

## Parliamentary Questions

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The goal of this chapter is to explain how policymakers prioritize issues across time and countries, focusing on one specific type of parliamentary activity: oral questions in plenary sessions. According to existing research about the policy process and the dynamics of policy change (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993, 2015), one should expect important regularities in the way policymakers pay attention to issues in the parliamentary arena in Western democracies. As Jones and Baumgartner (2005) emphasize for the United States, issue attention most of the time is highly concentrated on a few topics, and shifts in attention rarely occur following gradual adaptations to the growing importance of some new issues, but rather as a result of alarming and urgent adjustments to new social, political and/or economic conditions. Policymakers' responses to new issues is almost nil until the severity of problems force them to take action, which generally results in sudden increases in issue attention. These punctuations in issue attention reflect policymakers' reactions to the signals from their environment and only occur when issues reach a threshold, at which time they are impossible to ignore. When signals are strong enough, policy issues can no longer be neglected, capturing a disproportional amount of attention in the political agenda (Jones and Baumgartner, 2005).

Concentration of issue attention and dramatic responses to growing problems (or punctuations) occur in a context of cognitive and institutional constraints. Individuals do not have the cognitive capacity to process and interpret information about any issue simultaneously, and even if they could do so, the rules governing the political system impose important limits to the number of issues policymakers can process at a given point of time (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993; Jones and Baumgartner, 2005). Many issues are worthy of policymakers' attention, but not all of them can get onto the political agenda at the same time (Jones and Baumgartner, 2005; Kingdon,

1984). As a result, any correspondence between the dynamics of problem severity and policymakers issue attention tends to be low across time.

Following this line of research we test the general applicability of the punctuated equilibrium theory, and also explain some of the main characteristics of parliamentary activities in advanced democracies in recent decades (Copeland and Patterson, 1994; Wiberg, 1995; Döring, 1995; Green-Pedersen, 2010). Is over-time change in issue attention during question time incremental or rather stable and occasionally interrupted with radical changes? To what extent does economic recession generate an increasing concentration of issue attention to a set of issues? Do policymakers increasingly engage in non-legislative parliamentary activities as a mechanism of party competition? These questions have generated an intense debate in agenda-setting and legislative studies in recent decades. Our goal is to explore these trends by focusing on a specific type of non-legislative activity: oral questions. The analysis relies on the data available in eight countries of the Comparative Agendas Project webpage—Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, The United Kingdom, and Switzerland.<sup>1</sup> Time coverage differs across countries but the shortest span is a decade, so as to allow longitudinal studies. The final aggregated dataset, summarized in Table 29.1, contains almost 45,000 coded questions, making it the most complete dataset on non-legislative activities ever examined (to date). For each oral question, each team provided information about the date the oral question was submitted, the issue the oral question deals with (classified using one of the 21 topics and 230 subtopics of the CAP codebook), and, when available, the political party asking the question.

The chapter is structured as follows. Section 29.1 describes some of the features of oral questions and provides basic information about the merged CAP databases. The following sections go on to analyze available data. Section 29.2 analyzes to what extent oral questions are increasing over time

**Table 29.1.** Codification of oral questions by CAP

| Country        | Start | End  | No. of elections | No. of cabinets | No. of questions | % Opposition |
|----------------|-------|------|------------------|-----------------|------------------|--------------|
| Belgium        | 1988  | 2010 | 6                | 10              | 8223             | 58.5         |
| Denmark        | 1997  | 2012 | 6                | 7               | 1945             | 100.0        |
| France         | 1995  | 2005 | 3                | 7               | 1176             | 68.5         |
| Italy          | 1997  | 2014 | 5                | 12              | 4298             | 55.3         |
| Netherlands    | 1984  | 2008 | 8                | 10              | 1394             | 79.3         |
| Portugal       | 2003  | 2014 | 4                | 5               | 1940             | 77.8         |
| Spain          | 1983  | 2015 | 9                | 9               | 16,342           | 73.0         |
| United Kingdom | 1998  | 2008 | 3                | 4               | 8617             | 61.5         |

Source: Comparative Agendas Project

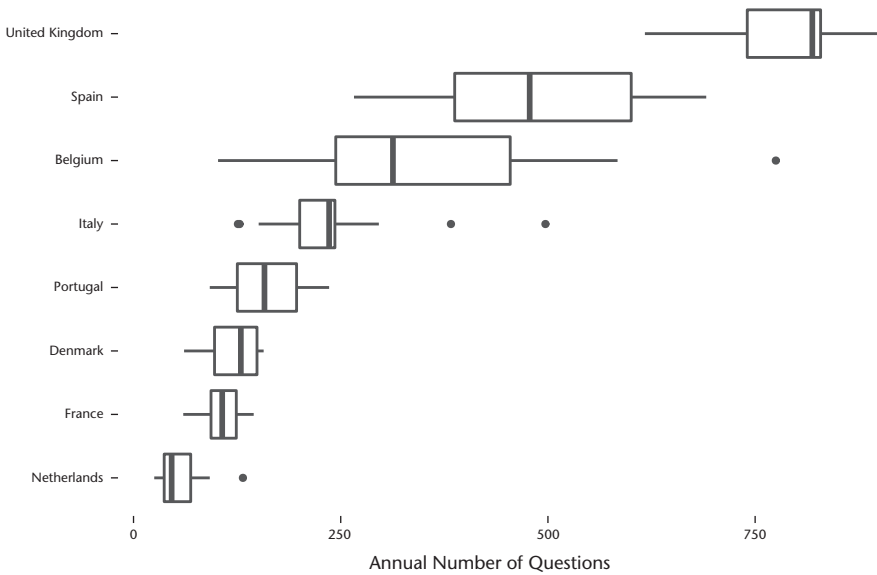
across countries. These findings are taken up in Section 29.3, which asks whether these trends occur in parallel to a growing fragmentation of the oral questions agenda and whether this trend is affected by economic recession. Section 29.4 explores hypotheses drawn from the literature on punctuated equilibrium, more specifically on the impact of institutional friction on issue attention change, asking whether the latter follows a leptokurtic distributional form and what can account for cross-country variation. In Section 29.5 we summarize our findings.

## 29.1 Oral Questions as Attention-Seeking Devices

In most Western non-presidential democracies, parliamentary rules define oral questions as one of the most important instruments available to individual deputies or/and parliamentary groups to monitor and publicly challenge governmental activities. Yet, empirical research demonstrates oral questions are also issue attention-seeking devices that individual MPs and/or parliamentary groups use to fulfill different political purposes. On some occasions, MPs ask questions as a way to raise attention about issues important to their constituencies, on other occasions they may simply show their concern and their thinking about highly politicized issues and/or events, while at other times, they are mainly oriented to highlight the flaws and weaknesses of governmental performance (Wiberg, 1995; Green-Pedersen, 2010; Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2010; Seeberg, 2013; Bevan and John, 2016; Chaqués-Bonafont et al., 2015; Borghetto and Russo, 2018; Salmond, 2014).

Oral questions constitute a crucial element of the symbolic political agenda. However, as Figure 29.1 and Table 29.1 illustrate, their use varies greatly across the eight advanced democracies under analysis. In the two majoritarian parliamentary systems—in the United Kingdom and in Spain—the mean number of oral questions is significantly above the average. British and Spanish members of the executive receive a median number of 755 and 483 questions per year. In contrast, in those countries in which there is a larger number of parties with parliamentary representation the mean number of questions is significantly lower: France (106 questions a year), Denmark (122 oral questions a year), Portugal (168), and the Netherlands (171), with the only exception being Belgium (357 oral questions a year).

Formal rules partly explain how political parties use oral questions. In most countries parliamentary rules define the functions and procedures of oral questions, their timing, frequency, and duration, which vary considerably from country to country. In contrast to other parliamentary activities, the institutional friction—defined as the cost to reaching an agreement—associated with oral questions is quite low (Baumgartner et al., 2009;



**Figure 29.1.** Distribution of annual number of oral questions across countries (box-plots)  
*Source:* Comparative Agendas Project

Baumgartner and Jones, 2015). To introduce an oral question there is no need to engage in any voting procedure. MPs can introduce oral questions about any issue they consider important provided that the issue is publicly relevant, falls directly under the responsibility of the executive, and does not deal with personal or private matters of its members.

In general, formal rules establish that all members of parliament (MPs) can participate during question time on a regular basis, usually every week during parliamentary sessions. Differences exist regarding whether oral questions are asked by deputies as individual members like in Denmark or the Netherlands, or as a part of a parliamentary group. In those political systems with strong party discipline, the capacity of individual MPs to highlight some issues during question time is limited by party leaders, who become key veto players, able to impose important limits on who asks questions about which issues and when (Rozerberg and Martin, 2011; Martin, 2011; Russo, 2011). Formal rules also define the maximum number of questions that can be scheduled per session and the pattern of distribution of oral questions across individual representatives and/or parliamentary groups. In Italy, all groups have the same allotment of questions regardless of the number of seats (Russo and Cavalieri, 2016), while in Spain, the allotment of oral questions per session for each parliamentary group varies across legislatures depending on the number of seats of each group (Chaqués-Bonafont et al., 2015). As a result, question time in Spain has a larger scope—questions per session in Spain

range from twenty-four to twenty-eight depending on the legislature, double that of Italy. In contrast, in the United Kingdom, parliamentary rules do not establish formal restrictions about the number of questions that can be scheduled during question time (Bevan and John, 2016).<sup>2</sup>

Opposition parties are more active than governing parties during question time in all countries. As described in Table 29.1, in Denmark, the parties in government do not participate in question time, while in the case of Belgium, Italy, or Spain the party in government asks on average more than 40 percent of the oral questions per session. In the case of Belgium and Italy, it originates from the presence of large internally fragmented majority coalitions (Russo and Cavalieri, 2016; Vlieghehart and Walgrave, 2011), while in the case of Spain the explanation is more related to formal rules (Chaqués-Bonafont et al., 2015). In the case of governing parties, question time represents a venue where MPs can address “friendly” questions to the cabinet, namely questions that aim to highlight and give publicity to policy achievements and governmental success. In contrast, opposition parties’ questions are employed to force the government to talk about highly controversial issues, emphasizing policy failures and social discontent. In doing so, as several scholars in the CAP community have already demonstrated (Green-Pedersen, 2010; Chaqués-Bonafont and Baumgartner, 2013; Baumgartner and Chaqués-Bonafont, 2015; Vlingehart et al., 2016) opposition parties follow media attention. In a context of agenda scarcity (e.g., number of questions per session), deputies and parliamentary groups tend to concentrate their attention on those issues that have gained media attention (e.g., newspaper front pages) especially those that emphasize the flaws and mismanagement of the governing party and/or that increase the visibility of those issues that are more rewarding in electoral terms (Baumgartner and Chaqués-Bonafont, 2015).

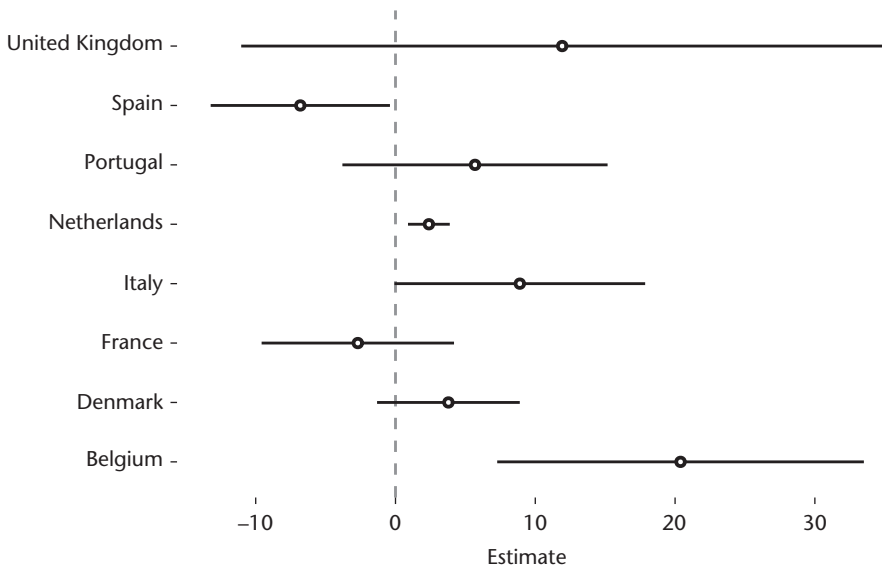
In short, oral questions are not simply instruments available to MPs to oversee governmental activities, but important attention-seeking devices that political parties use to fulfill their goals, mainly to maximize their chances of re-election. Most of the time, opposition parties ask oral questions to signal attention about issues that are not necessarily linked to governmental activities (John and Jennings, 2011; Chaqués-Bonafont et al., 2015; Chaqués-Bonafont and Palau, 2011). On the contrary oral questions of majority MPs are mostly about governmental success and policy achievements and leave aside highly controversial issues that may erode governmental support in the next elections (John et al., 2013; Chaqués-Bonafont et al., 2015). What is more, we argue, formal rules contribute to explaining some cross-national difference in the number of questions, especially in terms of agenda capacity—here the mean number of oral questions in a particular period of time. Section 29.2 goes deeper into the analysis of oral questions as attention-seeking devices focusing on the evolution of oral questions across time.

## 29.2 Party Competition and the Increase in Parliamentary Questioning

Agenda-setting scholars highlight that non-legislative activities are gaining importance as instruments for party competition in most advanced democracies (Döring, 1995; Döring and Hallerberg, 2004; Franklin and Norton, 1993). For some authors (Wiberg, 1995) this increment is linked to the expansion of the public sector and the growing complexity of society. As the scope of governmental activities increase, MPs have to devote an increasing share of their time and resources to monitoring the cabinet and public administration activities. Other authors (Döring, 1995) suggest the increment of non-legislative parliamentary activities is linked to the increasing professionalization of parliaments. Informational and human resources at MPs' disposal have grown exponentially in recent decades, especially after the consolidation of information communication technologies, and this enables MPs to develop their activities in a more efficient and productive way. Other authors argue that the growing importance of non-legislative activities is not necessarily linked to the scope of public affairs, or increasing parliament's professionalization, but to party competition (Green-Pedersen, 2010). Oversight activities have progressively become an arena where political parties compete, by emphasizing those issues that are the most beneficial to their cause (Mair, 1997). According to this view, oral questioning is an instrument political parties use to reinforce issue ownership. Political parties emphasize those issues for which they have a reputational advantage—either because most citizens perceive the party as especially capable of handling a specific issue, or simply as a result of a spontaneous identification between the party and an issue—in order to maximize political rewards (Budge and Farlie, 1983; Petrocik, 1996; Erikson et al., 2002).

In any case, according to the party competition approach, political parties will increasingly engage in non-legislative activities as a means to highlight the issues that maximize their chances of re-election. In order to test this argument, we ran a simple OLS regression model, in which the dependent variable is the number of oral questions per year in each country, and the independent variable is time, measured by year since the start of the series (positive coefficients indicate increase across time). To check for the autoregressive nature of the time series, the model includes the number of oral questions asked in the previous year as a control variable.

Overall, results do not lend support to the party competition hypothesis (see Figure 29.2). Non-parliamentary activities are increasing in Belgium, Denmark, Italy, and Portugal—coefficients are positive but not significant in the case of Portugal—but not in France, Spain, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom. Actually, in the case of France and Spain coefficients are

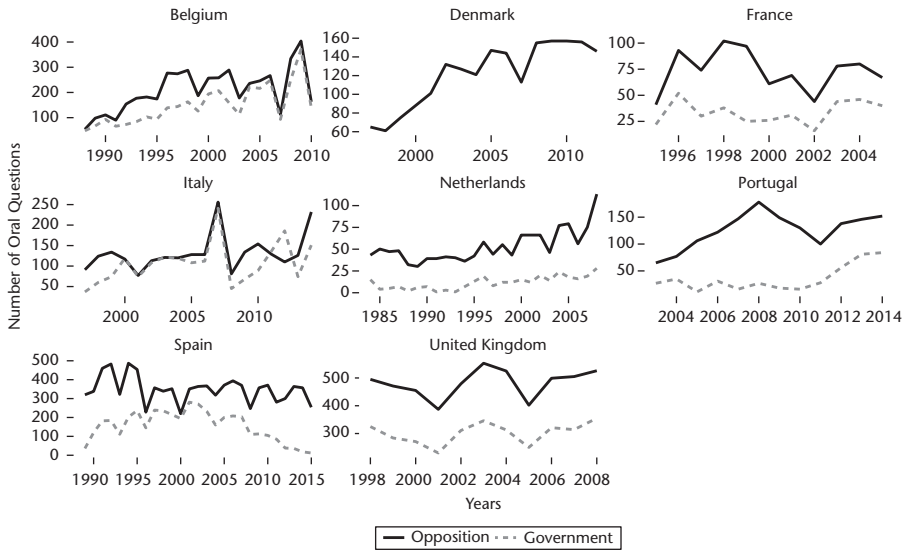


**Figure 29.2.** Estimated effect of the passing of time on the number of oral questions  
*Source:* Comparative Agendas Project

negative, indicating a decline in the number of oral questions across time. In the case of Spain, this decline is linked to both changing parliamentary rules in 2008 and economic recession (see Chaqués-Bonafont et al., 2015 for a discussion). Both factors radically transformed the functioning of non-legislative activities in Spain from one of issue competition, in which the party in government and the main opposition party asked the same number of questions, to a new scenario in which the incentives for the governing party to actively participate in the question period were reduced to the minimum.

These trends are clearly illustrated in Figure 29.3, which describes the number of questions asked by governing and opposition parties across time. In the case of Spain, the average number of questions declined dramatically after 2008, and this holds especially in the case of the governing party: the annual number of questions dropped from an average of 155 before 2008 to sixty-four questions a year, less than three per session. In contrast, in the case of the United Kingdom, the number of questions of both governing and opposition parties follows a stable pattern without much variation over time.

In short, these findings question previous research about the increase of non-parliamentary activities as a party competition strategy. Contrary to previous findings non-legislative activities have increased in some advanced democracies but not in others and this is related to institutional factors and changing economic conditions. The next question is whether non-legislative



**Figure 29.3.** Number of oral questions over time

Source: Comparative Agendas Project

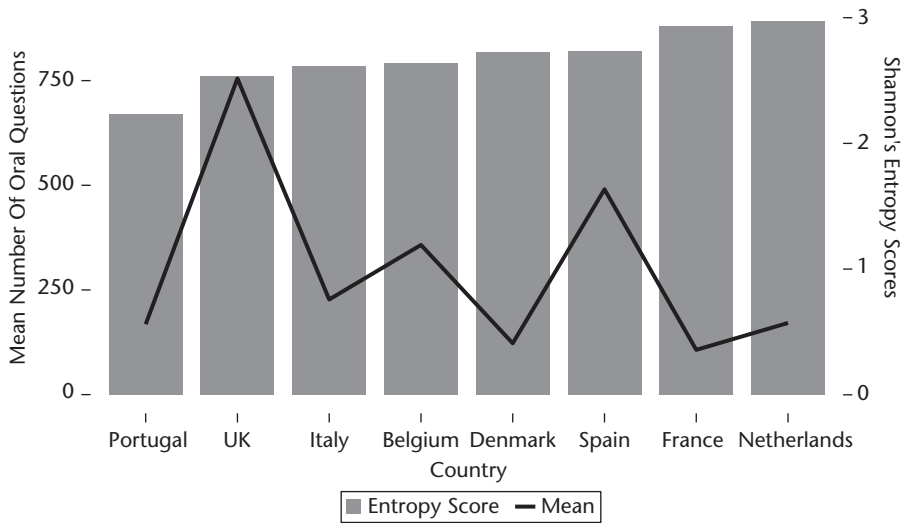
activities are increasingly more diverse across issues and whether this is linked to agenda capacity.

### 29.3 Fragmentation of Issue Attention

Agenda-setting studies highlight that in a context of cognitive and institutional constraints policymakers tend to focus their attention on a few issues. They do so because individuals do not have the cognitive capacity to process and interpret information about all issues at the same time—bounded rationality—and even if they could do so, institutional factors impose important constraints on how policymakers prioritize issues across time (Baumgartner and Jones, 2015, 1993). Cognitive and institutional factors oblige policymakers to select which issues to prioritize by taking into account either pressing events like the collapse of a nuclear-power plant, the issues their constituents identify as most important—like unemployment, or the mass influx of refugees from Syria—or the issues that occupy most of the attention in the media or in the parliamentary arena. In any case, following Jones and Baumgartner (2005) one should expect issue attention to tend to concentrate on a few issues.

There are several methods to analyze agenda diversity (see Jones and Baumgartner, 2005, for a discussion). First, we describe agenda diversity taking as the unit of analysis the percentage of oral questions dealing with an issue





**Figure 29.4.** Agenda fragmentation  
*Source:* Comparative Agendas Project

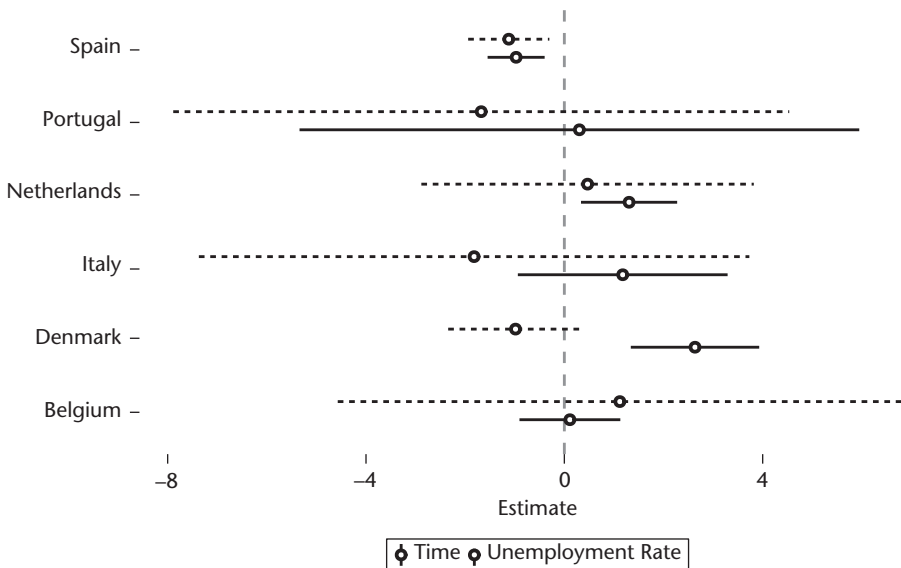
across time (years) in each country using Shannon’s entropy scores. This measure provides an indicator of the relative concentration or dispersion of issue attention for each country (Boydston et al., 2014). The score ranges from 0 to the natural log of 21 (note that the CAP methodologies classifies the political agenda across 21 issues). The higher the score, the less concentrated is the policy agenda.<sup>3</sup> As Figure 29.4 illustrates issue attention is highly diversified across issues during question time in all countries, but there still exists some significant cross-national variation. In the Netherlands and France agenda diversity is high, especially when compared with other countries like Portugal. Also, Figure 29.4 shows that agenda diversity—distribution of attention across issues—is not linked to agenda capacity, that is, the number of questions.

Next, we test whether agenda diversity changes across time. According to existing research, one should expect agenda concentration to increase as a consequence of dramatic events and especially during periods of deep economic crisis. In particular, after 2008, most of the Eurozone was plunged into a deep financial and economic crisis, degenerating in some countries into a public debt and bank defaults. The collapse of major financial institutions and the ensuing liquidity crisis called for urgent and, sometimes, dramatic responses by policymakers, mainly in the form of large-scale rescue packages for the banking sector, industrial bailouts, labor market reforms, and, in some cases, cuts in public service provision (Pisani-Ferry, 2014; Laeven and Valencia, 2008). The magnitude of the global financial crisis left little room for political

parties to select which issues to prioritize. Bad economic news is difficult to ignore and thus gets priority over anything else, pushing off the agenda anything not directly linked with economic conditions (Jennings et al., 2011). Signals about non-crisis-related issues are not completely neglected, but they do not receive as proportional a response as they would in normal times (Chaqués-Bonafont et al., 2015; Borguetto and Russo, forthcoming).

To describe whether issue attention is affected by changing economic conditions we compute for each country a regression model where the number of subtopics is the dependent variable and the independent variable is time elapsed from the start of the series (measured by year) and the annual unemployment rate (data retrieved from Eurostat). Note that here we use a different method to describe agenda fragmentation by focusing on the number of issues political parties are paying attention to while introducing oral questions. Results are quite similar to those studies using entropy scores as a dependent variable (see Chaqués-Bonafont et al., 2015 for a detailed discussion).

Results are summarized in the coefficient plot in Figure 29.5.<sup>4</sup> As expected the number of issues is increasing in all countries (positive point estimates of “Time”), although just the Netherlands and Denmark reach the 95 percent confidence interval. Only Spain shows a decrease. Vice versa, an increase in the unemployment rate, *ceteris paribus*, is normally associated with a narrower agenda. Spain, Portugal, and Italy, among the countries hit most hard by the



**Figure 29.5.** Estimated effect of the passing of time and the unemployment rate on the number of topics

Source: Comparative Agendas Project

economic crisis (but also Denmark), all report a negative coefficient, although only in the Spanish case it is statistically significant. As Chaqués-Bonafont et al. emphasize (2015) high unemployment led to increased attention to economy-related issues in Spain, while other issues—rights, education, environment, transportation, crime, and scientific research—were simply pushed off the agenda. Governments' disproportionate attention to the state of the economy came at the cost of disregarding other issues.

Other effects of the economic crisis are, on the one hand, a diminished possibility for MPs of governing parties to engage in oversight activities as a way to highlight governmental successes and to give visibility to policy decisions that may be electorally rewarding. On the other hand, under bad economic conditions, opposition parties have greater incentives to ask oral questions emphasizing the problems associated with economic recession and highlighting policy failures as a way of eroding confidence in the governing party and maximizing electoral rewards (Chaqués-Bonafont et al., 2015; Borghetto and Russo, 2018).

## 29.4 Parliamentary Questions and Institutional Friction

How do policymakers select the topic of their parliamentary questions? Do they tend to react proportionally to the intensity of demands for their attention or do they respond only when the signals coming from society are strong enough? Understanding the dynamics of policy reactions is important because it unveils how policymakers detect, prioritize, and solve problems, namely how they fulfill their representative function. One of the most important insights provided by agenda studies over the last decade is that, because of the limits of human information processing and institutional resistance to change, policy issue attention is mostly stable with occasional bursts of activity (e.g., Jones and Baumgartner, 2005). Previous works provided evidence that these patterns of attention change also characterize question time (Baumgartner et al., 2009; Brouard, 2013). Faced with an abundance of problems to choose from, as well as time and resource constraints, party leaders select strategically the topic to focus on. The first goal of this section is to corroborate these results using our cross-national data. Second, it looks closer at one case, Portugal, and offers some tentative answers for how the procedures regulating oral questions account for its record high levels of attention changes.

Using stochastic process methods, previous analyses showed that the most appropriate distributional form to describe variation in issue attention change is a leptokurtic curve. Unlike normal distributions, leptokurtic distributions are characterized by a high peak (representing a great number of small or no changes) and fat tails (indicating the presence of a remarkable

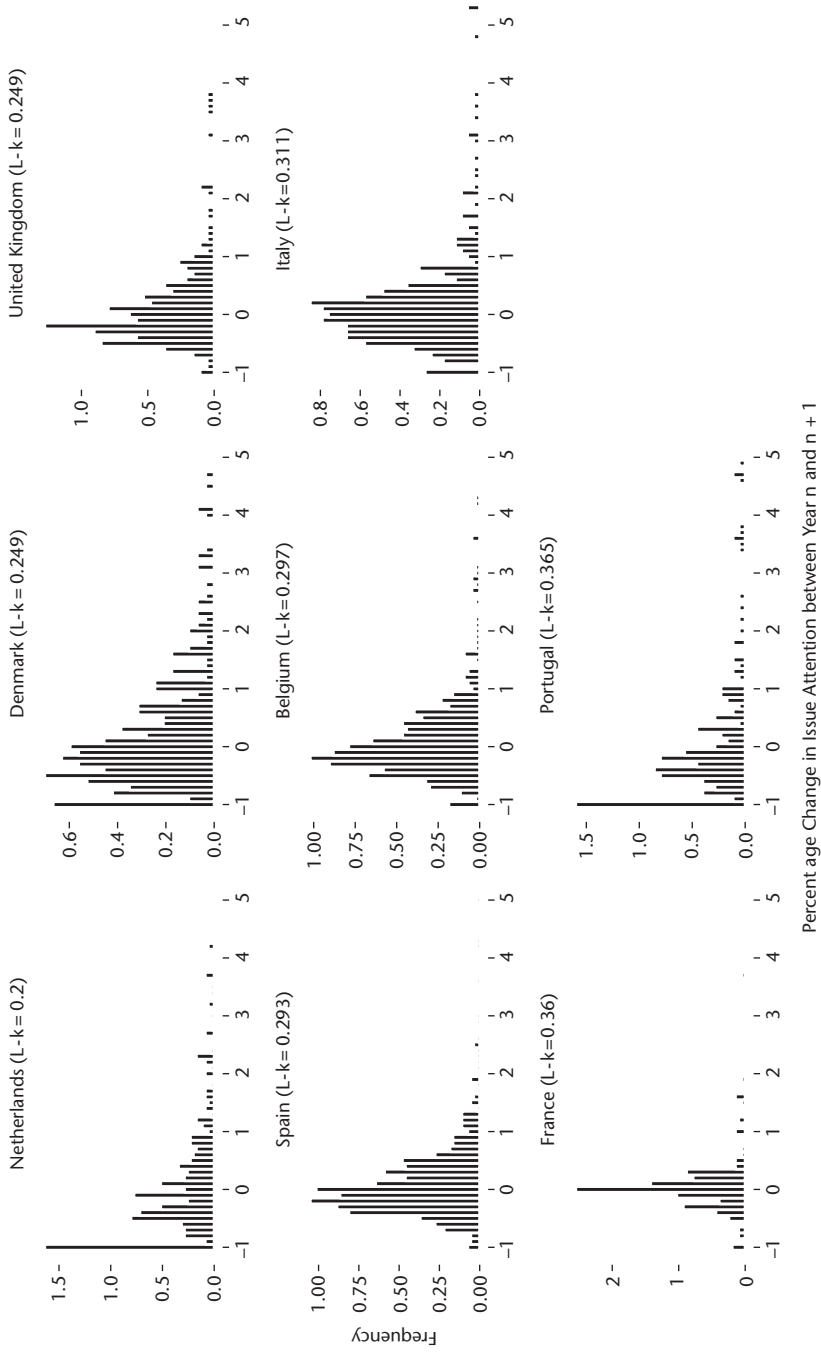
number of large changes). Two main factors account for this dynamic: cognitive/organizational friction and institutional friction. Both are at play when signals from society about relevant problems compete to capture the attention of policymakers. They act as retarding forces, slowing the reaction of the system to new information. Yet, when the amount of pressure reaches a threshold that is impossible to ignore, these issues capture a disproportionate amount of attention.

We hypothesize that these same dynamics are also at play during question time. Most of the time MPs are expected to follow some sort of lead from their party when choosing the content of questions, with ideology and issueownership concerns weighing heavily on their decisions. Without pretensions to describe an actual scenario, one can picture left-wing MPs giving priority to employment concerns (among other things) and right-wing MPs making a case for the interests of the business world. In such a world, question time would be rather monotonous and predictable. This is clearly a scenario that any spectator of, for instance, the Prime Minister's Question Time at Westminster can easily dismiss. Especially after the introduction of television coverage, Question Time has become a stage where parties compete by publicly reacting to the big issues of the day. A stage where opposition parties jump on the news that can embarrass the government or push forward new issues that the governing parties have refused to address until then but that have ended up on the media's radar. What is more, the low costs associated with oral questioning—especially when interventions must be quick and requires little party coordination—encourage this sort of activity.

We argue that the interaction of both scenarios, one where ideology and issueownership considerations matter alongside incentives to ride the wave of public opinion and the media, should produce the stick-slip dynamics expected by punctuated equilibrium theory. To check whether this is the case we calculated the yearly percentage-percentage change for each of the eight countries and twenty-one issues included in our aggregated dataset (see Figure 29.6).

Attention changes range from a minimum of  $-1$  (an issue that received attention at time  $t_0$  disappears at time  $t_1$ ) to a maximum of 22 (2200 percent increase in attention from the previous year). The mean change is 0.18, representing an average attention shift of 18 percent. Figure 29.6 shows frequency distributions of all issue attention changes across countries. Each of the plots reports also the L-kurtosis, a measure of the level of peakedness in a distribution that is—in comparison with the normal kurtosis—less sensible to extremes. As a rule, when distributions exhibit a L-kurtosis higher than 0.123, the average level in a normal distribution, they can be classified as leptokurtic.<sup>5</sup>

All country data reveal some level of leptokurtosis. The mean cross-country L-k is 0.29, with a standard deviation of 0.05. The lowest and highest



**Figure 29.6.** Distribution of attention change across countries

Source: Comparative Agendas Project

values are reached respectively by the Netherlands ( $L-k = 0.2$ ) and Portugal ( $L-k = 0.365$ ). As expected, values are somewhat lower in comparison with other institutions affected by higher levels of institutional friction, such as the budget (Jones et al., 2009), but they are perfectly in line with previous findings on parliamentary oral questions and interpellations in Belgium and Denmark (Baumgartner et al., 2009) as well as France (Brouard, 2013). Oral questioning confirms itself an intermediate activity in the decision-making chain, so it is reasonable to expect milder levels of leptokurtosis.

On the other hand, our data still reveal some level of unexplained variation in our pool of eight countries. For instance, the level of issue volatility is remarkably different in the Netherlands and Portugal. In the latter case, it is more likely to witness dramatic changes in attention for a specific issue from year to year. In line with the literature on punctuated equilibrium (e.g., Baumgartner et al., 2009; Jones et al., 2003, 2009) and its more recent elaborations (Breunig and Koski, 2012; Epp, 2015; John and Bevan, 2012), one can argue that both institutional and political factors account for this variation. Space constraints do not permit carrying out a full comparative analysis here. For this reason, the rest of this section will limit itself to exploring the possible factors explaining the comparatively higher level of punctuatedness in Portugal, the case featuring the highest level of  $L$ -kurtosis.

Among the plausible determinants, the first worthy of mentioning is the level of party-elite control over the content of oral questions. Portuguese question time is organized as a structured debate between the prime minister and parliamentary group frontbenchers. Only rarely are backbenchers allowed to take the floor during these debates. This implies that the content of questions is strictly agreed beforehand by the parliamentary group directorate. On the other hand, backbenchers are allowed to pursue their personal agenda through other outlets, for instance by asking written questions. We argue that the requirement of party coordination in the preparation of question time should impose a filter over the selection of topics. It should take longer for the party leadership to shift attention to a new topic, but when an agreement is reached on the party strategy, they should devote a disproportionate amount of attention to it. Vice versa, when backbenchers are allowed to participate and are left relatively free rein in the choice of questioning, collectively they should tend to focus on a higher variety of issues, reacting more promptly to signals coming from society, especially from their constituencies. Institutional friction should be higher in the former case with respect to the latter. Arguably, another procedural characteristic of question time in Portugal weighs substantially on issue volatility. Since the 2007 reform of the Rules of Procedures in the Portuguese assembly, every other question time session, the PM has had the

power to set the agenda of the day. On those days, the debate kicks off with a PM's statement on a preferred issue, followed by questions from the floor that are required to be germane to the topic (although this rule is not strictly implemented). These rules impose strict constraints on the scope and evolution of the overall agenda. More specifically, they attribute effective agenda-setting power to the government. When the cabinet has interest in drawing attention to a topic, it can use both PM-led debates and, in "ordinary" question time debates, "friendly" questions submitted by its supporting MPs. This is a procedure that clearly injects a high level of institutional friction in the system and helps explain the high record of punctuation in Portugal.

## 29.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, we compare non-parliamentary activities across seven countries for the last decades, using a comprehensive database of more than 45,000 oral questions. Our findings question previous research about the increase of non-parliamentary activities as a party competition strategy. Contrary to previous findings non-legislative activities have increased in some advanced democracies but not others and this is related to institutional factors and changing economic conditions. Also, the chapter illustrates that parliamentary agendas are increasingly fragmented across issues, and this trend is unrelated to agenda capacity. Actually, countries with a larger number of oral questions—mainly the United Kingdom and Spain—have a less fragmented agenda than countries like the Netherlands or Denmark, with a low number of oral questions per session. Again, Spain is the only country that exhibits a decrease in agenda diversity and this is significantly connected with economic recession. After 2008, a large set of issues, especially those related with health, education, and the environment were simply pushed off the agenda. Finally, results also corroborate the punctuated-equilibrium hypothesis. Issue attention evolves following radical changes or punctuations.

## Notes

1. Some of these databases are already available on the CAP website. Note that Germany, Greece, and Switzerland are also in the process of releasing their data.
2. For a broad overview about formal rules regulating parliamentary questioning see Wiberg (1995) and Russo and Wiberg (2010), the country reports in the present book, and the websites of national projects' national parliaments.
3. Shannon's H Entropy =  $-\sum p(x_i) \cdot \ln p(x_i)$  where  $x_i$  represents a dimension,  $p(x_i)$  is the proportion of total attention the dimension receives,  $\ln p(x_i)$  is the log of the

proportion of attention the dimension receives, using the total number of possible dimensions as the base of the log (Boydston et al., 2014). For a discussion about the advantages of entropy compared to other indicators of agenda diversity see Jennings et al., (2011) or Boydston (2014).

4. Results are mostly similar using as a dependent variable the Shannon's entropy score.
5. The "percentage-percentage" method calculates change as the difference between the percentage of the total agenda devoted to a single issue in one year ( $t_1$ ) and its percentage value in the preceding year ( $t_0$ ), divided by its percentage value in the preceding year ( $t_0$ ). Compare with the "percentage" method (which relies on counts) this measure assumes a fixed total level of governmental capacity to attend to issues over time.

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