament which, in spite of giving extensive powers to the executive, gives expression to accountability through opportunities to debate and challenge (see Adonis, 1993; Judge, 1993).

PMQs were first introduced in 1961 to formalize the process of members asking questions of the prime minister. Since then PMQs has become a high-profile event in British political life as a well as an increasingly public one through radio and TV broadcasts (Bates et al, 2012). Since 1997 it has been held as a 30-minute sitting every Wednesday while the House of Commons is in session (Coe and Kelly, 2009). PMQs is a prominent and dramatic venue for agenda-setting for the government and opposition parties that is often noted by media commentators and political satirists alike. However, because of this drama the value of PMQs has more recently been called into question (see Bates et al 2012 for a thoughtful overview of this debate as well as showing considerable evidence that PMQs have become shallower over time). Other recent work has found that, despite the theatrics, PMQs do not appear to be off-putting to the public, although many MPs are largely ambivalent about the entire ritual (Lovenduski 2012). While we do not contest these views of PMQs or these findings, we argue that PMQs still have a purpose

in seeking to set the policy agenda and to challenge the government alongside the practice of politicians seeking short-term headlines.

Before every PMQ session members submit questions that they would like to ask the prime minister, most often this is a question asking about the prime ministers engagements for the day. The questions themselves are chosen by a process called “The Shuffle,” a random draw from all submitted questions (Coe and Kelly, 2009). The final list consists of roughly 10 to a maximum of 16 questions that are asked dependent on time. The list of who will ask these questions is made available in advance to every Member of Parliament including the prime minister. Questions from the leader(s) of the opposition as well as Supplemental questions from other members called on by the Speaker during PMQs are also asked with who will be called on unknown prior to PMQs (House of Commons, 2008; Coe and Kelly, 2009). In practice there are only minor differences between questions selected through “The Shuffle” and those called by the Speaker. Namely, that the selection of questions from “The Shuffle” is random and that the names of those asking questions put forth through “The Shuffle” are known to all Members of Parliament prior to PMQs. However, as the factsheet on PMQs claims the prime minister is well briefed on all likely questions (House of Commons) partially evidenced by the stacks of files the prime minister often consults during PMQs.

The procedure for asking PMQs is as follows from 1997 to 2008 and is controlled by the Speaker. It is important to note that while this is the general order of PMQs it has been known to change with a different question other than the engagements question asked first, with more or less questions for the opposition and in other ways as the Speaker sees fit. Nevertheless, the process we present here matches nearly all of the

PMQs contained in our dataset. In general, the first question (often stated as “Question one”) is selected by a random ballot of backbench MPs. This is a standard question asking about the prime minister’s 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 policy. A series of questions from the leader of the largest opposition party follows, followed by a question from another member and then questions from the leader of any other major opposition party. The process finishes with a series of questions determined by “The Shuffle” and the Speaker’s discretion with the total number of questions depending on time. In the period of our data, between 1997 and 2008, questions were asked by the Conservative leader followed by questions from the Liberal-Democrat leader. Normally these leaders were given six and two questions respectively from 1997 to 2008 although some variation did occur<sup>3</sup> (House of Commons, 2008). Unlike the MP asking the first question and their supplementary question, as well as other question askers that follow, opposition leaders are given a degree of latitude in the topic and manner of their question asking. This latitude has increased over time with opposition leaders questions taking a disproportionately large amount of time during PMQs than other members’ questions (see Bates et al, 2012). The Speaker allows opposition leaders to respond to the prime minister’s answers as well as to offer opinions,

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<sup>3</sup> For this time period the average number of questions for the Conservative leaders was 5.7 questions with a minimum of 2 questions and a maximum of 8 questions. For Liberal Democrat leaders the average was 1.9 questions with a minimum of 1 question and a maximum of 3 questions.

which may or may not be related 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 broad, such as rhetorically asking the prime minister to justify the government's existence or mentioning specific and unrelated issues, such as offering condolences for a deceased constituent. The questions from other MPs must be far more focused and shorter with the Speaker interrupting long questions or highlighting that only one question can be asked so as to speed up proceedings with the rate of such interruptions having increased over time (see Bates et al, 2012). The prime minister is well briefed on all the topics that are likely to arise, but can still be caught off guard especially by supplemental questions where the members posing questions are unknown prior to PMQs (House of Commons 2008).

Prime Minister's Questions like other forms of parliamentary questions is first and foremost a venue for the opposition (Alderman, 1992; Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2010; Vliegenthart and Walgrave, 2011). The fact that the first several questions are reserved for the main opposition party or parties confirms this fact in very clear and procedural terms (House of Commons, 2008). However, once those questions have been asked the floor opens up and questions from all parties and all levels of political seniority are posed to the prime minister. While Cabinet members and other senior politicians inside government are unlikely and are even unable to ask questions other members of their own party still do. In fact even members of the government's own party ask about controversial issues, such as the Iraq War, providing an open venue for debate as is the ideal of the UK Parliamentary system (Adonis, 1993; Judge, 1993). Additionally, previous research clearly demonstrates that there are party differences in the number and



content of questions (see Wiberg and Koura, 1994; Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2010; Green-Pedersen, 2010; Vliegenthart and Walgrave, 2011) no doubt related to party preferences (see Adams et al, 2005; Adams and Somer-Topcu, 2009).

Table 1 summarizes this process for New Labour government from their election in 1997 to the end of 2008.

[insert Table 1 about here]

Parliamentary procedure also plays an important role in PMQs. As King (1976) first noted, PMQs is an important procedure where opposition frontbenchers, opposition backbenchers and government backbenchers all ask questions of the prime minister directed at them and their cabinet. These distinctions are important. The Speaker and “The Shuffle” act independently of party: the former seeks to allocate questions fairly whereas the latter is a random draw. Therefore, salient issues will be underrepresented by backbencher questions due to the ability of backbenchers with specific constituency interests to gain access to questions (House of Commons, 2008; Coe and Kelly, 2009) and as such salient issues will have lower percentages of backbench questions.

### **Policy Representation and Questions in Parliaments**

Political scientists usually approach the actions of legislators through an analysis of their careers and how they represent their constituencies, an approach which has been applied to the UK Parliament (Norton and Wood, 1993) and to its parliamentary questions (see Bertelli and Dolan, 2009; Saalfeld 2011). But the wider agenda of

Parliament might not so closely link to these representative concerns, whereby the actions of MPs reflect wider shifts in the policy agenda. Members of Parliament may see themselves as representing the national interest even if refracted through the experiences of their constituents. How well those interests can be represented in a venue like PMQs despite debates over its usefulness (e.g. UK Parliament, 1996) is an open and empirical question. Drawing on existing research on parliamentary questions we hope to better understand the purpose and effect of PMQs. Regardless of how shallow or conflictual the venue of PMQs has become in recent years (see Bates et al 2012), PMQs remains an extremely public venue that can have strong effects on the content of the political agenda even if the quality of the debate is as dire as popular perception indicates.

As with other opportunities to debate, the venue of PMQs may reflect the selective attention of its participants and leaders to concentrate on one policy topic as opposed to another, in other words to take ownership (e.g. Budge and Farlie, 1983). Questions give opportunities for political parties to coordinate responses on the big issues of the day, namely members of the opposition parties, which is particularly important in a (predominately) single-party 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 parties onto policy topics that it does not want to address. In other words to shift their attention away from the issues they own and onto issues they must address because of demands of governing (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2010). In fact, a combination of media attention and PMQs on a topic the government does not feel comfortable about could help shift public opinion in the opposition's favour. This relates to the wider literature on legislative agenda-setting (Brauninger and Debus, 2009), and recent work also linking

agenda-setting to parliamentary questions (Soroka, Penner and Bidook, 2009; Vliegenthart, Walgrave and Meppelink, 2011; Proksch and Slapin 2010). Other scholars argue that the growing competition over issues creates more of an opportunity for political parties to use venues such as PMQs and other forms of parliamentary questioning to expand the agenda and to challenge the government: ‘increased issue competition among political parties provides the explanation for the increase in non-legislative activities’ (Green-Pederson 2010, p. 348). Moreover, empirical evidence demonstrates that the content of opposition parliamentary questions drives the government’s agenda (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2010). Other empirical work on Belgium shows that the topic choice of questions is conditional on other influences such as issue salience, and more so if it is the opposition party asking questions (Vliegenthart and Walgrave, 2011). We should note that unlike models that consider party positions and preferences (see Adams et al, 2005; Adams and Somer-Topcu, 2009), this paper focuses on shifts in attention. Sometimes shifts in attention can lead to large reforms that may or may not be preference related (see Jones 1994). In other words even the governing party’s own preferences may not be pursued until an issue is salient.

Previous work on parliamentary questions has treated parties as just governments and oppositions, in this paper we expand this out to consider the different groups within political parties. There has been a lot of attention to intra-party politics in the last forty years, some of it inspired by King’s (1976) essay, and other work that has examined coalition building and alliances (e.g. Kitschelt 1994; Laver and Shepsle 1996) as well as the loyalty of party groups in an age of partisan dealignment (e.g. Kam 2009). Partly for this reason we expect the actions of the leadership group in parties in parliament to be

different from that of the backbencher and to be able to shape the agenda independently. Party followers will not necessarily be loyal to the leadership and this can be reflected in the questions they ask.

We therefore ask, what drives PMQs? We aim to unravel whether government shapes the attention in PMQs or whether it is the opposition, and if so what part or parts of the opposition, from its different parties to its front and backbench, shape attention in PMQs?

The nature of PMQs and their intended use generates several hypotheses about the distribution of attention by party and between party leaders and party members. The first concerns the ability of the opposition to structure the policy agenda

H<sub>1</sub> Opposition questions lead government questions, but not vice versa.

The number of questions asked on a particular issue varies between the government and opposition based on the need for government to claim credit for implemented policies, preferences, and general differences in issue ownership between the government and opposition parties (see Budge and Farlie, 1983; Wiberg and Koura, 1994; Adams et al, 2005; Adams and Somer-Topcu, 2009; Green-Pedersen, 2010), but the degree of issue salience naturally leads to the most notable differences and shifts in attention (Vliegenthart and Walgrave, 2011). Party differences of this sort in the UK have recently been demonstrated through empirical analyses of both the Speech from the Throne and Acts of the UK Parliament (Jennings, Bevan and John, 2011; John, Bevan and Jennings, 2014). By paying greater attention to issues the public prioritizes the

opposition drives the government's agenda prompting government MPs to respond (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2010). However, driven by their own goals and without the need to claim or account for implemented policies, the opposition does not similarly respond to the government's agenda (Alderman, 1992).

Our second hypothesis considers another important dynamic of PMQs, the fact that it provides a voice for both frontbench and backbench opposition MPs. As the frontbench for the government in PMQs only consists of the prime minister answering all questions with members of the cabinet unable to ask questions it is impossible to test this argument for the government as no government frontbench questions are asked.

H<sub>2</sub> Backbench opposition questions lead frontbench opposition questions, but not vice versa.

PMQs from different sets of actors are designed to react to one another. However, it is through PMQs that backbench opposition MPs receive one of their few opportunities to put forth their unique interests as well as consistency interests. By paying attention to issues other than the most salient issues backbench opposition MPs have the opportunity to drive future attention from frontbenchers forcing a reaction (see Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2010). Given their unique agendas as well as constituency interests the same effect does not occur when considering the effect of frontbench opposition questions on backbench opposition questions (see Fenno, 1978; Jogerst, 1991; Rasch, 1994). However, the opposition is not a unitary actor and smaller parties may face more pressure to keep a coherent message and hierarchy in order to survive.

H<sub>3</sub>: Smaller opposition parties' backbenchers have less of an effect on frontbench opposition questions.

In the classic works on British politics, parties have different forms of organisation and patterns of central control, which affects the role of backbench MPs in parliament (see McKenzie 1955). Such variation in party organization is to be expected from the comparative literature on political parties (Katz and Mair 1994). In most political systems, including Britain, there are several oppositions, represented by different political parties. These parties have different relationships between leaders and followers, and also have a specific interest to both the front and backbenchers from other parties. Because of this, we hypothesise that smaller opposition parties will vary in the extent to which they represent the policy agenda. In particular, their followers have less of an influence on the policy agenda than their party leaders. Smaller parties, such as the Liberal Democrats, require a stronger hierarchical structure in order to stay on message and remain competitive, especially in the UK's first past the post electoral system (Russell and Fieldhouse 2005). Small party groups in the House of Commons may be more compact and cohesive simply in order to survive.

While we offer no further hypotheses, we should not neglect the admitted influence of factors outside parliament on PMQs that link to government and opposition questions to reflect the concerns of these other venues. Specifically, there is a close relationship between the media and the arena of PMQs. For instance, it is one of the few legislative venues to get media coverage and interest. Moreover, measures of public

priorities such as responses to ‘most important issue’ type questions no doubt also affect the content of PMQs by often highlighting the very issues the opposition hopes to force the government to face. We therefore control for both media attention and public priorities in our statistical analyses.

## **Data and Methods**

### *Prime Minister’s Questions*

The PMQs used in this paper are from May 1997, i.e. the start of the Labour government, until December 2008 and are aggregated into totals by major topic per quarter.<sup>4</sup> A total of 9,062 questions were asked during this time period and were coded according to UK Policy Agendas Project major topic codes ([www.policyagendas.org.uk](http://www.policyagendas.org.uk)). Each question and answer pair was allocated a code according to the content of the question alone, specifically the portion of the official text asking a question and not the text responding to the prime minister’s previous answer as is possible with opposition questions. This process proved straightforward for all, but opposition questions then with the Speaker holding each MP to a single, focused question. In the case of opposition questions, the

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<sup>4</sup> The time period for this data was chosen due to available resources and based on a decision to match data produced by the UK Policy Agendas Project ([www.policyagendas.org.uk](http://www.policyagendas.org.uk)). However, as a robustness check our statistical analyses were also conducted from the third quarter 1997 to the second quarter 2007, the Blair years. These analyses led to the same inferences.

question asked at the end of their statement and responded to by the prime minister was the question that was coded. Our dataset therefore focuses only on questions and not the theatrics and the debate of PMQs. Nonetheless, it is important to note that this was a distinctive period in British politics largely reflecting the electoral dominance of Labour which was able to push through their legislative programme in successive parliaments. At the same time the opposition was not thought to be strong, but over time the government came to face increasing criticism, especially over foreign policy. So it is a good period to test for the importance of PMQs given the dominance of the executive.

To code all 9,062 questions, a large representative sample of questions (approximately 1/3 of all questions) was double-blind coded by two researchers with disagreements resolved by the project manager. With this cleaned sample a computer-assisted software package<sup>5</sup> was trained and used as a second coder for the remainder of the questions with disagreements also addressed by the project manager.<sup>6</sup> Each observed question includes the date, the full text of the question and answer, the topic of the question and the party of the questioner. We were further able to distinguish question

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<sup>5</sup> See the document “The Use of Computer Assisted Coding for Political Debates: British Prime Ministers Questions 1997-2008”, web link withheld.

<sup>6</sup> The usage of a computer and human coder led to an intercoder reliability of roughly 80%; however, the difference between using two human and a combination of a human and computer coder was negligible and the overall reliability following checks by the project manager was far higher.



askers, namely whether they were a member of the shadow cabinet (including party leaders), the so-called frontbench, for the two main opposition parties.

### *Public Opinion*

PMQs is one of the most public ways that Members of Parliament can express their concerns and represent the views of their constituents as the frequent references to them in their questions indicate. Therefore, the issue salience of the public plays an important role in determining the distribution of attention in PMQs, particularly for the opposition. To control for the direct effect of public opinion on question asking we include public opinion in the models of PMQ attention. Namely, we use Ipsos-MORI's 'most important issue' (MII) measure. The MII question asks, "What would you say is the most important issue facing Britain today?" These data were recoded from Ipsos-MORI's own coding scheme to match the UK Policy Agendas Project's major topic codes. In our models, we treat the relationship between public opinion and PMQs as contemporaneous due to the close relationship between current events and PMQs. It is unlikely that PMQs themselves influence public opinion as public opinion comes from many sources measuring the general salience of an issue. Furthermore, in spite of the media coverage of PMQs it does not regularly appear on the front pages of the newspapers or as headline news making the effect indirect at best.

### *Media*

We also use media data gathered from front-page headlines of *The Times* (London) as a further control for issue salience. This data was gathered for every

Wednesday and was also coded by major topic through a double blind coding procedure (at ~85% intercoder reliability with disagreements also addressed by the project manager).<sup>7</sup> Media attention serves to both capture attention to issues due to events and the level of media salience related to different issues. The relationship is tested contemporaneously due to the close relationship between current events and PMQs.<sup>8</sup>

### *Statistical Models*

In order to test our hypotheses we use graphical analyses to demonstrate the similarities and differences between the government and opposition agendas contained in PMQs. In addition to our graphical analyses of PMQs, we use time series cross-sectional models to test the expectation that opposition questions lead government questions, but not vice versa. This procedure allows us to understand why the total agenda changes over time. The two opposition and government models take the following forms and include fixed effects by topic to account for differences in the average change by issue.

$$\text{Gov}'_{it} = \text{Gov}'_{it-1} + \text{Opp}'_{it-1} + \text{Opinion}_{it} + \text{Media}_{it} \quad (1)$$

$$\text{Opp}'_{it} = \text{Opp}'_{it-1} + \text{Gov}'_{it-1} + \text{Opinion}_{it} + \text{Media}_{it} \quad (2)$$

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<sup>7</sup> The choice to sample front pages from every Wednesday was made to as closely match media salience with PMQs that occur on Wednesdays during the examined time period.

<sup>8</sup> The inclusion of a lagged media variable did not alter any of the inferences in the transformed results. In the untransformed results not presented here and discussed in footnote XX the lagged variable led to positive, but only marginally significant effects.

Where:

$$\text{Gov}'_{it} = \text{Gov}_{it} - \text{Gov}_{it-4}$$

$$\text{Opp}'_{it} = \text{Opp}_{it} - \text{Opp}_{it-4}$$

In these two models questions by both the government and the opposition have been seasonally differenced based on the corresponding quarter in the previous year. In other words the number of questions asked by the opposition on the economy in the first quarter of 2007 is subtracted from the total number of questions asked by the opposition on the economy in the first quarter of 2008. This produces the year-on-year difference in questions to account for the parliamentary calendar.<sup>9</sup> Namely, this differencing accounts for the fact that the government does not spend the same amount of time in session in every quarter and that certain issues, like the budget often come up around the same time each year. The cycles shown in Figure 1 demonstrate both why this transformation is needed<sup>10</sup> and the resulting transformation for all questions.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> As the data is seasonally differenced taking on both positive and negative change based values the use of time series cross-sectional OLS models is appropriate.

<sup>10</sup> Despite the strong seasonality of the series the results for analyses on the untransformed series not presented here were largely similar with the main finding that opposition questions lead government questions but not vice versa staying the same. The use of the untransformed series did however lead to a significant effect for the lagged

[insert Figure 1 about here]

We also make use of seasonally differenced data in models including fixed effects for the internal opposition models and our final model. In these models we consider both the frontbench (leader and shadow cabinet) and backbench (all other members) for each party in relation to one another.

## **Analyses**

### *PMQs: An Opposition Agenda?*

Beyond demonstrating the seasonality of the data, Figure 1a shows that the number of opposition questions is higher than the government's. This result contrasts with previous work in the UK that finds a roughly equal share of questions from the government and opposition (Borthwick, 1993). From Figure 1a PMQs is clearly a venue for the opposition's voice. As discussed earlier, PMQs is one of the few institutional venues where the opposition is given a voice in British politics, which it uses actively

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government questions in the government model and a significant positive effect for the media in both models with all other inferences staying the same.

<sup>11</sup> Phillips-Perron tests for unit roots demonstrated that there is no evidence of a unit root in any of transformed or untransformed series. Beyond the aggregate pattern of cycling demonstrated in Figure 1 individual series also demonstrated patterns of cycling in their autocorrelation function.

(Vliegenthart and Walgrave, 2011), partly because the procedure grants several questions to the opposition (House of Commons, 2008), so it has opportunities to set the agenda

### *Opposition vs. Government Policy*

We now turn to differences in the questions asked by the opposition and the government. Figures 2 and 3 present an array of 19 graphs for each of the 19 major topic codes used by the UK Policy Agendas Project. In Figure 2 the total number of questions asked by both the government and opposition by topic is graphed. In Figure 3 the percentage of questions asked by the government by topic is graphed. Combined these figures demonstrate the total amount of attention to each issue by the government and opposition (Figure 2) and the total share of attention by issue for the government compared to the opposition (Figure 3).

[insert Figures 2 and 3 About here]

Clearly there is a great deal of variation within and between topics as evidenced by Figures 2 and 3. For example, in Figure 2 the economy gradually declines as an issue for both the government and the opposition over much of the time period eventually leveling out with a static and rather low level of attention. This is followed by the sudden shock at the end of the period in 2008 with the start of the credit crunch. However, as Figure 3 shows, most of these questions on the economy come from the opposition by a ratio of three to one. The lower share of economy questions asked by the government

over nearly the entire time period further indicates that the opposition focuses its attention to issues that are salient for the public.

Parliament responds to outside events in other areas as well. Attention to agriculture in PMQs is generally low as to be expected from a generally low salience issue area. But in 1999 agriculture was at the very centre of UK Politics at the outbreak of BSE, which led to the slaughter of a large amount of the UK cattle population. This crisis produced a spike in attention to agriculture from the opposition, as seen in Figure 2, but there were virtually no questions asked by government MPs on the topic during this same time (see Figure 3) again highlighting the opposition's desire to focus on salient issues and challenge government.

#### *Driven by the Opposition?*

While there are clear differences, especially in the timing and level of attention to different issues by the government and opposition, there are many more similarities between the opposition and government agendas than the literature on party ownership implies. One possible reason for these similarities goes to the heart of PMQs as a means for political debate. Debates are of course marked by both actions and reactions with topics chosen by one side and then reacted to by the other. Table 2 presents a time series cross-sectional analysis of government and opposition questions to explore their ordering. The models include a lagged dependent variable, lagged attention from the other party's questions and controls for public opinion and media salience.

[insert Table 2 about here]

Turning first to the government model, the positive and significant result for the lagged opposition questions indicates that the government does in fact follow the opposition as expected by H<sub>1</sub>. Furthermore, the government model demonstrates that there is little inertia in the governmental agenda as indicated by the only marginally significant lagged dependent variable. In other words, government questions tend to change quite a bit in their focus from quarter to quarter. This may in fact be the result of a government agenda that is determined by both the previous quarter's opposition agenda and public opinion as is indicated by the positive and significant effect for these variables.<sup>12</sup> There is no effect for the media.

The opposition model also matches our expectations. The insignificant result for the lagged government agenda variable indicates that opposition PMQs do not follow government PMQs. The lagged dependent variable is positive and significant indicating a degree of inertia in the opposition agenda from quarter to quarter. This is directly counter to the government model and indicates that opposition questions tend to focus on similar issues from one quarter to the next. This is no doubt driven by the patterns of attention to contentious issues discussed above. It is also worth noting that public opinion in this

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<sup>12</sup> Inclusion of lagged public opinion in this model as with the opposition model led to marginally significant results while changing no other inferences.

model has a higher effect than in the government model, which indicates that the opposition more closely follows salient issues in their questioning as to be expected.<sup>13</sup>

#### *Deconstructing the Opposition: Front Versus Backbencher Questions*

The opposition is however quite a broad term and concept. In particular when it comes to UK PMQs during our time period there were two important opposition parties, the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats, both of which had an active front and backbench asking questions. Here we consider the internal dynamics of these two parties by assessing the effects of front and backbench questions on either other for each party. Table 3 therefore presents a time series cross-sectional analysis of front and backbench questions for the main opposition party of the time, the Conservative Party. The statistical models include a lagged dependent variable, lagged attention from the other side of the procedure of PMQs and controls for public opinion and media salience as before.

[insert Table 3 about here]

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<sup>13</sup> The low  $R^2$  for both models is due to seasonal differencing. In particular, by differencing the data we in fact remove one if not the primary determinates of questions at time  $t$ , questions at time  $t-1$ , in other words the inherent inertia of questions from quarter to quarter. Our original analyses which did not seasonably difference the data produced a better R-Squared (0.20 to 0.35 higher), but clearly do not fit the underlying data generating process or time series nature of the data due to their seasonality.



The results in Table 3 suggest that the backbench agenda drives the frontbench agenda. Turning first to the model for frontbench questions we find a powerful effect for backbench questions matching our expectations that backbenchers drive the frontbench agenda, supporting H<sub>2</sub>. The effect for lagged frontbench question in this case also demonstrates inertia indicating how the focus of frontbench questions from the Conservatives persist from quarter to quarter no doubt driven by the patterns of attention seen for the entire opposition in Figures 2 and 3. Backbench questions also respond to public opinion indicated by the positive and significant effect and at a noticeably higher level than Conservative backbench questions, suggesting that the Conservative leadership knowingly follows general public priorities.

On the other hand Conservative backbench questions clearly focus on similar questions from quarter to quarter shown by the positive and significant effect for the lagged dependent variable. Backbench questions also positively respond to public opinion as indicated by the positive and significant coefficient. However, these backbench questions are not driven by the Conservative frontbench further supporting H<sub>2</sub>.

[insert Table 4 about here]

Turning to the other opposition party, the Liberal Democrats, in Table 4 we find quite a different relationship. Namely, the backbench agenda of the Liberal Democrats actually negatively affects the frontbench. This finding is surprising in that it not only suggests a disconnect between the front and backbenches of the Liberal Democrats, but a conscious discounting of the backbencher focus. However, alternative analyses not

presented here which only focused on the Liberal Democrat leader and not the shadow cabinet as a whole found an insignificant effect.<sup>14</sup> Beyond this the patterns of both models are similar to those for the Conservatives with both clearly showing inertia through their lagged term. In other words the Conservative party is driven by concerns of their backbenchers and moves to respond to public opinion; the Liberal Democrats agenda only appears to respond to public opinion and possibly negatively discounts the interests of their members.

[insert Table 5 about here]

One question remains then, how do these different elements work to drive the government's agenda? Table 5 presents an extension to the analysis in the government model from Table 2. Specifically, it disaggregates the opposition into the front and backbenches of both the Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties. Here, a slightly better fitting model, shows that two elements of the opposition positively and significantly affect government questions. These elements are the Conservative backbench and the Liberal Democrat frontbench offering further, but more nuanced support for H<sub>1</sub>. Conservative backbenchers play an important role in the content of PMQs

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<sup>14</sup> The lack of robustness for this finding may be due to the much lower number of questions asked by Liberal Democrat MPs due to their far lower number of seats and therefore available question askers during this time period.

as does the Liberal Democrat frontbench demonstrating both that the opposition matters and that different elements of the opposition by party matters even more.

## **Conclusion**

The topics that appear in Prime Minister's Questions (PMQs) reflect both the general pressures on the policy agenda and the exigencies of party politics in a parliamentary system whereby MPs ask questions about the current issues of the day in the hope of giving advantage to their parties. But what is particularly noticeable is the difference between the government and opposition on key policy areas is not generally due to traditional party preferences (with the exception of the labour issue for the Labour government). Instead, the opposition highlights salient issues that are to the government's discomfort. More importantly the findings suggest that the opposition's agenda drives government backbench MPs to ask questions on the same topic, particularly when it comes salient issues, such as on the economy and defence. Nor do opposition questions follow the government's backbench questions, also demonstrating the agenda-setting power of the opposition ( $H_1$ ). At least in the venue of PMQs, the opposition—from the start of Labour government in 1997 to the end of 2008—challenged the government on issues it did not wish to stress and increased parliamentary attention on these topics as a result.

The procedure of PMQs ensures that the opposition asks a greater number of questions. The procedure also produces differences in the usage of questions between the front and backbench of opposition parties. The opposition frontbench uses its control over

the content of the questions for their own tactical ends often focusing on the same salient issues. Backbenchers on the other hand tend to use the questions for other matters that worry them or their constituents, which are often mentioned in the content of their questions. Backbench MPs from the Conservative party also drive the questioning of the Conservative frontbench and the questions asked by government MPs (H<sub>2</sub>; H<sub>1</sub>). It is difficult to say whether or not this effect is furthered by the observed increase in backbench rebellions through this time period (e.g. Cowley 2002), but our findings are certainly consistent with the phenomenon. However, the frontbench of the Liberal Democrats pays less attention to its backbench possibly employing a stronger hierarchical structure in order to be competitive as the smaller party (H<sub>3</sub>). The Liberal Democrats' frontbench also has a positive effect on government questions (H<sub>1</sub>). Despite the increased dramatization of PMQs over time (e.g. Bates et al 2012) and the general ambivalence concerning the ritual (Lovenduski 2012), PMQs still serve a clear purpose in causing the government and the most prominent members of parliament to devote attention to both opposition and backbench issues. While maybe no longer high politics then, PMQs are indeed still political.

Our results in this paper suggest that at least in the venue of PMQs the opposition and backbench Conservative MPs are able to use the venue to shape the policy agenda in different ways adding meaning to parliamentary debates (see Adonis, 1993; Judge, 1993). The institution of PMQs has procedures that allow both the opposition and backbenchers to represent the issues they think are important, but for different reasons. For backbenchers this includes the discussion of constituency interests. For the opposition our results suggest that the real purpose of PMQs for these actors may in fact be to force the

government to attend to a set of issues they might wish to avoid. As in the wider European literature on parliamentary questions (e.g. Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2010; Seeberg 2013; Vliegenthart, Walgrave and Meppelink, 2011; Vliegenthart and Walgrave, 2011), our results demonstrate a responsiveness of the government to the opposition. However, the responsiveness of PMQs is also affected by the institution of “The Shuffle” which creates a clear venue for backbench MPs to participate in the process (House of Commons 2008; Coe and Kelly, 2009). In summary, the ritual and the drama of PMQs, in spite of appearing to be shallow and media-focused, can help backbenchers and the opposition change the attention of government. Nevertheless, future work would do well to consider if the decline in the quality of debate from PMQs has had more dire effects for policy-making beyond the agenda-setting phase.

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Figure 1: Government and Opposition Questions vs. Seasonally Differenced (t-4) Questions

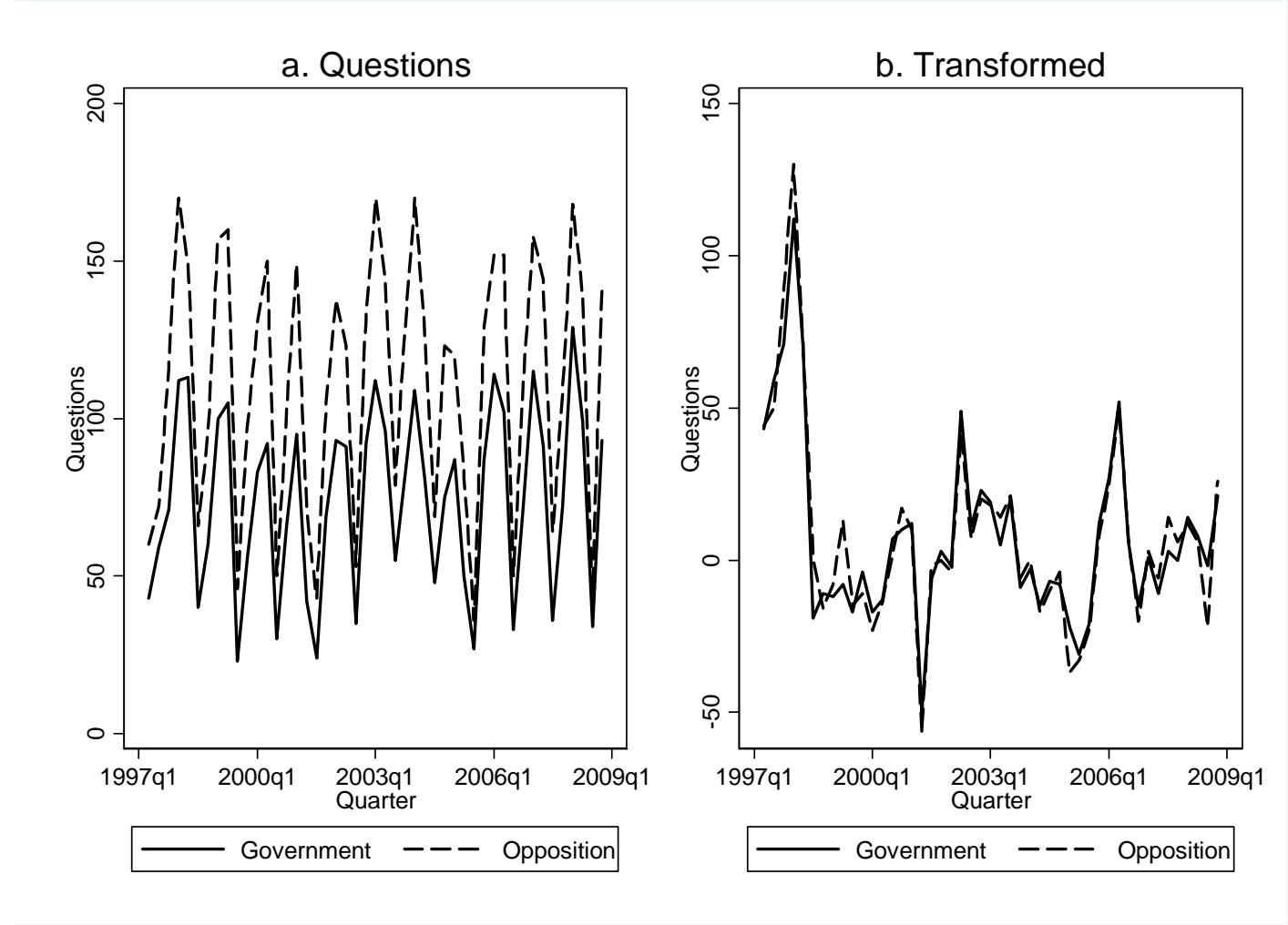


Figure 2: Government vs. Opposition Questions by Topic

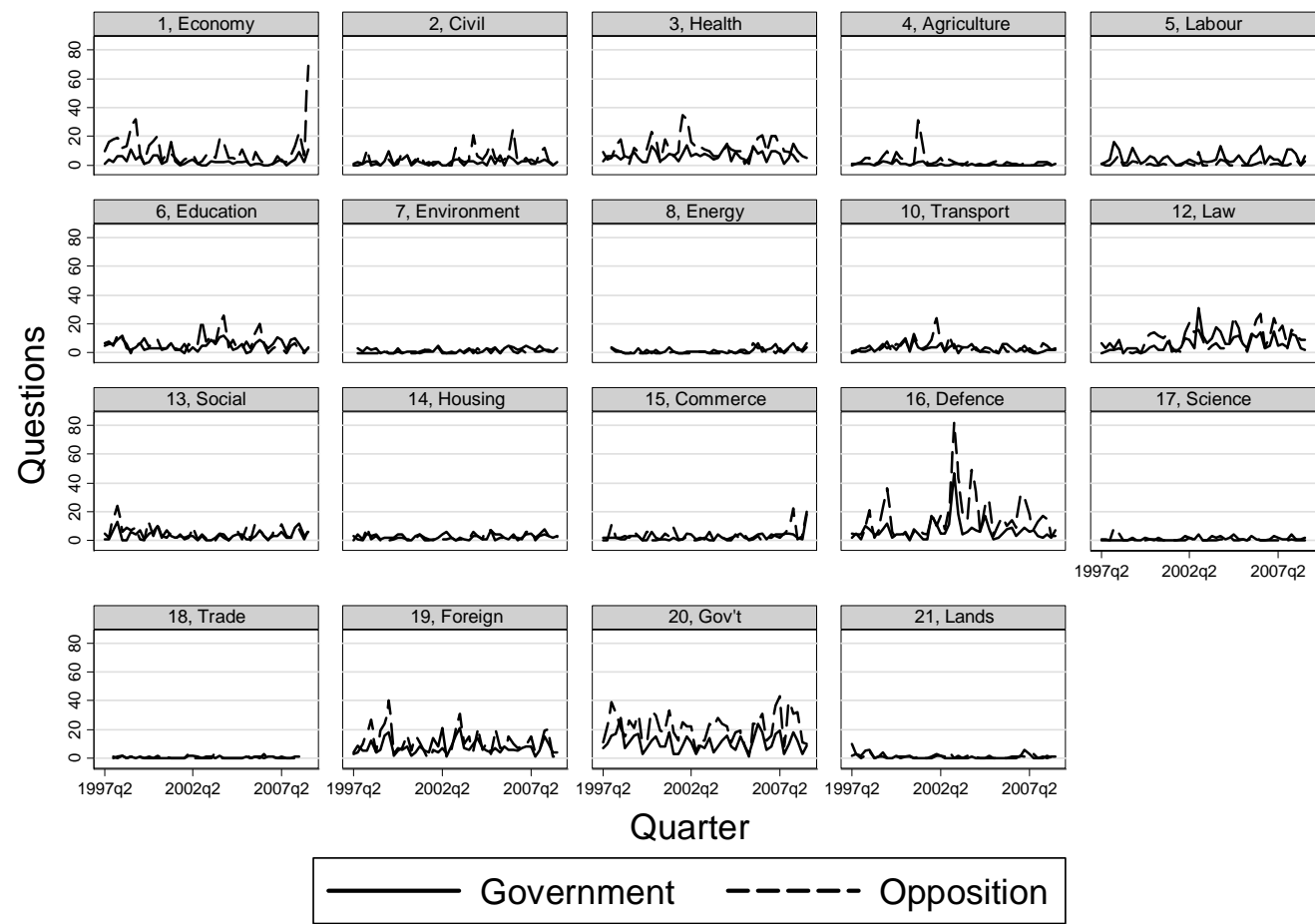


Figure 3: Percent Government Questions by Topic

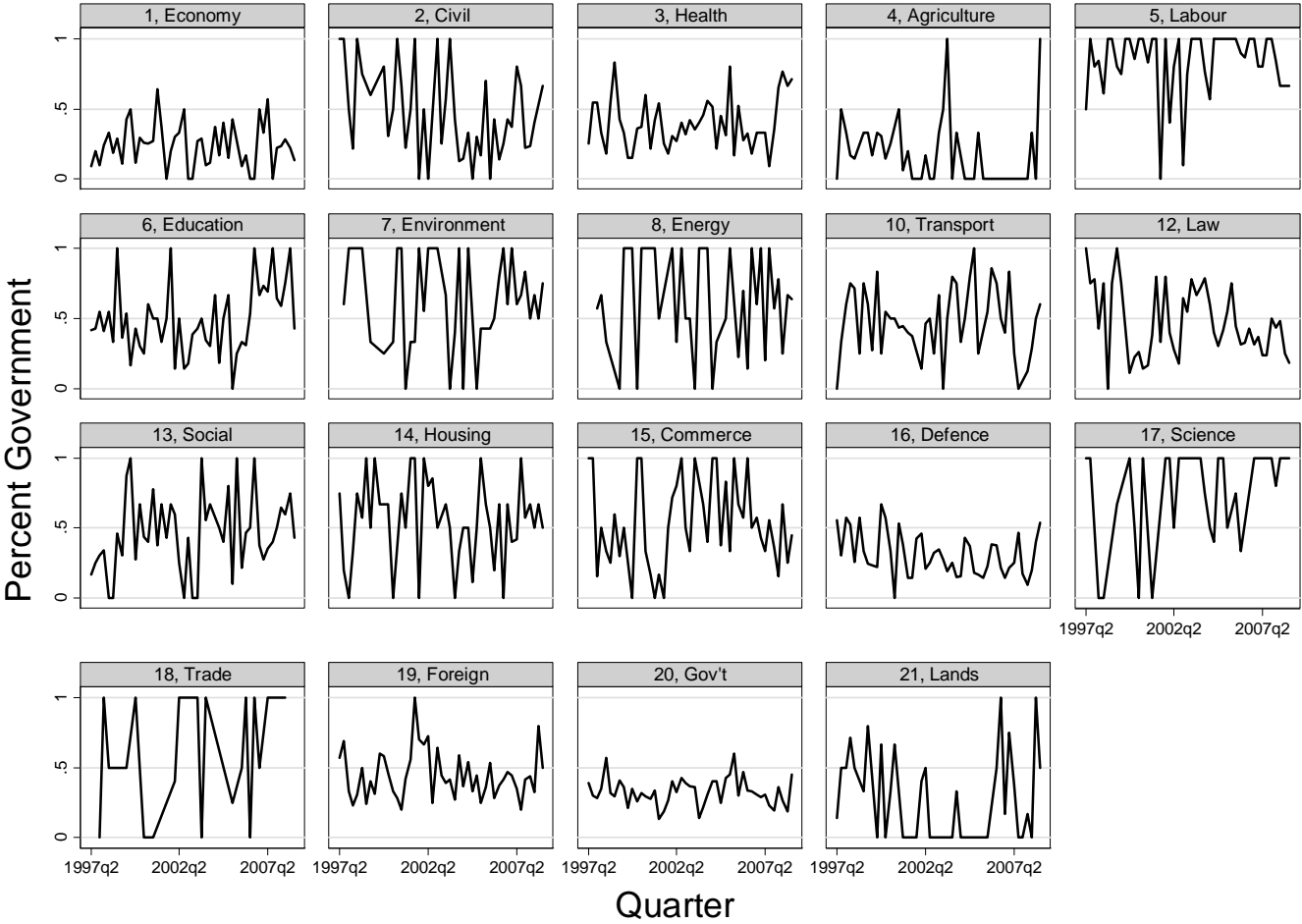


Table 1: The General Process of PMQs for New Labour, 1997-2008

1. Question submission by MPs with two general types
  - a. Engagements Question
  - b. Other Questions
2. “The Shuffle”
  - a. Submitted questions selected at random
3. Question Time
  - a. Engagements question with one follow-up question by the MP asking “Question 1”
  - b. Opposition questions
    - i. Six Conservative questions
    - ii. Two Liberal-Democrat questions
  - c. Other questions
    - i. Questions from “The Shuffle” (Asker known prior to PMQs)
    - ii. Supplemental Questions called by the Speaker (Asker unknown prior to PMQs)

Table 2: Government vs. Opposition Question Ordering

	Gov' <sub>it</sub>	Opp' <sub>it</sub>
Gov' <sub>it-1</sub>	0.070 (0.039) †	-0.006 (0.071)
Opp' <sub>it-1</sub>	0.071 (0.021)***	0.265 (0.039)***
Opinion <sub>it</sub>	0.152 (0.030)***	0.520 (0.054)***
Media <sub>it</sub>	-0.033 (0.028)	0.032 (0.050)
Constant	-0.560 (0.229)*	-2.669 (0.415)***
$R^2$	0.07	0.19
$N$	798	798

Note: \*  $p \leq .05$ , \*\*  $p \leq .01$ , \*\*\*  $p \leq .001$ , †  $p \leq 0.10$ ,

N=798 (19 Major Topics (n) \* 42 Quarters (T))

Table 3: Conservative Frontbench vs. Backbencher Question Ordering

	ConFrontbench' <sub>it</sub>	ConBackbench' <sub>it</sub>
ConFrontbench' <sub>it-1</sub>	0.171 (0.038)***	0.014 (0.022)
ConBackbench' <sub>it-1</sub>	0.195 (0.066)**	0.197 (0.037)***
Opinion <sub>it</sub>	0.317 (0.036)***	0.131 (0.020)***
Media <sub>it</sub>	0.038 (0.034)	-0.009 (0.019)
Constant	-1.628 (0.279)***	-0.639 (0.158)***
$R^2$	0.16	0.10
$N$	798	798

Note: \*  $p \leq .05$ , \*\*  $p \leq .01$ , \*\*\*  $p \leq .001$ , †  $p \leq 0.10$ ,

N=798 (19 Major Topics (n) \* 42 Quarters (T))



Table 4: Liberal Democrat Frontbench vs. Backbench Question Ordering

	LibDemFrontbench' <sub>it</sub>	LibDemBackbench' <sub>it</sub>
LibDemFrontbench' <sub>it-1</sub>	0.281 (0.039)***	0.007 (0.016)
LibDemBackbench' <sub>it-1</sub>	-0.177 (0.084)*	0.133 (0.035)***
Opinion <sub>it</sub>	0.159 (0.024)***	0.030 (0.010)**
Media <sub>it</sub>	0.068 (0.023)**	0.002 (0.010)
Constant	-0.988 (0.186)***	-0.169 (0.078)*
$R^2$	0.14	0.03
$N$	798	798

Note: \*  $p \leq .05$ , \*\*  $p \leq .01$ , \*\*\*  $p \leq .001$ , †  $p \leq 0.10$ ,

N=798 (19 Major Topics (n) \* 42 Quarters (T))

Table 5: Opposition Elements on Government Questions

	Gov' <sub>it</sub>
Gov' <sub>it-1</sub>	0.081 (0.039)*
ConFrontbench' <sub>it-1</sub>	-0.031 (0.038)
ConBackbench' <sub>it-1</sub>	0.173 (0.056)**
LibDemFrontbench' <sub>it-1</sub>	0.137 (0.058)*
LibDemBackbench' <sub>it-1</sub>	-0.000 (0.108)
Opinion <sub>it</sub>	0.153 (0.030)***
Media <sub>it</sub>	-0.041 (0.028)
Constant	-0.520 (0.229)*
$R^2$	0.08
$N$	798

Note: \*  $p \leq .05$ , \*\*  $p \leq .01$ , \*\*\*  $p \leq .001$ , †  $p \leq 0.10$ ,

N=798 (19 Major Topics (n) \* 42 Quarters (T))