

Issue competition in the European Parliament.
An Analysis of Parliamentary Questions for oral answer (2004-2019)

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Abstract

This article aims at complementing analyses of the partisan politicisation of the European Parliament (EP) from roll-call votes to the analysis of how political groups make use of parliamentary questions. We argue that questions offer an institutional opening for issue politicization and for partisan differentiation. Parliamentary groups in the EP have incentives to shape public policy at the EU level by drawing the attention to their topics of predilection and by controlling ongoing action. We make use of a new dataset on questions for oral answer (2004-2019) to test if this results in European party groups emphasizing differentiated topics in their questions to the Commission and the Council. Our analyses confirm groups' differentiated issue attention. These findings have important implications for understanding the partisan politicization of EU policies and confirming the truly political nature of deliberation in the EP. They reveal patterns of partisan opposition different from those expressed in votes and emphasize the relevance of parliamentary questions as a key institutional window for politicization.

Keywords: legislative studies, politicization, European integration, European parliament, parliamentary questions, issue competition

The story of the European Parliament (EP) is the one of a 'parliamentary assembly', deprived of powers and role, searching to become a 'real parliament' (Rittberger 2005;

Herman and Lodge 1978). As for the first meetings of the ECSC assembly in 1953, its members have tried to acquire all the characteristics and competences of the low chamber of any democratic regime. They immediately agreed that deliberation should be structured by political groups. Members also took inspiration from national chambers to define the Rules of Procedure of their assembly, its overall organisation, and the status of its members. In 1965, the Parliamentary Assembly decided to call itself “European Parliament”, a wording institutionalized by the Single European Act (1986) (Westlake 1994). In 1976, they obtained to be directly elected. The members of the EP (MEPs) continued to devote much of their energy to extend their competences. Treaty after treaty, they have acquired all the key-functions (budget, law-making, ratification, control, nomination) usually fulfilled by low chambers. In parallel, the political dimension of the EU has been affirmed, with the creation a European citizenship, the institutionalization of European political parties, and the establishment of a link between European elections and the appointment of the Commission through the so-called *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure (Peñalver and Priestley 2015). The treaty of Lisbon reinforces the centrality of the EP by affirming a logic of “representative democracy” (art. 10 TEU) and providing a general definition of the role of the EP (art. 14 TEU).

In sum, even if the EU remains a peculiar polity, close to the *sui generis* institutional system invented in the 1950s, that lends itself to different perspectives (Hooghe and Marks 2019), the EP appears today in many respects as a ‘real’ parliament, i.e. an assembly resembling in all respects (competences, mode of functioning, organisation...) a chamber of any democratic regime (Copeland and Patterson 1994). But how far does the EP witness the emergence of political competition that could contribute to articulate and transmit citizens’ demands and interests into EU policy-making? Some scholars regret that the “hollowing-out” of national democracy attributed to the delegation of competences to the EU is not compensated by the emergence of party conflict at this level (Mair 2007a; Bartolini 2005).

Over the last decade, this problem has been approached through the lens of politicization as an “increased relevance of political parties and party conflict” and growing salience and contentiousness of issues (de Wilde 2011: 562-562; see also Hooghe and Marks 2012; Hutter and Grande 2014). If EU policies are insufficiently politicized, e.g. debated in a visible way, dissatisfied citizens may direct their blames at the EU polity rather than at single policies (Mair 2007b).

The technical and consensual approach to policy-making developed at EU-level to transcend national and sectorial interests may be unfavourable to partisan competition and confrontation (Radaelli 1999; Dehousse 2011; Bressanelli, Koop & Reh 2020), and intergovernmental logics are seen to predominate since the 2000’s (Bickerton, Hodson, Puetter 2015). Yet, increasingly polarised parties are represented in European institutions (Brack 2013; Hooghe and Marks 2008). Even among scholars agreeing on the predominantly political dimension of deliberation in the EP, and the importance of party groups and European parties (Attinà 1990; Hix and Lord 1997; Kreppel 2002; Hix et al. 2005; Lindberg et al. 2008), views diverge on the nature of the cleavages. The analysis of roll call votes in the plenary room (RCVs) and of the deliberations within committees and groups, as well as surveys conducted among MEPs and staff members, led to paradoxical conclusions. It is now widely recognised that the left-right dimension crucially shapes coalitions in the EP, more than the anti-/pro-EU dimension; nevertheless, most of the legislation is adopted by a grand coalition comprising both the centre-right (Group of the European People's Party (EPP)) and the centre-left (Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament (S&D)) groups (Hix et al., 2007, p. 159; Marié, 2019; Novak & al., 2020), against hard-Eurosceptic members, who play the role of the opposition (Hix and Noury 2016). Whether political conflict revolves on fundamental oppositions between pro- and anti-Europeans, or respond to left-right or more differentiated lines of conflict tackling single policies needs to be reconsidered. This question is key to understanding more general political

dynamics at the EU level. A central question relates to which issues are politicized (Guinaudeau and Persico 2014): making the large spectrum of the EU policies visible and debating them seems important given their consequences on the daily life of EU citizens (Mair 2007a; Kriesi et al. 2012; Fabbrini 2019). The Assembly's capacity to reflect the growing cleavages and controversies regarding the EU, its objectives, actors and policies, implies such a large focus, and groups have an important role to play in drawing attention to different matters.

Available research on politics in the EP tends to focus on voting behaviour (Costa 2019; Johansson and Raunio 2019). However, these findings' substantive implications with respect to the weight of parties are disputed given the selection biases induced by the practical necessity to focus on RCVs (Carrubba and Gabel 1999; Kluger Rasmussen 2008; Otjes & van der Veer, 2016; Bowler & McElroy, 2015) or on actors' testimonies. This article shifts the attention to an alternative medium through which partisan players become involved in policy-making that remains understudied at the European level: parliamentary questions. They are indeed a tool that political groups can use quite freely, for various purposes. Questions are not central in the activities of the EP, now rather centred on law-making, but they provide a strategic tool in an institutional context that otherwise offers little freedom to MEPs and groups. Also, from an empirical standpoint, questions are an excellent indicator of groups' and MEPs' attention focus (Brack and Costa, 2019), providing insight into EU-level politicization processes.

In the first section, we argue that parliamentary questions offer a window for the politicization of European public policy that deserves closer attention. After having introduced our theoretical expectation of differentiated patterns of partisan issue attention, we present a new dataset covering all questions for oral answers asked in the EP over three legislatures (2004-2019). Our analyses confirm that parties devote differentiated levels of attention to

policy issues. These findings open up promising research avenues regarding the logics underlying parliamentary questions in the EP and their consequences.

Parliamentary questions: an understudied instrument of differentiation in a constraining institutional context

Party differentiation clearly runs against a number of the EU's specificities: the search for consensus within and among all EU institutions; the technocratic functioning of the Commission; the diplomatic nature of negotiations within the Council; the high level of political fragmentation of the EP and the absence of a clear majority (Mair 2007b; Lindberg et al. 2008; Papadopoulos and Magnette 2010). Consensus democracy, and the priority set on consensus-building and depoliticization as a common strategy to favour agreements (Schimmelfennig 2020; Bressanelli, Koop and Reh 2020), leaves little room for party differentiation in what the public can see of EU legislative activities. Since the 1990s, the two main political groups in the EP (EPP and S&D) have taken the habit to work together, for organisational matters. Between July 2014 and December 2016, they even did for political matters. In parallel, the generalisation of trilogues – i.e. the negotiation of legislative proposals by a small number of actors representing the Commission, the Council and the EP – has limited the expression of political divergences within the house (Roederer-Rynning & Greenwood 2015). In most cases – around 90% – the EP only adopts the amendments approved during those interinstitutional negotiations, and nearly all adopted amendments are supported by several groups.

While agenda-setting is identified as a key partisan tool in most national parliaments (e.g. Cox and McCubbins 2005), political groups cannot set the legislative agenda of the EU:

they can only try to influence it through non-binding resolutions (Kreppel and Webb 2019). Except in rare circumstances, legislative proposals originate from the Commission. Neither can groups control a standing committee, since the nominations to the different committees and the allocation of reports are decided in proportion to each group's number of seats. The EP agenda is also defined in a consensual manner, through group negotiations within the Conference of Presidents. More generally, the main initiatives regarding the overall strategy of the EP originate from the parliamentary committees or from the hierarchical organs, and not from groups (Brack and Costa 2018). From an institutional perspective, scholars thus conclude that single groups or parties have little opportunity to weight on policy-making in the EU regime (Hix, Noury, and Roland 2007).

This conclusion oversees a rare, but potentially powerful window for party competition and issue politicization provided by parliamentary questions. MEPs are indeed free to ask questions to several institutions on subjects of their choice. This possibility has existed since the creation of the European Coal and Steel Community in 1952. Its founding treaty included the opportunity for Assembly members to question the High Authority, the precursor for the Commission (art. 34).¹ This tool was then extended to the Council according to a custom institutionalized in 1973, to the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy in 1999, to the European Central Bank (ECB) in 2002, and to the European Council in 2009. There are three types of questions that follow specific rules, related to the procedure and to their content, as defined in the EP regulations:

¹ This possibility was then upheld by the Treaty of Rome, in article 140: "The Commission will answer orally or in writing the questions asked by the Assembly or by its members". Today, the institutional framework for parliamentary questions is defined in article 23 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, which reworks the wording of the article cited above.

1. The (written) questions for written answer can be asked by all MEPs. Because of the inflation of the number of questions, MEPs were called in July 2014 to limit the number of their written questions.
2. The (written) questions for oral answer can be asked to the Council or to the Commission by a parliamentary committee, a political group or at least 40 MEPs (rule 128).
3. The (oral) questions during “Question Time with the Commission” (art. 129) take place during each session, for 90 minutes, on one or more specific themes. The questions of Members are selected through a ballot system.

Parliamentary questions of the three types respond to four main rationales. First and foremost, questions are a main instrument of scrutiny. In a logic of checks and balances, the EP was originally granted with the right to censure and question the High Authority / Commission. As the censure was unlikely and useless, the activity of questioning has developed to allow MEPs and groups to control the activities of the Commission, and later those of the Council (Raunio 1996; Proksch and Slapin 2011; Font & Pérez Duran 2016)². Still today, questions are the main tool to control the executive work in the EU, and to make the Commission and the Council accountable for their action or lack of action.

Secondly, questions are a substitute to the impossibility for the EP to initiate legislative proposals – a competence that is still essentially in the hands of the Commission. The Maastricht Treaty has granted the EP with the right to make suggestions of initiative to the Commission (article 225 of the TFEU), but this possibility is not perceived by MEPs as an efficient tool to set the agenda (Kreppel and Webb 2019). By contrast, questions are used not

² See Martin (2011a) for a more general argumentation on parliamentary questions and Höhmann and Sieberer (2019) for findings at the level of a national parliament.

only to call the Commission to explain its strategy on a given issue or policy, but also to highlight priorities for action.

Thirdly, questions can be used as a substitute for amendments. The generalisation of the early agreements on legislative matters has indeed reduced Members' and groups' ability to table amendments, in parliamentary committees and in plenary sessions (Rasmussen & Reh 2013). Today, 99% of the legislative proposals are adopted in first or early second reading, which strongly restricts MEP' capacity to amend them (European Parliament 2019, 3).

Finally, questions for oral answer are a key-moment in the deliberation of the EP. Following the answer given by the representative of the Commission or the Council, a debate may take place, resulting in the vote on a resolution in around 20 per cent of the cases. Resolutions do not create any legal obligation, but they are a political tool allowing the assembly to make its voice heard on any issue related to the competences and activities of the EU.

In a nutshell, questions contribute to politicize issues as they increase their salience and express partisan divergences with respect to priorities for EU action as well as to policy directions. They are not only central in the interaction with the other institutions, allowing the EP to demarcate itself, but are also used, at various levels, for communication purposes. Questions are often quoted in press releases, newsletters and on social media, targeted at a various audiences including constituents or nationals of MEPs, partisans of a EU party, civil society organisations, EU microcosm, or EU citizens.

Partisan players are likely to use these opportunities. Political groups and the parties they represent have diverging policy priorities and interests, which are likely to be reflected in their questions. Each group has areas of predilection they are more likely to emphasize in questions. Questions may then contribute to the group's issue handling reputation (Grynaviski 2010; Walgrave et al. 2012). Partisan patterns of attention are discernible at the national level in several countries (Lazardeux 2005; Otjes and Louwerse 2018) and can be analysed through

the lens of a issue competition (Green-Pedersen 2007, 2019). At the EU level, the “electoral disconnection between European political groups and citizens” (Slapin and Proksch 2010: 336) challenges the mere existence of electoral incentives for MEPs. However, they massively use questions – more than 160,000 were issued over the 1999-2019 period, suggesting that the EP is perceived as an increasingly relevant arena where to push forward partisan policy claims. A recent study on immigration policy concludes that the “electoral disconnection” reduces European parties’ incentives to engage with their opponents’ issues and incites them to focus on their own agenda and on issues on which the group is cohesive (Meijers and van der Veer 2019). This is likely to apply to other areas.

In sum, we expect groups to “mark their territory” by focusing their questions on the domains for which they have a strong credibility (Green-Pedersen 2007; Dahlberg and Martinsson 2015) and by using them to distinguish themselves from the groups with whom they have to compromise on legislative, budgetary and institutional matters. Our hypothesis is therefore that *questions are a tool for political groups to steer the EP's deliberations towards their preferred topics*, with the observable implication that *the thematic profile of questions differs across groups*. For instance, green parties are expected to focus on environmental protection and far-right parties on immigration and the principle of European integration (Bale 2003; Blomqvist and Green-Pedersen 2004; Green and Hobolt 2008; Meijers and van der Veer 2019). By contrast, social-democratic parties may concentrate their efforts on their classic social battlegrounds of work, welfare and social policy (Budge and Farlie 1983; Blomqvist and Green-Pedersen 2004; Green and Hobolt 2008; Jensen 2010; Jakobsen and Listhaug 2012). Right-of-the-centre organisations, including Christian-democratic and conservative parties affiliated to the EPP, typically own issues of economic policy, even if liberal parties (Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe, ALDE) also enjoy strong credibility on these matters (Budge and Farlie 1983; Dejaeghere and van Erkel 2017). Conservatives are traditionally associated to defence and to security, with strong positions on

law and order (e.g. Budge and Farlie 1983; Green and Hobolt 2008), even if their ownership is increasingly contested by parties on the far right (Smith 2010).

Parliamentary questions attract growing attention at national level (Blidook and Kerby 2011, Raunio 2009, Chiru and Dimilescu 2011, Navarro and Brouard 2014, Martin 2011b, Proksch and Slapin 2011, Bailer 2011, Lazardeux 2005, Saalfeld 2011), but not at the EP level. The rare analyses available cover short periods, or a restricted empirical focus: the 3,000 questions asked in 1994 (Raunio 1996), 626 questions asked by 120 MEPs during the 5th legislature (Navarro 2014) or written parliamentary questions in one sector (immigration) between 2004 and 2016 (Meijers and van der Veer 2019). Recent studies examine questions at a larger scale as an indicator of MEPs' activities and profiles. They allow MEPs to control the executive and to promote themselves in view of their re-election (Sozzi 2016). In her analysis of the use of questions, speeches, motions and written declarations during one legislature, Sorace (2018) shows that written questions are privileged by backbenchers. Brack and Costa (2019) have studied how written questions are used to address issues in link with MEPs' constituencies.

Data

To what extent do parliamentary groups focus on distinct issues when asking questions within the EP? To find this out, we draw on an original database on the 2,244 questions for oral answer issued from July 2004 to May 2019. They offer a better indicator of partisan strategies of issue politicization than questions with a demand for a written answer, which are tabled by MEPs quite freely, possibly for political reasons, but also regarding issues that are salient in their district (Bowler and Farrell 1995; Sozzi 2016; Brack and Costa 2019). On the contrary, questions for oral answer have to be submitted by a parliamentary committee, a political group

or at least 40 MEPs; most of them come from groups and provide a good indicator of their topics of predilection. As those questions are asked orally during the plenary sessions, their number is strictly limited, forcing political groups to be highly selective. The questions at Question Time are not a good indicator of political priorities, as they are strongly linked to immediate political developments.

To our knowledge, no specific attention has been devoted so far to questions for oral answer in the EP. Full information on the questions asked over the course of the two last decades is however available on its website. Based on this source, our data identifies, for each question, the date of submission, the name(s) and political group affiliation of the authors³. Most groups in the EP correspond to long-standing political party families which, beyond a certain level of internal heterogeneity, share core positions with respect to some of the historical European cleavages (Hix & al. 2007; Koop & al. 2018). This allows us to distinguish the following categories that have persisted over time in a coherent form: Christian Democrats, Social Democrats, Liberals, Greens and Radical-left (a full list of the group denominations covered by each category is available in appendix). It is more difficult to identify the groups on the right of the Christian Democrats (EPP group) with a clear party family. We nevertheless distinguish three categories:

(1) National-conservatives: this category includes various groups that have, over time, gathered parties favourable of taking sovereignty back from EU institutions and defending conservative and traditional values. These groups are, over our period of study: the Union for a Europe of the Nations (2004-2009), Independence/Democracy (2004-2009) and Europe for Freedom and Direct Democracy (2009-2019);

³ When the question has been submitted by a political group and not by a parliamentary committee.

(2) Far-right: this category comprises only the group Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF), founded in 2015 under the leadership of the French National Front and of the Dutch PVV, which has strong Eurosceptic and anti-immigration positions;

(3) Conservatives: this category is made of the group of European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR), founded by the British Conservatives after they left the EPP – later joined by other moderate-Eurosceptic forces. This group is likely to share policy priorities with Christian-Democrats, in particular with respect to economic issues.

The theme of each question was coded following the *European Agenda (EA) Codebook*⁴, comprising more than 250 issues of public politics (budget and debt, gender discrimination, etc.), regrouped into 20 general themes. This content was established manually from the full text of each question⁵.

As empirical evidence on these questions is scarce, we use our data to provide descriptive evidence, before we turn to a statistical analysis of partisan differentiation in the thematic profile of parliamentary questions. First, there is no discernible trend with respect to the number of questions asked over time, which is between 80 and 150 a year. More than two thirds (74%) were addressed to the Commission, and this proportion grows over time. This could result from the more “political” relation between the EP and the Commission after the J.C. Juncker’s election in 2014 (Shackleton 2017).

Issue attention appears, on Figure 1, to be heavily focused on two domains. First, 13.3% of all questions cover preoccupations linked to international relations, including human rights concerns in third countries, development aid, international resource exploitation,

⁴ http://euagendas.weebly.com/uploads/9/9/4/3/9943893/eu_codebook_3.2_october-2013_general.pdf. Inter-coder reliability on a random sample of 100 questions was 75%.

⁵ A list of question examples for some of the policy domains is available in the online appendix (n°1).

passport issues or international terrorism. These questions are often addressed to the Vice-President of the Commission/High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. Rights and minority protection attract almost the same level of attention (12.7%). Four policy domains follow: environmental protection (9.4%), immigration (9.1%), agriculture (7.4%) and market regulations and enterprises (6.9%). These historical fields of EU intervention account for almost two thirds of all questions. Foreign trade, although a historical EU competence, attracts less attention (6.1%), a similar level to the one devoted to new and limited competences, such as justice and home affairs (5.7%) or defence (4%). The remaining topics pertain to quasi-exclusive competences of the member states, like health, social policy, culture or education. Significantly, only 6.2% of the questions deal with the functioning and legitimacy of the EU (Figure 1, in black): questions for oral answer are clearly used to politicize single policies, rather than for an fundamental discussion on the EU polity or the principle of European integration.

Figure 1 Distribution (%) of written questions for oral answer, by topic

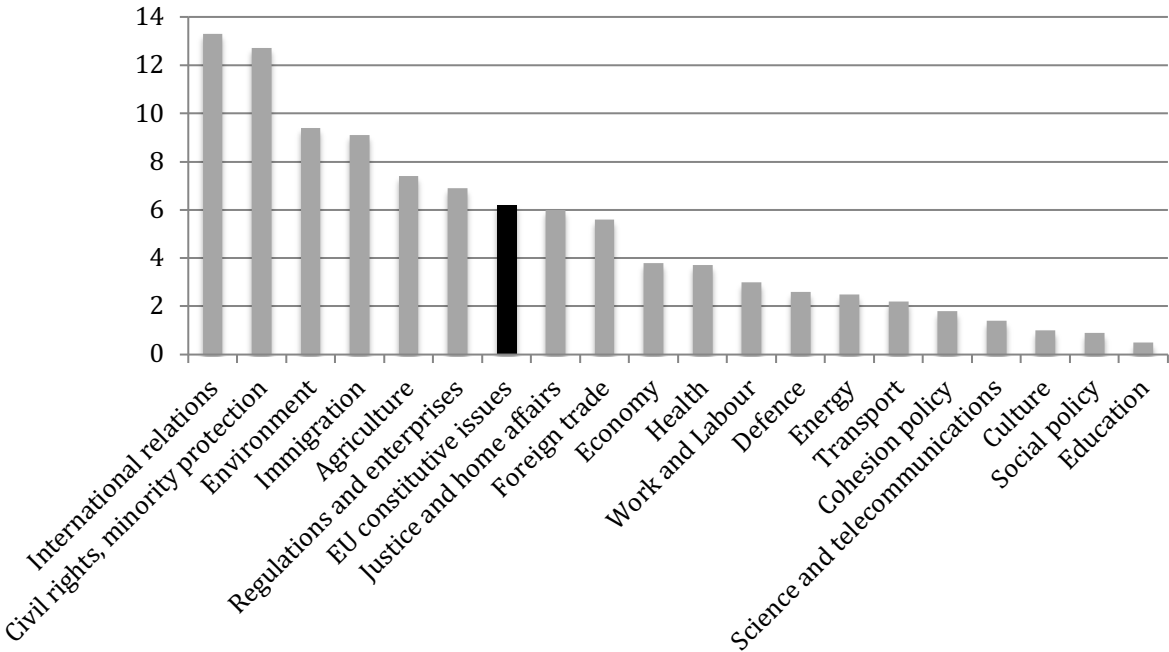
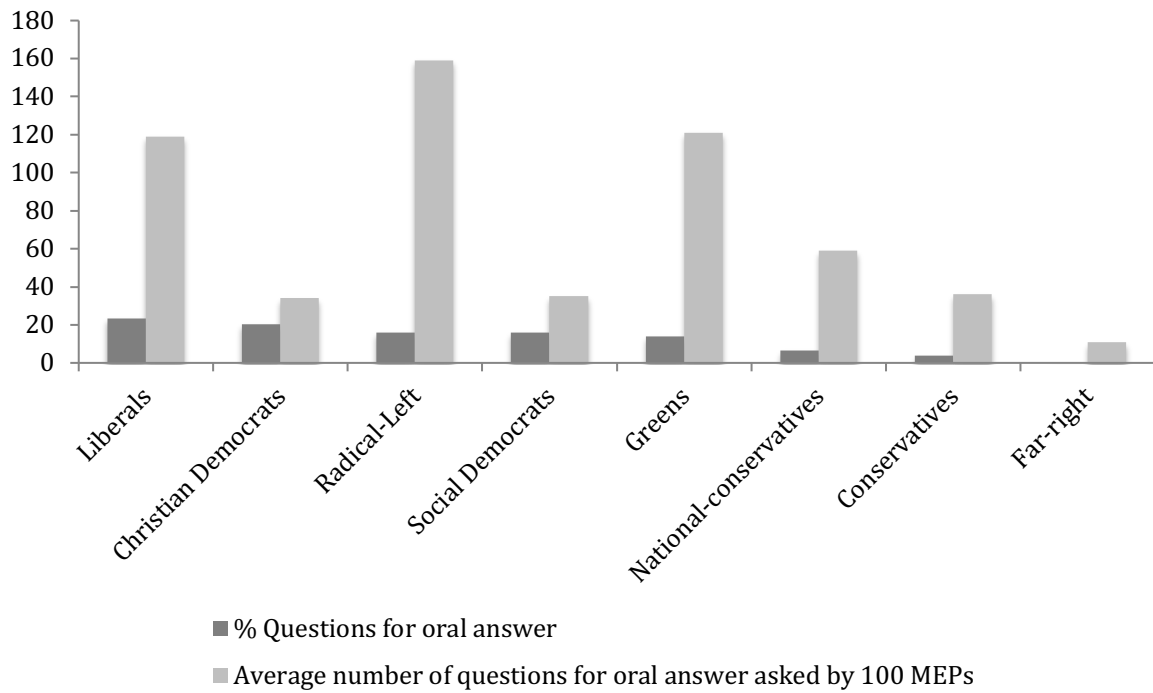


Figure 2 represents the breakdown of the questions according to the political group of the author. The liberal (23.5%) and Christian-democratic groups (20.4%) ask most questions, followed by the radical-left (15.9%), social-democratic (15.8%) and green groups (14%). National-conservative, conservative and far-right groups ask less questions (with 6.5%, 3.7% and 0.3% respectively). Controlling for group size reveals that radical-left, green and liberal MEPs have been particularly active in asking questions, with more than one question for oral answer per MEP on average. National-conservative and conservative members are a bit less active. Members of the Christian-democratic and social-democratic groups have asked even less questions, which reflects their status as majority coalition: they have less incentives to exert parliamentary control over EU policy-making and enjoy alternative channels to set their priorities. The far-right group demonstrates very little activity, with only four questions in four years of existence (2015-2019). This mirrors the limited involvement of its MEPs in the functioning of the EP. This group is excluded from the remaining analyses.

Figure 2 % of written questions for oral answer, per political group⁶ and average number of questions asked over the 2004-2019 period per 100 MEPs

⁶ The percentages are calculated in relation to the oral questions submitted *by party groups*.



Analyses

We explore the hypothesis of politicization of the EP through the lens of the thematic differentiation of the questions submitted by each group. Table 1 emphasises (in grey) the group devoting the most attention to each topic. The results confirm that groups focus on distinct issues. Some of the issues over-invested in by certain groups (compared to others) reflect, as expected, the topics of predilection of their political family. We observe a particular engagement of the Christian democratic and conservative groups into economic matters, by contrast to Greens – a finding in line with their traditional association to post-materialist concerns. More surprising is Liberals’ apparent lack of interest in this topic, with a level of questioning activity below the one of left-wing parties. Regarding agriculture, the comparatively strong interest of the Conservatives and the Christian Democrats is in line with the issue competition literature, even if a similarly strong interest is noticeable on the part of

the radical-left group. The same goes with the topic of minority rights and discriminations, on which the green and liberal groups appear to be particularly active. On EU constitutive issues, we note a marked investment by the most Eurosceptic groups – the National-Conservatives and the Conservatives – with close to 11% in both cases (see Senninger 2017 for congruent findings in Denmark).

Our data confirms that the National-Conservatives and (to a smaller extent) the Christian Democrats are particularly interested in justice and home affairs (with 11% and 8% of their questions, respectively), but the Greens appear to be very active on this subject as well, with questions pointing in the opposite, anti-authoritarian direction.

Table 1 Attention (%) to each policy area⁷ in questions for oral answer, by political group category

	Radical-left	Greens	Social-Democrats	Liberals	Christian Democrats	Conservatives	National-Conservatives
Macro-Economy, regulations, internal and external trade	13.2	3.9	12.9	10.3	20.0	17.0	13.3
Civil rights, Minority protection	16.2	23.9	17.8	19.3	8.1	8.5	13.3

⁷ For the sake of readability of the remaining analyses, some of the categories with very few questions have been grouped so as to limit the thematic categories to the twelve displayed in Table 2. The categories “Work and labour” were merged with “health” and “social policy”, “transportation” with “cohesion policy”, and “environmental protection” with “energy”. The categories “education”, “science and telecommunications” and “culture”, which all include very few questions, were also fused. Finally, we merged concerns of “macro-economy”, “internal” and “external trade” into a single category.

Work, health and social policy	5.4	3.9	5.9	6.3	11.1	6.4	7.2
Agriculture	9.3	2.8	5.0	4.7	7.7	12.8	6.0
Environment, energy	5.9	7.2	8.9	3.3	7.3	8.5	10.8
Immigration	19.6	20.0	14.4	13.0	11.9	8.5	8.4
Justice and home affairs (crime)	4.4	8.3	5.9	4.3	7.7	4.3	10.8
Cohesion policy, infrastructure	2.9	0.6	2.5	3.0	5.4	2.1	7.2
Defence	1.5	8.3	0.5	3.3	3.1	2.1	1.2
Education, culture, science and telecommunications	0.5	0.0	1.0	3.7	3.1	4.3	3.6
International relations	14.2	16.1	17.8	24.2	8.8	14.9	7.2
EU constitutive issues	6.9	5.0	7.4	4.7	6.1	10.6	10.8
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Other topics are characterized by differentiated levels of attention, but not by patterns that may be interpreted in terms of issue ownership. In particular, the National-Conservatives and the Conservatives ask more questions about environmental protection and energy than the Greens. On the other hand, the radical-left group and the Greens are more active on immigration than the groups on the right of the political spectrum. Similarly, most questions on defence are submitted by the Greens, and left-wing groups do not show stronger activity

with respect to work, social policy, education or cohesion policy that are more invested by right-wing groups⁸.

Descriptive data overall tends to confirm that groups tackle differentiated policies when questioning the Commission or the Council, although we have seen that issue ownership does not account for all patterns observed as our hypothesis would lead us to expect. Before we explore complementary explanations, we run a series of logistic regressions to assess the significance of these differences. We run one model per domain (Table 2).⁹ Our dependent variable therefore takes the form of a dummy distinguishing for each question whether it deals with the issue of interest, or not. A qualitative variable on the group asking the question then allows to assess how far the probability that a question is about a certain issue changes depending on the group submitting it. We use as a reference category the liberal group, located at the centre of the political spectrum represented in the EP, and one of those most active in asking questions.

The volume of questions and attention paid to different topics varies over time, as do the groups' capacities, e.g. in terms of number of MEPs. Yet, Figure 2 shows that the number of questions submitted does not reflect groups' number of seats and the groups included into the analysis seem comparable in terms of number of questions. To account for potential

⁸ These issues are subject to a comparatively small number of questions. Figure 2 already suggested that the number of questions asked about each policy sector tends to reflect its degree of integration. These observations are in line with arguments about strongly limited institutional leeway for left-wing policies at the EU level in the context of an intergovernmental institutional setting and divergent national interests (Scharpf 1999; Bartoloni 2005; Crespy 2016).

⁹ We did not estimate models for social political issues, urban and regional policies, nor for education and culture policies, for which relatively few questions were asked.

confounders, we include fixed-effects for each legislature¹⁰ and control for a list of real-world and public opinion factors likely to shape the level of attention to the different topics. We control, on the one hand, for classic indicators of macro-economic conditions – GDP growth, unemployment and inflation rate, as measured by the World Bank – based on the expectation of a trade-off between economic and other issues. On the other hand, for the four topics with available data (the first four in Table 2), we additionally control for their salience in mentions of “most important issues” in the bi-annual standard Eurobarometer survey. This data is available since 2004 for the topics Economy, Crime, Immigration, Defence, and Environment & Energy and captures the proportion of respondents citing each issue as one of the two most important problems in their country. Standard errors are clustered by group and by legislature. The online appendix provides summary statistics for all independent variables (n°2), along with a correlation matrix confirming the absence of multicollinearity concern (n°3).

The analyses confirm most descriptive findings and establish that groups use questions to direct deliberations towards differentiated topics. We find the expected association between the Christian democratic group and economic matters (in contrast to Greens), between National-Conservatives and EU constitutive issues (while this overemphasis is not significant for Conservatives), as well as between Liberals and topics linked to rights and liberties and to international relations. Again in line with issue ownership theory, Christian Democrats and National-Conservatives overemphasize crime and Conservatives, agriculture.

Yet, as the descriptive table already showed, this is also the case of the Greens who follow, in this area as well as with respect to immigration, a logic of control by emphasizing migrants’ rights and the protection of individual freedoms. The same goes for defence, a traditional topic of right-wing parties, that are nonetheless tackled by the Greens based on an

¹⁰ Findings (available upon request to the authors) are substantively identical when modelling fixed-effects for years, or time as the number of years passed since 1999.

demilitarization stance seeking. Conversely, our data reveals that if the Greens devote significantly more attention to environmental protection than the reference group of Liberals, all right-wing parties are even more active, expressing concerns about the potential negative effects of environmental regulations on economic growth.

Our findings echo a growing literature on issue competition, with concepts such as “issue engagement”, “issue convergence” and “issue uptake” (Damore 2004; Sulkin 2005; Green and Hobolt 2008). Political parties have incentives to focus on their topics of predilection, but they cannot ignore policy priorities addressed by their competitors (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2015). In this context, parties mostly opt for a mixed strategy combining an engagement on concerns that are central to their issue-handling reputation, and adversarial responses to competitors on their battlegrounds of predilection. Parties may then use questions differently depending on whether they deal with one of “their” policy domains or not, adopting a logic of resistance on other parties’ domains (as do the Greens by questioning on defence, but through the lens of disarmament) and a more proactive logic on their preferred fields. This can be linked to the two main functions of questions for oral answer, agenda-setting and control, and point to the need to refine our hypothesis to account as well for the latter logic.

Table 2 The determinants of the probability of each issue being subjected to a question with demand for an oral answer, depending on the political group

		Attention dedicated to the issue...			
		Economy	Crime	Immigration	Environment
Category	Christian Democrat	1.886* (.486)	1.962° (.730)	.893 (.234)	2.628* (1.111)
	Social Democrat	1.228 (.354)	1.522 (.636)	1.174 (.318)	3.033** (1.261)
	Liberals	Ref	Ref	Ref	Ref
	Greens	.340* (.146)	2.026° (.798)	1.596° (.411)	2.552* (1.142)

Radical-Left	1.189 (.338)	1.034 (.462)	1.470 (.376)	2.314 [°] (1.061)
Nat.-Conservatives	1.210 (.436)	2.691* (1.228)	.701 (.307)	3.856** (1.931)
Conservatives	1.411 (.636)	0.969 (.761)	.501 (.283)	4.024* (2.671)
GDP growth	1.087 (.064)	1.312 [°] (.202)	.891* (.046)	1.277* (.123)
Inflation rate	.806 [°] (.095)	1.412 [°] (.291)	1.309* (.144)	.936 (.147)
Unemployment rate	1.683*** (.218)	.993 (.178)	1.117 (.125)	1.225 (.238)
Public salience	1.007 (.006)	.953* (.022)	1.011 (.022)	1.143** (.052)
N	1278	1278	1278	1278
Pseudo R²	.07	.05	.06	.07

Attention dedicated to the issue...

		Defence	Rights and Liberties	International relations	EU governance	Agriculture
Groups	Christian Democrats	1.093 (.554)	.371*** (.100)	.316*** (.082)	1.324 (.514)	1.828 (.675)
	Social Democrats	.140 [°] (.148)	.931 (.222)	.652 (.148)	1.723 (.661)	1.073 (.457)
	Liberals	Ref	Ref	Ref	Ref	Ref
	Greens	3.099** (1.349)	1.309 (.300)	.622 [°] (.151)	1.057 (.461)	.567 (.302)
	Radical-Left	.568 (.389)	.821 (.201)	.557* (.136)	1.465 (.578)	1.998 [°] (.728)
	Nat.-Conservatives	.336 (.364)	.653 (.236)	.244** (.111)	2.572* (1.172)	1.509 (.817)
	Conservatives	1.450 (1.541)	.369 [°] (.202)	.688 (.302)	2.434 (1.376)	2.963* (1.590)
	GDP growth	1.105 (.089)	.955 (.044)	.949 (.039)	1.236** (.095)	.838* (.062)
	Inflation rate	.661 [°] (.148)	1.235* (.123)	.793* (.076)	1.022 (.145)	1.353* (.204)
	Unemployment rate	.696 (.180)	.836 [°] (.088)	.913 (.093)	1.015 (.189)	1.184 (.201)
N		1278	1278	1278	1278	1278
Pseudo R²		.13	.04	.05	.05	.05

NB. Logistic regression, odds ratios, SE in parentheses, fixed effects for years not shown. Reference category: Liberals.

The levels of significance retained are [°]<.1, * <.05, ** <.01 and ***<.001.

Discussion: Politics matter more than expected in the European Parliament

Thanks to our innovative dataset, our paper is the first to empirically study questions for oral answer in the EP over a long period of time. This perspective allows for observations beyond short-term developments and for statistical analysis, and delivers several findings. We show

that groups make extensive use of questions to set the political agenda and initiate debates on relevant problems – as a question for oral answer may be followed by a debate and the vote of a resolution (art. 136 of the Rules of Procedure of the EP, January 2021). Importantly, they use them to different extents, with a particularly intensive activity on the part of the liberal, green and radical-left groups, and focus on different policy issues.

These first empirical insights on parliamentary questions as a tool of partisan differentiation in the EP constitute an important contribution to the literature on democratic representation, party politics and politicisation in this arena. Conventional approaches rely mainly on roll-call votes and discourse analysis, especially against the background of recent evolutions. Indeed, since the 2014 elections, Social Democrats, Christian Democrats and Liberals have united their forces to defend European integration from the attacks and the rise of the Eurosceptics. Their formal coalition (the “block”), based on a political agreement between the leaders of the three groups involved, did not survive the election of the new EP president in December 2016. However, concretely, members of the groups EPP, S&D and ALDE (Renew, since July 2019) have never voted together that often (Marié 2019). As our observations reveal, this quasi-unanimity among pro-European members does not reflect the diversity of their political views on EU institutions and policies and the variety of their topics of interest. While EP voting dynamics could suggest that they essentially reflect a cleavage between pro and anti-European members, examining the issues tackled by parliamentary questions reveals that other dimensions of politicisation are at work.

Broadly speaking, our results picture the EP as a “real parliament”, structured by parliamentary groups that have contrasted views on political priorities: it is not different from a national chamber in this respect. Admittedly, votes on legislative and budgetary matters are driven by a large consensus and lead to over-lapping majorities in most cases, but those consensus are the result of constant political negotiations, among groups that have to adjust their own political preferences, and not of a deliberation driven only by expertise or national

concerns. Questions allow to observe processes of issue competition between groups that mostly remain hidden behind the outcomes of compromises. This is even more the case with the generalisation of legislative early agreements, which does not allow anymore groups to table and discuss amendments in plenary session (Roederer-Rynning & Greenwood 2015).

Studying parliamentary questions therefore appears as a meaningful approach to politicisation and the mechanisms of representation at EU level. Our analysis paves the way for at least two lines of research. First, future work ought to move our understanding from the observation of partisan contrasts to the identification of factors of variation. Some of our observations are in line with the implications of issue ownership strategies, in particular National-Conservatives' priority to justice and home affairs, and liberal and green groups' emphasis on civil rights and minority protection. Yet, most topics are subjected to a specific interest of at least two groups, often with antagonist positions. The Christian democratic and national-conservative groups do for instance devote more attention to crime, but we also see a comparatively strong engagement of Greens here and the substance of questions shows that they point to different directions. These observations prove the need to complement the issue-ownership perspective with accounts for party conflict (over the substance of EU policy) and the control function of questions.

This would shed light on radical-left and green groups' focus on classic right-wing issues, such as immigration or defence. Coding the substance of questions would allow to map the direction of groups' respective statements and to account for conflict. Questions could also be differentiated depending on whether they draw EU institutions to a particular topic, asking for action (agenda-setting function), or request more information, precisions or guarantees on policies already initiated or a pledge made in the past (control function).

Second, the different types of questions call for a systematic comparison. Indeed, while groups exert a strong control over questions for oral answer, questions for written answer are submitted by individual MEPs and may be shaped by partisan considerations, but also by the

nationality, constituency, personal spheres of interest or career of the author and by the majority/opposition status of her domestic party. Both types of questions may then contribute to different chains of representation.

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Appendix 1 Classification of the political groups

Group Category	Political groups
Christian Democrats	Group of the European People's Party and European Democrats (EPP-ED); Group of the European People's Party (EPP)
Social Democrats	Group of the Party of European Socialists (PES); Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament (S&D)
Liberals	Group of the European Liberal, Democrat and Reform Party (ELDR); Group of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ADLE)
Greens	Group of the Greens ; Group of the Greens/European Free Alliance (Greens/EFA)
Radical-Left	Group of the European United Left (GUE); Confederal Group of the European United Left /Nordic Green Left (GUE/NGL)
National-Conservatives	UEN (Union for Europe of the Nations); EDD (Europe of Democracies and Diversities); Independence/Democracy (IND/DEM); Europe of Freedom and Democracy (EFD); Europe for Freedom and Direct Democracy (EFDD)
Conservatives	European Conservatives and Reformists Group (ECR)
Far-right	Identity, Tradition and Sovereignty Group (ITS); Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF)