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Behavioural Consequences of Restrictions on Plenary Access: Parliamentary Questions in the Norwegian *Storting*

BJØRN ERIK RASCH

Questioning is an important activity in the Norwegian Storting. This research suggests that, in explaining and drawing inferences from patterns of questioning, attention must be given to the rules of the game. Specifically, distinguishing between open access or restricted access to questioning is crucial. In the Norwegian Storting, access to written questions is relatively open. Parties exert no (or only mild) control; formulation of questions are left to individual discretion. The same can be said about ordinary (oral) questions in Question Time. Question Hour, on the other hand, is limited to exactly one hour, and access is constrained. Restricted access leads to centralisation of agenda power to the party leadership. The consequences of access rules are shown by comparing behavioural patterns in Question Time (relatively open access) and Question Hour (restricted access). The results suggest that access rules must be accounted and controlled for in any research exploring behaviour through questions.

Keywords: *parliamentary questions; access rules; legislative behaviour; Norwegian Storting.*

Most assemblies in parliamentary systems have developed an array of means to control government ministers and their bureaucracy. Parliamentary questions are among the least dramatic tools that legislators may use, and most parliaments have institutionalised a variety of forms of questioning – both oral and written types (Wiberg 1995). Questioning is used to extract information from governments and to monitor their actions. It can be used to scrutinise the justifications ministers give for executive branch decisions and policies. As an instrument of control, parliamentary questioning is analogous to fire-alarms rather than police patrols (McCubbins and Schwartz 1984). It is typically a decentralised way of examining the government. In addition, parliamentary questioning also serves purposes that are not directly related to control of the executive, such as being a tool for agenda setting (Rommetvedt 2003, p. 49, Green-Pedersen 2005); questions may draw media attention, generate debates and, in the end, lead to new legislation. Also, self-promotion rather than control of the executive or agenda setting may be the real aim of some of the questioners (Mayhew 1974, Martin 2011). Incumbents then use questioning as part of their reselection and re-election strategies (Rasch 1994, 2009).

Modern parliaments operate under severe time constraints (Döring 1995, Cox 2006). Among the things they need to regulate are the use of parliamentary instruments (for example, means of executive control) and allocation of plenary time (for example, participation in legislative debates and oral questioning). The openness of parliamentary questioning varies across different legislatures, and within the same legislature across types of questions. In some cases access is open; parties exert no (or only mild) control and formulation of questions is left entirely to individual discretion. In other cases time constraints necessitate coordination, which in turn centralises agenda power in the hands of parties and their leadership. Thus, open versus restricted access may be a crucial distinction when it comes to explaining parliamentary behaviour, including selection of institutional rules. This is the main message of this essay.

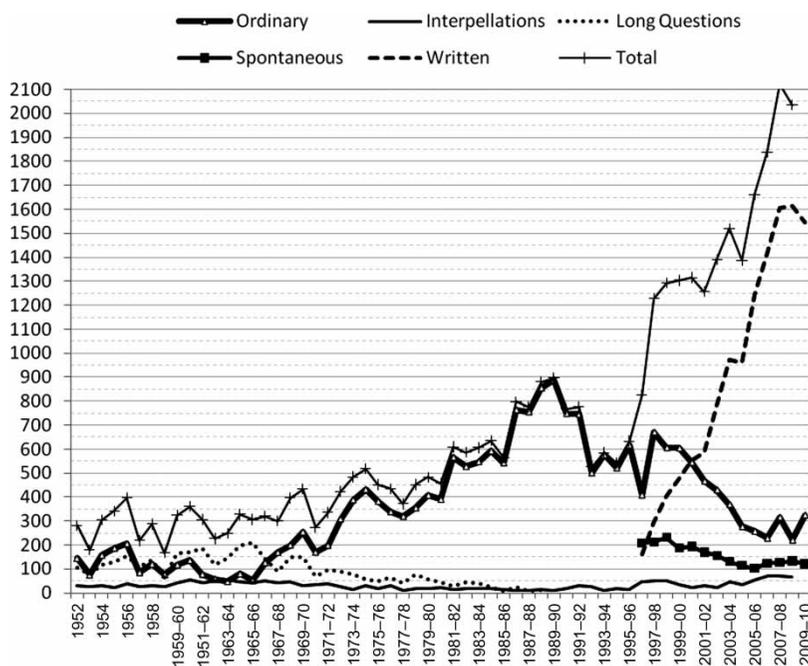
The analysis is structured as follows. After first presenting the types of questioning and institutional developments in the Norwegian parliament over recent decades, scarcity of plenary time and restrictions on access are introduced as factors that shed light on behavioural patterns – for example why government supporters no longer seem to ask questions. Next, to probe the importance of time restrictions further, two similar types of oral questioning with differing access rules are compared: *Question Time* with its relatively open access and *Question Hour* with restricted access. For this reason the latter is dominated by frontbench legislators, in particular when the prime minister or other central government ministers are present in the *Storting*, whereas *Question Time* primarily attracts ordinary MPs and backbenchers. A brief section with concluding remarks ends the contribution.

Institutional Developments

Four types of questioning exist in the Norwegian *Storting* today: interpellations, ‘ordinary’ questions (for *Question Time*), ‘spontaneous’ questions (for *Question Hour*) and, finally, written questions. The last two options were introduced in 1996. Until 1989, a kind of ‘long questions’ also was available. Long questions were used infrequently and slowly disappeared, as shown in Figure 1. The various types of questioning differ in several respects. Ordinary questions were introduced in 1949, partly based on the British model. Interpellations have been used since 1885 and are the most comprehensive and demanding type – typically generating a broader debate on the floor (Helander 1991). At the other extreme are the very short queries in *Question Hour*. The weekly *Question Hour* does not exceed one hour, and only a small group of government ministers (or the prime minister alone) attend each time. Ministers in this case are unaware of the questions in advance.

Table 1 shows what kind of interaction the four types of questioning generate. *Question Hour* follows a stricter scheme than *Question Time*, but this seems understandable as long as *Question Hour* is limited to only one hour. In both cases, the interaction involves one MP and one government minister.

Figure 1: The Number of Parliamentary Questions, 1949–2010



Over recent years, only written questions have grown steadily and, today, significantly outnumber oral questions. Staff members of the parliamentary party groups emphasise that there is a hierarchy among the three most common instruments of questioning:¹ written questions seldom have any political significance, and are often used as a way of getting information on details (for example, related to the state budget), whereas spontaneous questions may be quite important from a political point of view. The latter is a lively confrontation between the opposition and the government on central contemporary issues, the sort of issues that make the front pages of newspapers and prime time news. Ordinary questions are seen as something in between.

More details on the level of questioning after the mid-1990s can be found in three appendix tables which are available directly from the author due to limited space here. It is clear from the data that MPs of government parties seldom ask questions, especially in Question Hour. During the first four years after this instrument was established, government supporters tabled some spontaneous questions. Soon, however, Question Hour was completely taken over by the opposition, and today an informal norm has developed whereby government MPs should not attempt to get spontaneous questions on the agenda. Consequently, the secretariat of the presidium, who prepares Question Hour administratively, takes as a point of departure that time slots for spontaneous questions are

Table 1: Instruments of Parliamentary Questioning

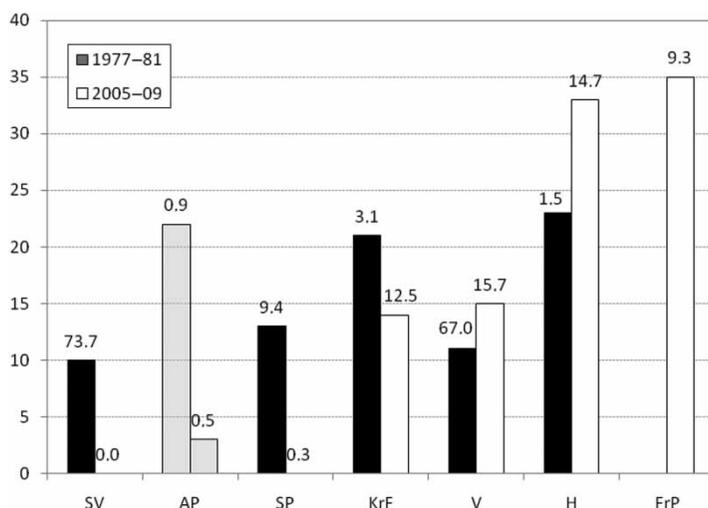
Type of Question	Constraints ^a	Interaction
Interpellation	Interpellations submitted in writing Answered within one month (Presidium may allow later answer) Total of one hour and a half (answers by government members – within 10 minutes each – in addition	Q → A → Debate → (Q) → (A) (One questioner, at least one cabinet member, several MPs. May generate proposals for voting.)
Written Question	No more than 2 questions each MP any week Answer within 6 days (or explanation of why no answer will be given)	Q (Written) → A (Written) (Written communication only. One MP and one cabinet member.)
Spontaneous (Oral) Question (Weekly)	Total of app. one hour (Question Hour) Maximum of 6 minutes each question Allocation of questioning in advance President controls (decides) agenda	Q → A → (Q) → (A) (One MP questions one cabinet member. No debate.)
Ordinary (Oral) Question (Weekly)	Question submitted in writing Submitted almost one week before Maximum one question each MP each week Question Time no strict time limit Maximum of 7–8 minutes each question	Q → A → (Q) → (A) → (Q) → (A) (One MP questions one cabinet member. No debate.)

^aGovernment members may choose not to answer, but hardly ever do so. If such rejections occur, they typically need to be explained by the government. The Parliamentary President may dismiss interpellations and questions on formal grounds.

allocated between opposition parties only.² Also in Question Time (ordinary questions), questions from government supporters have gradually disappeared. In the 1990s they tabled nearly 10 per cent of all questions, but today are almost silent (3 per cent or less of the questions). Non-opposition percentages of written questions are also low, although the absolute number of questions is not insignificant.

It has not always been like this. Figure 2 compares the share of ordinary questions for each party in the terms 1977–81 and 2005–09. The numbers above the bars are the average number of ordinary questions per MP belonging to the relevant party. The Labour Party was in government during both of the selected terms, but the level of questioning by Labour MPs has been reduced dramatically during the time period (dropping from 22 to 3 per cent); during 1977–81 the governing Labour Party tabled roughly the same number of questions as the two most active opposition parties. At the time, no commentators found this to be particularly strange or inappropriate.

Parliamentary questioning serves multiple purposes, with executive control and oversight as an important function. This of course is comprehended by the

Figure 2: Percentage of Questions for Each Party in Question Time, 1977–81 and 2005–09

Note: Data labels show average number of ordinary questions per party MP during the entire four year term. A Labour (AP) minority government was in power in 1977–81, while a centre-left coalition comprising the Centre Party (SP), Labour (AP) and the Socialist Left Party (SV) governed from 2005 (N for 1977–81 = 1474; N for 2005–09 = 1024).

Table 2: Answers from a Survey in the *Storting*, Spring 2005

Assertion	Strongly Agree	Partly Agree	Partly Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Other
Control ^a	21.4 (25)	42.7 (50)	22.2 (26)	12.0 (14)	1.8 (2)
Agenda-setting ^b	28.2 (33)	46.2 (54)	19.7 (23)	5.1 (6)	0.9 (1)
Self-promotion ^c	38.5 (45)	35.9 (42)	17.8 (21)	6.0 (7)	1.8 (2)

Notes: Percentages. $N = 117$.

^aMPs were asked to consider the following assertion: 'Questioning is a very important instrument in the *Storting's* control of the executive.'

^bMPs were asked to consider the following assertion: 'Parliamentary questions are important to direct attention towards issues that would not otherwise attract interest from the government minister.'

^cMPs were asked to consider the following assertion: 'Too many MPs use parliamentary questions for self-promotion.'

parliamentarians themselves, as the results in Table 2 from a survey in the *Storting* indicate. Almost two thirds of the MPs agree that parliamentary questioning is a 'very important' instrument of control. At the same time, three quarters of those surveyed agreed that parliamentary questions could be used for agenda setting purposes. Even more strikingly, the same high share of parliamentarians also agrees with the assertion that too many of their colleagues use questioning for self-promotion. The *Storting* survey, conducted by mail in 2005, mainly concerned ordinary questions in Question Time.

Scarcity of Plenary Time

Democratic legislatures experience a constant pressure on their time (see, for example, Döring 1995, 2001, Cox 2006, Cox and McCubbins 2006, McCubbins 2008). In most parliaments, bills have to be voted upon in a plenary session. Often plenary debates take place ahead of voting, at least when it comes to significant legislation. Other types of plenary debate of course also occur more or less frequently, for example on government white papers, on financial matters (state budget and central government accounts), after statements by government ministers, on questions of confidence, and so on. Similarly, oral questioning is a type of activity that requires time on the floor. As Cox (2006, p. 144) emphasises, busy legislatures evolve a complex set of offices, procedures and regulations to manage plenary time. This is simply a necessity in the modern world.

Procedural Reform

Scarcity of plenary time has implications both for the direction of procedural form and behavioural patterns within given institutional frameworks. Let us first go back and interpret the institutional developments in light of constraints on plenary time. It should be noted at the outset that parliamentary questioning is regulated in the *Rules of Procedure* of the *Storting*, and these rules can be amended at any time by simple majorities. In practice, changes do not take place unless some preparatory work has been carried out (by the presidium of someone they appoint), and consensus normally is sought. Still, the procedural rules are relatively easy to amend.

As seen from Figure 1, the total number of questions has increased dramatically over time. Around 1990, oral questioning peaked at a level that was difficult for the assembly to handle. To accommodate all the questions that were handed in for the weekly Question Time, evenings often had to be used. Access to ordinary questions was free for all MPs, and open access over time led to over-exploitation of plenary time. The fact that too many questions were tabled each week generated pressure for some kind of reform that could limit questioning. There were discussions in the *Storting* – occasionally in the media as well – on how time-consuming Question Time was. It was often mentioned that many MPs used ordinary questions for partisan or self-serving electoral purposes (see further Table 2, which reports more recent data). Research based on data from the 1990s and earlier confirms that electoral considerations indeed had a significant impact on questioning (Rasch 1994, 2009).

The solution that the *Storting* finally settled on in the mid-1990s was institutional ‘diversification’. Written questions were introduced potentially to eliminate some oral questions, at least those without political significance. Spontaneous questions were introduced to generate a more lively and expedient (as seen from the point of view of the party groups) arena for confrontations between the government and the opposition. The new Question Hour was limited to one hour only. Some additional restrictions aimed directly at Question

Time have made access slightly less open than previously (for example, a rule permitting no more than one weekly question per MP). The combined effect of these reforms has stabilised the number of oral questions, and limited the pressure on plenary time.

The recent disappearance of government supporters from oral questioning might have been a side effect of the introduction of Question Hour. The strict one hour limitation soon made it obvious that government parties could not ask questions without reducing questioning from the opposition. In this sense it was and still is a zero-sum game. During the years of minority governments (from the time of reform until 2005), the opposition in reality could force its will and 'reserve' Question Hour for opposition MPs. To an extent, an informal norm emerged against government supporters tabling spontaneous questions – a norm that easily spread to other types of questioning that struggles with scarcity of plenary time. In line with this argument, there is a gradual reduction of ordinary questions from government supporters beginning in the 1990s;³ Question Hour so to speak 'contaminated' Question Time. Of course, other factors have contributed to the disappearance of government supporters from parliamentary questioning in recent years, but scarcity of plenary time seems to have been crucial. We can test the effect of scarcity – and differences in access rules – more directly by comparing behavioural patterns in the two main types of oral questioning in the *Storting*.

Comparing Question Time and Question Hour

Question Time and Question Hour are quite different when it comes to regulation of time and participation. The first is relatively open: each MP may hand in one ordinary question per week, and each Question Time continues until the last question has been answered. In other words, access is open and the time horizon is not strictly fixed. This implies that ordinary questions are (still) a decentralised means of executive control. The parliamentary parties do not have to play a central role. The parties seldom or never use Question Time as an arena to orchestrate unified campaigns. The decision to table a question is left to the discretion of individual MPs.

Question Hour, on the other hand, operates within fixed time limits. It lasts almost exactly one hour. Even if the interaction between MP and government minister is simplified compared to ordinary questions, it is often not possible to include more than six or seven spontaneous questions each week. We can surely assume that more than a handful of MPs would like to table such questions each week, especially when the prime minister or other leading ministers are present. High demand combined with scarcity of plenary time necessitates some kind of coordination. This task is taken care of by the parties. In other words, scarcity implies a centralisation of agenda power. Individual discretion becomes less important and the power to allocate spontaneous questions among MPs in practice gravitates towards the leadership of the parliamentary party groups.

The parties could use a diverse set of principles in allocating questions in Question Hour among their members, such as, for example, a lottery, equality,

first-come-first-served or queues.⁴ No systematic allocation rule of this type is utilised, at least not on a regular basis. Instead, MPs gain access on a discretionary basis. Their ability to express the policy positions of their party in an efficient and convincing manner is likely to be important. Often expertise is crucial. For example, if the Minister of Education is present, leading party representatives in this policy area may gain access to the rostrum at the expense of other MPs.

We expect Question Hour to be more of a frontbench arena than Question Time. Because of the relatively open access of the latter, we also expect it to be more exposed to self-promotion strategies by backbenchers (see further the motives evident in Table 2). Thus, there should be a difference in the effects of variables related to re-election and other electoral considerations between open access and restricted access parliamentary questioning.

Multivariate Analysis

To investigate the above hypotheses we use data on oral questioning in the *Storting* during the entire electoral term 2005–09. During this term a centre-left coalition consisting of the Centre Party (SP), Labour (AP) and the Socialist Left Party (SV) was in power. Because government supporters hardly ask any questions, only MPs from the opposition are included in the analysis.

Results are reported in Tables 3 and 4. The tables contain the main analytical variables – related to leadership positions and electoral considerations – and

Table 3: Predicted Number of Ordinary Questions, *Question Time* 2005–09

	Ordinary 2005–06	Ordinary 2006–07	Ordinary 2007–08	Ordinary 2008–09
Constant	2.864 (1.921)	1.803 (2.330)	5.679** (2.543)	0.727 (2.006)
Leadership	-0.952 (0.583)	-1.147 (0.699)	-1.174 (0.834)	0.231 (0.649)
Insecure Seat	-0.693 (0.635)	-0.437 (0.761)	-0.408 (0.892)	0.284 (0.692)
Sole Constituency Member	1.203* (0.614)	1.803** (0.743)	0.317 (0.899)	1.249* (0.693)
Final Term	-0.764 (0.658)	-1.725** (0.787)	-0.428 (0.943)	-1.299* (0.726)
Seniority	0.881 (0.531)	0.127 (0.635)	-0.712** (0.309)	-0.434* (0.239)
Seniority Squared	-0.129** (0.063)	-0.045 (0.075)		
Gender	-0.116 (0.628)	-0.431 (0.753)	-0.031 (0.889)	0.433 (0.686)
Age	0.005 (0.028)	0.054 (0.034)	0.020 (0.040)	0.055* (0.031)
Opposition Parties (Liberal Party [V] as reference):				
Christian People's Party [KrF]	-0.444 (1.007)	-0.613 (1.231)	-0.371 (1.447)	-0.092 (1.113)
Conservatives [H]	0.452 (1.022)	-0.357 (1.225)	0.986 (1.439)	0.128 (1.107)
Progress Party [FrP]	-1.725* (0.978)	-1.269 (1.171)	-2.166 (1.387)	-1.766 (1.067)
Adj. R^2	0.221	0.153	0.140	0.183
N	82	81	79	77

Notes: OLS estimates with standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

Table 4: Predicted Number of Spontaneous Questions, *Question Hour* 2005–09

	Spontaneous 2005–06	Spontaneous 2006–07	Spontaneous 2007–08	Spontaneous 2008–09
Constant	3.560*** (1.105)	4.664*** (0.972)	4.193*** (1.360)	5.809*** (1.549)
Leadership	0.393 (0.335)	0.609** (0.291)	0.849** (0.403)	0.888* (0.455)
Insecure Seat	-1.036*** (0.365)	-0.790** (0.315)	-0.870* (0.439)	-1.081** (0.495)
Sole Constituency Member	-0.754** (0.353)	-0.665** (0.309)	-0.865** (0.429)	-1.044** (0.484)
Final Term	-0.171 (0.378)	-0.047 (0.325)	-0.422 (0.454)	-0.683 (0.512)
Seniority	0.400 (0.305)	-0.197 (0.268)	0.456 (0.366)	0.385 (0.413)
Seniority Squared	-0.051 (0.036)	0.013 (0.031)	-0.065 (0.043)	-0.058 (0.049)
Gender	0.599 (0.369)	0.370 (0.330)	0.286 (0.444)	0.161 (0.490)
Age	-0.034** (0.016)	-0.043*** (0.014)	-0.031 (0.020)	-0.041* (0.022)
Opposition Parties (Liberal Party [V] as reference):				
Christian People's Party [KrF]	-0.107 (0.578)	0.268 (0.524)	-0.654 (0.709)	-0.739 (0.801)
Conservatives [H]	-1.282** (0.587)	-0.658 (0.528)	-1.728** (0.706)	-1.866** (0.797)
Progress Party [FrP]	-1.940*** (0.561)	-1.617*** (0.500)	-2.551*** (0.675)	-3.090*** (0.762)
Adj. R^2	0.263	0.289	0.240	0.260
N	82	78	80	81

Notes: OLS estimates with standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

some standard controls. The *leadership* dichotomy includes party group leaders and deputies, members of the Presidium and leaders and deputies of legislative committees (non-leaders are coded 0). There are no backbenchers in a strict sense in the *Storting*, as each MP has to be an active member of a standing committee. However, the least central MPs often occupy electorally unsafe seats, and electoral vulnerability to some extent indicates relative insignificance within the party. The variable *insecure seat* is coded 1 if an MP has an adjustment seat or a seat belonging to the last quartile allocated in the constituency.⁵ There are a total of 19 constituencies ranging from 4 to 17 seats (including one adjustment seat in each district). *Sole constituency member* is a variable that indicates whether the MP is the only one from his or her party in a constituency. A sole representative will have an incentive to use questioning to voice concerns by the home constituency, thereby also affecting one's chances of re-nomination and re-election. MPs can act on this incentive provided access is open. *Final term* is coded 1 if the MP in question was not re-elected in 2009. MPs in their final term should not be expected to use questioning for electoral purposes (if open access), and will not be given priority by their parties if access is restricted.

The other variables are included for control purposes. *Seniority* measures the number of terms. Its effect is curvilinear in most of the equations. *Age* is in years. *Gender* is coded with men as 1. The final variables are party dummies. The Liberal Party (V) is the reference category in the equations. This party has 10 MPs, one less than the Christian People's Party (KrF). The Conservatives (H) and the Progress Party (FrP) have 23 and 38 MPs, respectively. The total

number of units (opposition politicians) is less than 82 in some of the equations (parliamentary session) because outliers have been removed.

With regard to spontaneous questions, as expected, leadership has a positive effect. In the open access Question Time, the leadership variable does not have a similar impact; it tends to be negative, although not significant. In the context of restricted access the electoral variables are negative; those controlling the agenda do not seem to let MPs use spontaneous questions for self-serving electoral purposes. In Question Time, leadership position plays no role. To be the only party-MP from a district tends to increase questioning. Those in their final term tend to reduce questioning. The strong effects of two of the party dummies in the equations of Question Hour reflect that the two biggest parties – Conservatives and the Progress Party – do not have a share of spontaneous questions that is proportional to their share of seats. The reason for this is the strict time constraint.

The main purpose of the regressions in Tables 3 and 4 has been to show that differences in access rules at the institutional level generate behavioural differences. Scarcity of plenary time makes the leadership of the parliamentary party groups more central in coordinating and allocating access to questioning. The relevant effects are quite consistent over all four years of the election term.

Conclusion

Questioning is an important activity in the *Storting*. Over recent decades, new instruments of questioning have been created and others have been re-regulated several times. The total number of questions each year continues to grow, but the mix has changed and written questions are now far more numerous than oral questions. Parliamentary questioning always has been an arena for the opposition, but representatives of governing parties today are less active than ever; government supporters have vanished from the scene.

Access regulations differ among available instruments of questioning. This research contrasted two instruments of oral questioning that differ sharply when it comes to access regulations. Question Time is (still) marked by relatively open access. Parties exert no control. Formulation of ordinary questions is left to individual MPs. Those who want to ask questions normally gain access to the floor without any party interference. Question Hour, on the other hand, is limited to exactly one hour, and, with a total of 169 MPs in the *Storting*, access has to be regulated in one way or another. Restricted access implies at least some degree of centralisation of agenda power to the party leadership (within constraints set by the Rules of Procedure and the Presidium as practical organiser). Open versus restricted access is a crucial distinction when it comes to explaining parliamentary questioning. Because the parties have got a role as pre-floor gatekeepers in Question Hour, it has developed into more of an arena for frontbenchers. In the open access Question Time, individual considerations related to the electoral arena play a more prominent role. Those with a leadership position are not particularly active. The lessons for the comparative study of

parliamentary questions as a tool to measure the behaviour of individual legislators is clear: the details of institutions and rules governing access to questioning tools must be described and controlled for. Patterns of questions reflect not just behaviour but the boundaries dictated by access rules.

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Notes

1. Interviews both with staffers from opposition and government parties were conducted in January 2011.
2. Based on interviews.
3. Contact the author for details set out in Appendix Table A1. Not available here through lack of space.
4. An example of the use of a lottery (for backbench questions) can be found in the Prime Minister's Questions (PMQ) in the British House of Commons.
5. In each constituency, seats are allocated to parties sequentially according to electoral strength (by using the Sainte Lagüe formulae). Seats that are allocated late in the process are seen as more insecure than those allocated early.

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