

# Asking About Europe: MPs Use of Parliamentary Questions for European Issues

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Why do national members of parliament use questions to ministers to ask about European issues, rather than just local or national ones? Questions are one of the most individual, flexible, and public ways that MPs can try to influence what their governments do at the European level. As such, they allow us to look below the level of parliaments and parties to try to understand why individual members of parliament choose to focus on Europe. This is particularly important since our understanding of party and parliamentary involvement should be rooted in the motivations of individual MPs. Looking at the questioning behavior of British MPs in the House of Commons from the year before the Brexit referendum and the year afterwards, I examine what percentage of the questions that each MP asked had to do with the EU.

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## **Introduction**

The British electorate's vote to leave the EU highlighted some of the main problems facing Europe. Euroscepticism has been on the rise, in part because many citizens feel that the EU, its institutions, and its decision-makers are distant and that there is not sufficient democratic input. This problem, known as the democratic deficit, has been a topic of great debate and discussion among EU actors and academics. One possible solution they have discussed is to make the national parliaments more involved in the process. Most EU citizens feel more of a connection to their MP(s) and national parliament and feel better represented by them than they do by the European Parliament or other EU institutions. Thus, the national parliaments could help add another democratic bridge to the EU.

The EU has made some efforts to involve the national parliaments. For example, the Commission now sends proposed EU legislation and other pre-legislative documents directly to the national parliaments (rather than parliaments needing to get it from their governments) and has opened a political dialogue with the national parliaments about proposed legislation. The national parliaments now also have the ability to delay or potentially block EU legislation on certain grounds, although the procedural hurdles for doing so are quite high.

National parliaments and their members have also taken steps toward involvement. All of the national parliaments now have European Affairs committees to monitor what is happening at the EU level, including what their ministers do at the Council of the EU. They have appointed representatives to Brussels to monitor legislation and to coordinate between them, and they have set up intra-parliamentary communication networks. They will hold debates about EU issues, have their ministers report about Council meetings, or even have EU officials report about various issues or developments.

However, national parliaments also have a heavy workload dealing with national issues, so the extent to which they can focus on Europe is inherently limited. National and European timelines and agendas often do not align, and the amount of information coming

from Europe can be overwhelming. In interviews with national MPs, many of them expressed an interest in EU involvement, but also stressed the constraints of time and the already demanding national-level issues and workload.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, since even European elections tend to be fought over national rather than European issues (Reif and Schmitt 1980), there is reason to suspect that many MPs may not see an electoral benefit to focusing on Europe. If this is the case, it is difficult to see why MPs would be motivated to take on European policy-making concerns in addition to their domestic ones.

Therefore, this paper seeks to understand why individual members of parliament choose to focus on Europe. Specifically, it uses data on parliamentary questions in the British House of Commons before and after the Brexit referendum<sup>2</sup> to examine which types of MPs may be more likely to ask questions about Europe. There are a few reasons why studying questions during this period in Britain is of particular interest. First, questions are a good source of data for examining individual behavior since they are less regulated by parties than many other forms of parliamentary activity, including floor time during debates or voting. Posing this question at the individual level is important, since parliaments as a whole are unlikely to show more involvement if individuals within the parliament are not interested in doing so. Second, questions are a relatively public form of parliamentary action, so they are a way for MPs to show their constituents or relevant interest groups that they are paying attention to a certain issue. Third, the British House of Commons is more constituency-focused than many other parliaments, suggesting that constituency-level factors should have more influence on MP behavior. Fourth, the period surrounding the Brexit referendum is one during which European issues were more salient, both for MPs and the British public, increasing the chances that citizen preferences would affect MP behavior

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<sup>1</sup> Based on author conducted interviews with approximately 170 members of parliament and their staff members. Interviews were primarily done with members of the national parliaments of Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Poland, and the United Kingdom in 2014 and 2015. They focused on the ways that MPs get involved in European Union policy-making, including parliamentary questions.

<sup>2</sup> Formally, this was the United Kingdom European Union membership referendum, held on June 23, 2016.

on this set of issues. Fifth, the Brexit referendum also allows for constituency-level estimates of Euroscepticism, sending a clear message about constituent preferences to MPs and allowing us to more accurately measure this variable.

### **Questions as a Parliamentary Tool**

I conceive of parliaments and their members as having a 'parliamentary toolbox', which contains the different methods of influence that parliaments have over their ministers, national legislation, and now European policy-making. Just as a hammer is better used on a nail than a screw, certain parliamentary tools are better suited to certain situations. Questions differ from many other types of involvement in that they are a tool that individuals can use, that their topic is quite flexible, and that they are relatively public.

Questions are one of the more flexible tools that parliaments have at their disposal. MPs generally do not have to get questions approved by party officials or the government. Often, question times are open to any topic, or at least any topic that is relevant to the ministers that are present. At other times, question sessions may have a broad topic, but MPs can still choose any related question and can choose to focus it at the national or European level. For example, one MP mentioned a question period scheduled for the following day about refugees and said that she expected it to take on a heavily European character, since many politicians think that the issue calls for a European solution.<sup>3</sup> Another MP from the Green Party said that she and others who deal with climate and the environment almost always ask about the EU, because these issues are almost exclusively dealt with at the European level.<sup>4</sup> These characteristics make questions one of the most flexible and individual tools available to members of parliament.

Questions are often about the public display, and members of parliament do view them as such. For example, the Speaker of the House of Commons stepped in during one

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<sup>3</sup> Member of Parliament. Personal Interview. October 7, 2014. Bundestag, Berlin.

<sup>4</sup> Member of Parliament. Personal Interview. October 8, 2014. Bundestag, Berlin.

question period to clarify the procedures being used “because we must not mislead the public.”<sup>5</sup> Depending in part on what MPs wish to display to the public, as well as on the day and the issue at hand, questions periods can be put to many different uses and can take on a very different character. They may sometimes take on a humorous character and display a good relationship between ministers and MPs, such as when UK Prime Minister David Cameron took time during his last session of parliamentary questions to refute recent rumors, with photographic evidence, that he did indeed love Larry, the cat who lived at 10 Downing Street and would be remaining with the house.<sup>6</sup> This type of question and answer interaction may be particularly useful to show the public a level of cordiality and collegiality between or within parties, especially after a publicly and politically tense period, such as the UK referendum on EU membership and party leadership fight that surrounded Prime Minister Cameron’s resignation. If the humor is done well, these types of exchanges are likely to be picked up by the press and social media, as this example was.

In contrast, questions can also be used in a very adversarial manner, with the goal of embarrassing or “ambushing”<sup>7</sup> the government, or of getting them to divulge information they did not want to make public. One such technique is for MPs to find the information from another source, have the government answer the question, and then show the discrepancy between them. This works particularly well if the government is purposely not answering or is hiding something and the MP can show this “in black and white,” and then take it to the press so they can publicize it.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, criticizing a minister based on information that they have provided can be particularly effective, since they cannot claim that the information is inaccurate or misleading. It may come as no surprise that it is usually members of the opposition that use questions in this way.

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<sup>5</sup> Speaker of the UK House of Commons. Hansard, 21 June 2010, Column 28.

<sup>6</sup> Answer from David Cameron during parliamentary questions on July 13, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Member of Parliament. Personal Interview. November 25, 2014. House of Commons, London.

<sup>8</sup> Member of Parliament. Personal Interview. November 24, 2014. House of Lords, London.

The public nature of questions allows MPs to use them for communicating with the public about various policies and issues. For example, opposition MPs often use questions as a way of publicizing what they believe to be the government's failures or embarrassing actions. This is a way of getting the minister to speak publicly, and even if the minister is able to avoid directly answering the question, it is still a way for the MP to point out these embarrassing details on a public stage. This may help the opposition gain votes and supporters.

Questions may also be used to actually get information, although often written questions may be more useful for getting detailed information than are oral questions. While detailed information may be the least likely to attract the interest of the public or the press, one member of the House of Lords pointed out that getting information in a question may be a better way of getting that information into the public domain, even if it is already somewhere on a government website, since the press will often pay attention to questions but would not bother to go to the website for it.<sup>9</sup> Questions may also be used to highlight concerns, especially those shared by constituents or interest groups, which simultaneously puts the concerns "on the minister's radar"<sup>10</sup> and can be demonstrated to interested actors.

Questions are often thought of as a tool of the opposition, and they are one of the tools that is most accessible to them. However, government backbenchers may use question time. In some cases, they may use it as an opportunity to criticize the government, especially since there is less party control over questions and the stakes are not as high as they may be on a vote. Questions are a way for backbenchers to signal disagreement without threatening formal censure or confidence proceedings. However, they may be less likely to do so in countries that allow for supplementary questions,<sup>11</sup> since

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<sup>9</sup> Member of Parliament. Personal Interview. October 8, 2014. *Bundestag*, Berlin.

<sup>10</sup> Member of Parliament. Personal Interview. November 25, 2014. House of Commons, London.

<sup>11</sup> In parliaments that allow for supplementary questions, there is usually a list of formal questions, which may be printed on an agenda or submitted to the government ahead of time. After each of these questions is asked, there will be time for the original inquirer to ask a follow up or for other members to pose related questions. The UK does allow supplementary questions.

this may open the minister up to further criticisms from the opposition (Cole 1999).

Backbench questions may be more common in the case of European Union politics, since most governing parties were not formed along the European politics issue dimension, and intra-party disagreement is more common. Qualitative evidence suggests that questions are used this way, especially among the UK Conservatives, who are very divided over Europe and were in government for most of the time under consideration here. There is also evidence of this in the quantitative results presented later, as the opposition does not ask significantly more EU questions than do backbenchers.

In contrast, government supporters may use questions as a way to help the government, by providing them with the opportunity to highlight their achievements or to take a stand on a popular issue, trying to gain votes and support for their party. They may also help consume time with positive and easy questions, limiting the time that their minister is "on the spot" for the opposition. In contrast to the point above, supporters may also try to help the minister by using supplementary questions to put a more positive spin on something started by the opposition. In some cases, the government may also plant questions from its supporters so that it can reveal good news in the public spotlight (Cole 1999). Another potential way for government supporters to use questions occurs in multi-party governments, where MPs from one party may use question time to monitor the actions of ministers from a coalition party (Thies 2001, Martin and Vanberg, 2004, 2005). However, it is questionable how much this occurs in practice, as Russo and Wiberg (2010) do not find much evidence of it.

Questions may also be used as a way to represent citizens or interest groups, which MPs can then publicize as a form of "credit-claiming" (Mayhew 1974). One British MP who I met with immediately before Question Time showed me the briefing he had gotten from a pro-Israel pressure group with suggestions of questions to ask and background information on each one. I attended the subsequent Question Time, and he did have this material in hand as he asked a question based on it. He said that he gets similar briefings on every

subject, including Europe, although he usually does his own research as well.<sup>12</sup> Such information provides a relatively low-cost way for MPs to take a certain position and let interested parties see that they are acting on their behalf. For European issues, which MPs may know less about, questions have the potential to be an easy, low stakes way to get involved.

The media help as an important intermediary between the legislature and the citizens in order to make questions effective. Prime Minister's Questions or the equivalent are often broadcast live on television and watched by millions of citizens, and the media pay relatively more attention to questions, or at least to oral questions, than many other activities within the legislature (Salmond 2007). There is evidence that more open and flexible questioning institutions do improve communication with citizens, as they are associated with increased political knowledge by citizens, increased partisan attachment, and increased electoral turnout (Salmond 2014). Since one of the main issues facing the EU is the lack of citizen awareness of it and connection to it, more questions about Europe might lead both citizens and the media to begin paying more attention to Europe.

Other purposes are more about communicating directly with the executive, with less concern for public perception. Questions may help backbenchers or the opposition to press for governmental action or attempt to shift government policy. Questions allow parties and individuals to communicate about what issues are important, bringing the attention of fellow MPs, the government, and potentially the public to these issues. Attentiveness to an issue is a necessary prerequisite for significant policy change (Baumgartner and Jones 1993, 2002; Jones 1994; Kingdon 1995). This may be one of the most important reasons why MPs use questions, as 74% of Norwegian MPs believed that "parliamentary questions are important to direct attention towards issues that would not otherwise attract interest from the government minister" (Rasch 2011). While this attention may (and very often does)

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<sup>12</sup> Member of Parliament. Personal Interview. December, 2 2014. House of Commons, London.



exist at the EU level without existing at the national level, it must also exist there in order for there to be any significant influence on the executive by members of parliament. Questions are a good way for members of parliament to demonstrate their interest and concern on these issues, especially for members of the opposition or backbenchers, who may have much less access to ministers.

One of the other major functions of all parliaments is to hold government accountable and fulfill a scrutiny role. Questions can be a useful way of doing this, especially for opposition MPs who may not have much direct or informal access to ministers or the party strength to use stronger measures. One French MP used a question about the Greek debt crisis to point out the weakness of the National Assembly's EU accountability powers, compared to the German Bundestag, which must be consulted. She praised the government for holding a debate on the issue, but pushed for further parliamentary accountability by asking that the parliament be allowed to hold a vote on the government's position.<sup>13</sup> Even when parliaments cannot get a formal right to mandate the position that their governments can take during Council meetings, holding votes or coming to some other consensus position in parliament (as during a debate) is likely to constrain the government, since it would be difficult politically for a government to ignore a clear, public preference of its parliament (Auel 2006).

Even without using some of these other tools, questions do seem to be at least moderately effective at holding the government accountable. About 64% of Norwegian MPs strongly or partly agreed that "questioning is a very important instrument in the *Storting's* control of the executive" (Rasch 2011). Salmond (2011) shows that questioning practices do affect ministerial behavior, at least in terms of delegation. He demonstrates that when ministers face more open questioning procedures, especially in terms of spontaneous questions, they are less likely to delegate, because they would have a greater chance of

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<sup>13</sup> Eva Sas, French MP. Question No. 3089. September 7, 2015. French National Assembly. Available at: <http://questions.assemblee-nationale.fr/q14/14-3089QG.htm>

being held responsible for decisions they were not aware of, which would hurt their reputations for competency. Cole (1999) looks at a least likely case, examining the effect of questions on non-departmental public bodies, and finds a small effect for these quasi-governmental institutions. Additionally, countries with larger public sectors do tend to have more parliamentary questions, indicating that more government activity leads MPs to ask more questions (Wiberg 1995). Qualitative evidence suggests that their effectiveness depends on the usefulness of the minister's answer and, more importantly, whether it has the potential to be combined with media pressure. Some MPs will mention questions in press releases, while others publicize them on their websites or social media.

Questions are also an opportunity for an exchange of information between the parliament and the government. Since an information asymmetry is one justification for the deparliamentarization thesis, which says that parliaments are losing power and influence to the executive, any opportunities to correct this asymmetry are key to our understanding of these relationships and the deparliamentarization process. While members of parliament may also ask for information through more informal means or through the committees, questions are the key formal and public way for any individual member to request information from the government. They are a tool that can help MPs "tease out the government position."<sup>14</sup> By using formal questions, they also make the answer public, which may help with the scrutiny function and connects this purpose back to the more public ones. They can help spread information, including to other members of parliament, even if both the MP asking the question and the minister answering it already know the answer. It can also help with the information asymmetry because it may allow MPs to use the civil service as researchers, thereby increasing their capacity to get information, especially in countries where parliamentary staff is in short supply.

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<sup>14</sup> Member of Parliament. Personal interview. November 23, 2014. House of Commons, London.

However, the idea of using questions to exchange information highlights the fact that even within the category of parliamentary questions, different types of questions are used for different purposes. The main distinction is between written and oral questions. For example, many MPs said that they use oral questions as a way to embarrass the government, while they use written questions to get information. Oral questions “can be used to make a point, but not to make a case.”<sup>15</sup> Either way, questions bring some kind of information, embarrassing or not, into the public domain and reminds ministers that members of parliament are observing their actions, especially on the given issue. Since this paper focuses on oral questions, I expect that Eurosceptic MPs may be more likely to ask about European issues, as they would be the most interested in embarrassing the minister or making a public point about Europe.

There may also be some individual reasons for asking questions, such as those relating to individual career advancement. They can be a way of building a name and reputation, especially as a leader on certain policy areas, and demonstrating this to party leaders may help MPs get specific committee assignments or eventually ministerial posts. Bailer (2011) finds that the best predictor of question-asking in Switzerland was age and experience, with younger and newer MPs using questions as a way to build a reputation for themselves. MPs themselves seem to believe that self-promotion is a common use of questions, at least in Norway, since a 2005 survey of Norwegian MPs found that 74% of respondents either strongly or partly agreed that “too many MPs use parliamentary questions for self-promotion” (Rasch 2011). This opportunity for specialization may also be important for the internal functioning of the parliament, since Rozenberg et. al. (2011) argue that questions may help fulfill the role that US Congressional committees do in Krehbiel’s informational view (1991). Since committees in European parliaments are

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<sup>15</sup> Member of Parliament. Personal Interview. November 24, 2014. House of Commons, London.

generally much weaker, they do not provide the same incentives for members to become policy experts, but the public and reputational benefits of questions may help fulfill this role.

### **Hypotheses**

Given the public nature of questions and the politically divisive nature of the EU to UK politics under the period of study, I expect that the Euroscepticism of an MP's constituency and how well he or she is aligned with that position should matter for the share of their questions that are EU-related. Given that oral questions are often more about the "show" rather than getting information, I expect that questions will likely be used by Eurosceptics to criticize the EU. This has been found within the European Parliament, where Eurosceptic Members of the EP (MEPs) were more likely to table questions (Proksch and Slapin 2011). MPs whose positions on Brexit were aligned with their constituents should be more likely ask about the EU, since this position could help them win votes. In contrast, those who are not aligned would not want to remind their constituents of this fact and would therefore not want to use a public tool like questions to try to influence policy on Europe.

*H1a: Those representing more Eurosceptic districts will be more likely to ask about Europe.*

*H1b: Those MPs who are aligned with their districts on the Brexit issue will be more likely to ask EU-related questions.*

I also expect that MPs will use questions to ask about the issues and policy areas that they care about. As mentioned above, questions are one way that MPs can advertise their policy expertise and can use their increased knowledge about that area to inform their fellow MPs and the public. For example, there is evidence that MPs who are on the defense committees ask more questions about defense issues, although this was less true in the UK than in Spain, France, and Germany (Rozenberg, et al. 2011). Similarly, I expect those MPs on the European Scrutiny Committee or who are interested in European countries to ask more of their questions about Europe.

*H2: MPs on the European Scrutiny Committee or who state an interest in European countries will be more likely to ask questions about Europe.*

I expect that Conservatives will be more likely to ask Europe-focused questions. This is especially true since the Conservatives were in government for most of the period under study here. Europe as an issue is more salient for the Conservatives than any of the other parties in the House of Commons. According to expert surveys, their salience score is a 7.4 out of 10, where 10 is high importance. The next highest were the Liberal Democrats, at 6.7, who were also in government during some of this period. Europe is much less salient for Labour, at 3.6, and they were the main opposition party during this period. Additionally, the Conservatives are much more internally divided about Europe than any of the other parties. Experts give them a score of 7.3 out of 10, where 10 is completely divided. All other parties in the House were at or below 4 on this metric (Polk, et al. 2017). This suggests that Europe would be a prime policy area for Conservatives to use questions as a tool of internal dissent.

However, I also expect the opposition party leadership to ask more questions about Europe, especially in the post-Brexit period. I expect that European and Brexit issues are more electorally salient after the referendum, making them better issues to try to win over voters during this period. Additionally, since the Conservatives were so divided on Europe and, especially since the referendum, have not overseen the smoothest Brexit process, opposition leadership may see this as a good opportunity to score some points.

*H3a: Conservative MPs will be more likely to ask about Europe than backbench opposition MPs.*

*H3b: The opposition leadership should be more likely than their backbenchers to ask about Europe.*

## Data and Methods

In order to test these hypotheses, I collected data on all oral parliamentary questions posed in the two years surrounding the Brexit referendum. The referendum was held on June 23, 2016, so the data for the year before run from June 22, 2015 to June 22, 2016, and the data for the year after run from June 24, 2016 to June 24, 2017. The main dependent variable measures how many of an MP's parliamentary questions in a year that were related to Europe. I calculated this measure by searching the question text for EU-related terms. Some search terms clearly indicate that the question is about Europe. For example, if they ask about a specific EU directive, one of the EU institutions, or a broad EU policy program, then that question is certainly related to the EU. However, other terms are less clear. For example, even when they mention the European Union by name, sometimes it because they are commenting about how they have the highest unemployment rate in the European Union or the lowest carbon emissions in the European Union. While this still shows that they are choosing Europe and the EU as their frame of reference, instead of another relevant grouping, such as OECD countries, it is not clear that simply using phrases like "Europe" or the "European Union" clearly makes the question related to the EU in the same sense as referring to the EU's institutions or policies. For automated coding, the use of words like "Brussels" are particularly problematic, since the word may be used as a way to refer to the politicians, bureaucrats, and institutions located there, or it may be part of a discussion about the train line between London and Brussels. For this analysis, I use the strict measure, which requires that the question be clearly related to Europe.

Due to data availability on some of the independent variables (discussed below), the final dataset includes 1,030 MP-year observations split across the pre-referendum and post-referendum periods. About three-quarters of the observations show none of an MP's questions being clearly EU-related. The most clearly EU-related questions that any MP asked was 4. Due to the count nature of the data and the high proportion of zeroes, I use a zero-inflated negative binomial model, which first predicts whether an MP was likely to ask

any EU-related questions and then predicts the percentage he or she asked. The first model, presented in columns 1A and 1B of Table 1, are for the pre-referendum year. The second model, presented in columns 2A and 2B, are for the post-referendum year.

The first set of independent variables in the model account for the Euroscepticism of the MP and his or her constituency. In order to measure Euroscepticism of the constituency, I use the share of the vote for a UKIP candidate in the pre-referendum model and the vote share for the "leave" option in the Brexit referendum for the post-referendum models. Both of these measures have the benefit of existing at the constituency level. UKIP vote share is certainly an imperfect measure, since it is not a pure measure of Euroscepticism, depends on the individual candidate running, and strategic voting may keep people who would have supported the UKIP candidate from actually voting for him or her. However, we would expect that UKIP would be more likely to support candidates in more Eurosceptic areas and that they would be more likely to garner more votes in these areas. Losing votes to a UKIP competitor is also a clear signal to an MP that they may want to take Eurosceptic concerns more seriously. The data for UKIP vote share come from the Constituency Level Elections Archive (Kollman, et al. 2018).

The data on the "leave" vote share is combined from two sources. Official figures were not reported at as fine-grained a level as would be necessary for constituency-level data. Rosenbaum (2017) was able to gather specific vote tallies for 128 of the constituencies, directly from the relevant vote-counting authorities. For those constituencies with exact data, those figures were used. For the remaining constituencies, Hanretty (2017) has estimated the constituency level figures, using demographic information and the local authority level at which vote counts were reported. The overlap between these suggests that the estimates are pretty accurate. Thirty-six of the constituency estimates were correct to the tenths of a decimal point. On average, the estimates were .1% higher than the known figures (Dempsey 2017).

For MP Euroscepticism, I also use data related to Brexit. First, I use a dummy variable for whether or not the MP publicly supported the leave campaign. Data for this variable is cross-checked across lists put out by interest groups on both sides of the campaign and by news outlets.<sup>16</sup> I then code for whether an MP was aligned with his or her district. If a district was more than one standard deviation above the average UKIP vote or the average Brexit vote and that MP stated a leave preference, then I consider them aligned. Similarly, if the vote was more than one standard deviation below the mean and the MP stated a remain preference, I consider them aligned.

All of the remaining variables come directly from the UK Parliament's website, via the member search API.<sup>17</sup> The first set of these relate to an MP's interest in the EU. The first variable is a dummy variable for whether they listed an EU country or Europe as a region in the optional "countries of interest" section of their biographies on the parliament's official website. The second variable is a dummy for whether or not they served on the European Scrutiny Committee during the year in question.

The third set of variables relate to one's status as a member or leader of the opposition. The first is a dummy variable for whether one was a Conservative. The second is a dummy for whether one is a member of the opposition party leadership. The party leadership variable includes opposition whips and leaders of some of the smaller opposition parties.

Finally, I include a variable for the number of years one has been a member of the House of Commons. While the average MP has served for just over eight years, two have served for as long as forty-five years. Finally, for the first part of the model that predicts whether any of the questions will be EU-related, I add a variable for the total number of

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<sup>16</sup> "How Eurosceptic is Your MP?", Get Britain Out, <https://getbritainout.org/how-eurosceptic-is-your-mp-2/>; Conservatives in Europe for Britain, [https://web.archive.org/web/20160620223238/http://www.conservatives.in/members\\_of\\_parliament](https://web.archive.org/web/20160620223238/http://www.conservatives.in/members_of_parliament); "EU Vote: Where the cabinet and other MPs stand", BBC News, <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-eu-referendum-35616946>,

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.data.parliament.uk/dataset/members-of-the-house-of-commons>



questions asked by the individual MP (on any issue). The intuition is that those who ask fewer questions are probably less likely to ask about the EU.

## **Results**

The results, presented in Table 1, are somewhat mixed. For the most part, constituency Euroskepticism, as measured by UKIP or leave vote share, is not significant. The one exception to this is that whether an MP was aligned with his or her constituents in the post-referendum period was positive and marginally significant at the .1 level for the count of how many EU-related questions an MP asked. Despite questions being a more public tool, the bulk of the evidence suggests that it does not seem that MPs were using questions to communicate with their constituents about Europe, or at least that if they were, this did not depend on how Eurosceptic their constituents were. However, it does make sense that if there was going to be a relationship, it would be more likely to appear in the post-referendum period, since referendum vote is a clearer measure of constituency Euroskepticism. This is true from both a social science perspective and from the point of view of the MP. It also makes sense that an effect would be most likely to appear among those MPs who are aligned, since they have evidence that their constituencies broadly agree with them. Additionally, questions do not have to be negative, so Euroscepticism may not have a consistent effect, but MPs who are not aligned with their constituents may prefer to not discuss the topic at all, whereas aligned MPs will have more motivation to do so.

[View Table 1]

The variables relating to EU interest are only significant for predicting the count of questions in the pre-referendum period. Those MPs who expressed an interest in an EU country and those on the EU committee were both expected to ask about two to three times as many EU questions as their peers. The effect is slightly stronger for committee members, who are expected to ask about 2.8 times as many EU questions, than for those with interest in an EU country, who are expected to ask about 2.1 times more. Since we

would broadly expect these MPs to ask more EU-related questions regardless of the Brexit referendum or process, it makes sense that their effect would be clearer in the pre-referendum period, which resembled something closer to “normal” EU politics.

The opposition party leadership was also significantly more likely to ask more EU-related questions, and again, this effect was stronger during the pre-referendum period. The opposition party leadership is predicted to ask 4.7 times as many EU questions as other members before the referendum, while they are expected to ask about 2.6 times as many after the referendum. However, in both periods, it suggests that the opposition party leadership saw Europe as a relevant topic on which to try to embarrass the Conservatives and therefore asked more questions about it than their backbenchers did.

Having a longer tenure in the house of commons is very slightly related to asking more EU questions in the year after the referendum, with a p-value of .05. This fits with expectations, as it means that more experienced members are more likely to focus on the EU. However, it is a bit surprising that this was only true after the referendum, when the EU would seem to be a more newsworthy and attention-grabbing topic.

Finally, and somewhat surprisingly, asking more total questions made MPs less likely to ask any EU-related questions in the pre-referendum period. This perhaps reflects the specialization of EU-related questions during this period, where they were being used by specific MPs focused on Europe, which is supported by the finding that being interested in EU countries or on the committee were significant.

## **Discussion**

These results showed that the pre- and post-referendum periods are different, with only the opposition party leadership variable being significant in both models. While attention to the EU was likely higher in Britain during both of these periods, the pre-referendum period was likely closer to a “normal” political period and what we would expect to see during most other periods and in most other countries. During these times, it was

MPs who were most interested in Europe, either because of an interest in a specific country or because of membership on the European Scrutiny Committee, who were most likely to ask about the EU.

The results also do not suggest that constituent preferences are a major factor in MP questioning behavior, as neither UKIP vote share nor leave vote share were significant. If constituent preferences are not affecting this behavior during this period of heightened EU saliency, it is hard to imagine that they would be an important predictor in other times or countries. However, there is some evidence that those MPs who were aligned with their constituents were more likely to ask about Europe in the post-referendum period, which is when they would have had the clearest information about their constituent preferences. It also makes sense that these MPs would be most willing to remind their constituents about their position on the EU and to be seen talking about it, since they were aligned.

One future extension would be to try to code the questions for whether they refer to the EU positively, negatively, or neutrally. This data would allow for a more fine-grained analysis of why some MPs might decide to use questions about the EU in these slightly different ways. It would also allow us to draw firmer conclusions about whether there really was a switch in questioning behavior on either end of the referendum. However, an initial survey of the questions, especially after the referendum, shows that many questions are phrased "How will Brexit affect policy area X?", which is not easily code-able as positive or negative.

As long as MPs do not see the European Union as something that can help them electorally, and especially if it is Eurosceptics who are more likely to talk about Europe, it is hard to see how they will be able to help overcome the democratic deficit. While it is certainly true that questions are only one type of involvement and that MPs may choose to use other tools to try to influence what happens at the European level, those may be less effective at solving the democratic deficit because many of them are less public. If

parliaments are involved in the EU policy-making process but their citizens do not see evidence of it, then they will not necessarily feel any greater connection to the EU.

**Table 1: Zero-inflated Binomial Regression of MP's EU-Related Questions Before and After the Brexit Referendum**

Predictors of MP's EU-Related Questions				
VARIABLES	1A	1B	2A	2B
	Pre-Referendum Questions - Any	Pre-Referendum Questions - Count	Post-Referendum Questions - Any	Post-Referendum Questions - Count
High UKIP Vote	-2.017 (1.810)	0.459 (0.382)		
Low UKIP Vote	8.539 (12.15)	0.778 (0.699)		
MP Aligned - UKIP	-8.687 (11.71)	-0.555 (0.589)		
High Brexit Vote			3.315 (3.394)	-0.344 (0.351)
Low Brexit Vote			7.895 (7.225)	-0.00673 (0.587)
MP Aligned - Brexit			1.221 (3.789)	0.777^ (0.469)
EU Country of Interest	3.377 (2.578)	0.760* (0.323)	8.228 (6.166)	0.139 (0.349)
EU Committee	-5.635 (3.993)	1.030** (0.378)	-1.315 (2.476)	0.0392 (0.336)
Conservative MP	-0.337 (1.569)	0.318 (0.259)	11.11 (7.836)	0.163 (0.227)
Opp. Party Leadership	10.18 (11.58)	1.539* (0.680)	36.61 (26.73)	0.943* (0.423)
Membership Length	0.000228 (0.000262)	5.31e-05 (4.50e-05)	0.000323 (0.000358)	9.04e-05* (3.83e-05)
Total Questions	-2.740* (1.357)		-3.564 (2.420)	
Constant	4.048* (2.022)	-1.766*** (0.278)	-0.169 (2.201)	-1.357*** (0.217)
Observations	503	503	527	527

Standard errors in parentheses

\*\*\* p<0.0001, \*\* p<0.01, \* p<0.05, ^ p<0.1

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