

“Information, conflict or constituency? Parliamentary oral questions about defence policies in Spain, Germany, France and the United Kingdom”

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The relation between executive and legislative powers has been characterised as a chain of delegation in which, at the parliamentary stage of the chain: (a) the parliament delegates a large part of its prerogative to the government, (b) the government is held accountable to the parliament (STRØM, MÜLLER, BERGMAN 2003). The simplicity of the relation between the principal and the agent is somehow blurred by the diversity of the motivations of the principal for checking the activities of its agent. The most commonly accepted conceptualisation of the parliamentary scrutiny under the chain of delegation model is that MPs scrutinize ministers in order to know if they act on the interest of the parliament and to press them to do so. The complexity occurs when this collective parliamentary interest is disaggregated at the individual level. The motivations and types of scrutiny practiced by an MP depend then of his/her institutional position (majority/opposition) and of his/her main preferences (policy/office/votes) that are themselves the product both of the institutional framework and of psychological expectations (STRØM, MÜLLER 1999). Thus, to take only but one example, a backbench majority MP who is determined to enter the cabinet will be less willing to force a powerful minister to reveal some hidden aspects of his/her policy than an opposition MP obsessed with the next elections.

Out of the diversity of reasons for engaging into scrutiny activities, three dominant patterns of parliamentary control emerge. The first pattern is “fighting against asymmetric information”. The parliamentary scrutiny tries to limit the information gap between the government and the legislature and to obtain some commitment about the government future behaviour. Such pattern supposes both that MPs engaged in the scrutiny process are essentially policy seekers and that they possess a certain level of expertise and specialisation. The second perspective on parliamentary control is rooted in party politics. MPs act as electoral agents that send contradictory signals to voters in order to obtain their support. Controlling the cabinet can thus be used as a strategy for differentiating each other, for developing the cohesion among the majority and for attacking opposition groups. Oral questions seem all the more useful in that perspective that they are public and, in many cases, broadcasted on TV. MPs in that case tend to be more oriented by electoral and career considerations. Lastly, a part of the parliamentary activities of control can be used in order to protect and support the constituency. MPs actually appear as intermediary agent in charge of diffusing information on a top down but also bottom up process. In view of defending their constituency, they try to obtain information about the government’s plan, they inform the cabinet of the local consequences of the policies and above all they try to influence the future

decisions and to attract some funding for their region. MPs engaged in such activity can be regarded as vote seekers even if their motivations may actually be more complex.

The paper identifies those three patterns and their mutual arrangement on the ground of the oral questions addressed to the Minister for Defence in four Western European assemblies at the mid 2000s'. Issues related to defence appear indeed to be an interesting case for differentiating those elements in parliamentary regimes. The secrecy surrounding defence matters challenges the first dimension of parliamentary control. Defence may be less attractive in terms of party and electoral politics given its (alleged) unanimity as well as the lack of interest of the general public. Yet, the examples of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars indicate that dramatic changes may occur all of a sudden. Lastly, defence policies do have important consequences for local constituency in terms of location of troops as well as defence industry.

Four European democracies have been selected for the comparison: France, the United Kingdom, Spain and Germany. Various comparative studies lead to consider that the two former are largely dominated by the executive power and that the two latter tend to participate more actively to the policy-making process (NORTON 1996 and 1998; DÖRING 1995; DÖRING, HALLERBERG 2004). The electoral system and the role played by central State also oppose the same groups of countries. Taking into consideration each assembly is also interesting for specific reason: the lack of cohesion of the Blair majority after the Iraq war, the particular weakness of the French legislature regarding international affairs under the Vth Republic, the *gross coalition* in Germany since 2005, and the tense relation between majority and opposition in Spain after J.M. Aznar's electoral defeat of 2004.

Among all the numerous scrutiny tools, the oral questions on defence – and more precisely those addressed to the Minister of Defence – have been selected in order to build a comparative framework between the four assemblies. The oral dimension of the control also enables to capture the politicized part of the parliamentary activities that otherwise tends to be mostly technical. The paper presents the data (1) and the main trends related to the question on defence (2) before discussing their use for technical/informational (3), party (4) or local (5) purposes.

1. The data

Attention was paid on building a comparative framework between four democracies that are very different in many respects. The oral question on defence (OQD) has been

selected by taking only into account the questions asked to the Minister of defence or by a cabinet member under his/her authority. Other members of the government as the Prime Minister and the Foreign Affairs Minister but also the Minister for Industry are also regularly questioned on defence issues. Yet, the selection of the question asked to a given minister that exists in each of the four selected countries enabled to build a comparative framework. It also permits to analyse globally the relation to the legislature of a given member of the government. The collective parliamentary questions have also been excluded like the Spanish *interpelaciones* presented in the name of a group and addressed to the whole government. By definition such a procedure does not enable to analyse the individual motivations for questioning ministers. This analysis focuses on the OQD formulated by MPs in Lower Houses in France (Assemblée nationale), Germany (Bundestag), Spain (Congreso), and the UK (House of Commons) and answered by the Minister of Defence or by a member of the government under his/her authority.

The period of time that has been studied varies for each country: 2002-2007 for France (60 months), 2004-2005 for the UK (12 months), 2005- February 2009 for Germany (40 months) and 2004-2008 for Spain (48 months)¹. These different time patterns find their explanation in methodological problems in gathering national data. All national assemblies do not present similar, and thus comparable, available empirical material. Nonetheless, these differences do not present an obstacle to the comparison: the quantitative analysis allows comparing aggregated data and averages, whereas the qualitative study of the OQD underlines national contexts and meaning given to questions.

2. Oral Questions on Defence asked in four European legislatures

The Figure 1 presents the number of OQD and the procedures used for the four assemblies.

¹ The periods cover a whole term of office for France and Spain. The study has been limited to a single session for the Commons due to the high number of OQD asked (from May 2004 to March 2005).

Figure 1. OQD answered by the Defence Minister or by a member of government under his/her authority: number and procedures

	France (2002-2007)	United Kingdom (2004-2005)	Germany (2005-2009)	Spain (2004-2008)
Number of OQD	122	897	56	59
Mean number of OQD by year	24	897	17	16
Questions answered by the Minister	79%	39.5% ²	14%	100%
Questions asked during the "question time"	61%	49%	87.5%	100%

Great variations are to be observed concerning the number of OQD asked in each assembly. About twenty questions are asked by year to the French, German or Spanish Minister whereas the number of questions answered by their British counterpart and the members of cabinet under his authority was 45 times higher in 2004/2005 with 897 oral questions. The difference partly derives from the size of the questions - the concise style of the British question time enabling to ask more questions during the same span of time: questions are formulated through two or three sentences at the Commons against more than ten at the *Assemblée nationale*. Such huge variation could also be explained by the specific political context of that period in the UK as concerns defence issues. Indeed, the wider issue of Iraq and the controversy on the decision-making for the British "road to war" remained firmly at the heart of the agenda. Public attitudes concerning the war in Iraq continued to disturb the Prime Minister Tony Blair, blamed for engaging the UK in the Iraq war and manipulating the Public and the Parliament. Public trust in the government had fallen. In February 2004, the Butler report refused to blame anyone in its inquiry on *Intelligence in Weapons of Mass Destruction*. The Secretary of State for Defence, Geoff Hoon, was a much criticised figure over Iraq. He was widely expected to resign on the publication of the Hutton report on the death of the MoD scientist David Kelly in January 2004³. However, the reading of the set of questions makes clear that there was not any Kelly or Butler effect on the oral questions asked to the defence minister.

Therefore, the high number of oral questions asked on the floor of the Commons mainly derives from the significant and central role played by oral procedures at

² During the question time only or more precisely during the open part of the question time excluding the specific debates (49% of the OQD).

³ Another issue made him vulnerable to criticism both outside and inside his party, namely the transformation and reorganization of the Army he planned: it was meant to lead to changes in the local regiments, notably in Scotland, which had obvious local impacts.

Westminster⁴. Legislative studies have stressed for long the existence of a trade-off between representation and governance (SHEPSLE 1988). More recently, several studies on the European activities of national legislatures have contributed to highlight the relevance of the classic cleavage between *talking* and *working* parliament, the Commons being ideal-typical of that former kind of activity (AUDEL 2005; AUDEL 2007; WESSELS 2005). Working parliaments such as the Danish and German legislatures tend to participate to the policy-making through cooperation behind closed doors with the cabinet. On the contrary, the British lower house is deprived of effective institutional levers for influencing the policy-making process but participates actively to the public scrutiny of the government. The sharp difference between Germany and the UK regarding the number of OQD thus illustrates a classic finding of comparative legislative studies. Nevertheless, it also indicates how close to the German model the French Parliament is even if the National Assembly is poorly involved in governance activities. Lastly, the Spanish and the French Assembly appears also close as concerns the proportion of OQD among all the oral questions: they amount to 1.9% in France and 2.6% in Spain.

The other data relative to the identity of the answering minister and to the procedure used enables to distinguish more precisely the four assemblies. Regarding first, the answering minister:

- There are no sub-minister under the authority of the Minister for Defence in Spain. Two Defence Ministers follow one another within this period of time. The first one is José Bono, until 2006, when José Antonio Alonso Suarez is taking up the office. The former was a popular socialist leader and the latter organised most notably the sending of Spanish soldiers to Lebanon and has increased the number of Spanish troops in Afghanistan.
- In France, the Defence Minister supervised a sub-minister for veterans (Hamlaoui Mékachéra) that answered 21% of the questions⁵. The neo-Gaullist leader Michèle Alliot-Marie was the defence minister throughout the period. She was the first female to access to that position.
- In the UK, the Secretary of State for Defence (Geoffrey Hoon) had under his authority the Armed Forces Minister (Adam Ingram) and a Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Ivor Caplin). The questions addressed to the Ministry of Defence (MoD) were split between that team which refers to the high number of members of the British cabinet.

⁴ More secondarily, this high level also reflects the maintained significance of the army within the British society, in contrast to Germany or Spain (size of the defence industry, numerous troops on the British territories and aboard, associations of veterans...).

⁵ “Secrétaire d’État aux Anciens combattants” became “Ministre délégué” in 2004.

However, it should be noted that even if Mr Hoon answered 39.5% of the OQD asked during the open part of the question time (i.e. excluding the debates focused on a precise topic), that level represents 175 questions, that is ten times more than the French or Spanish ministers.

- In Germany by contrast, the defence Minister hardly ever answers on the floor of the Bundestag (2.4 answers by year). The minister Franz Josef Jung delegated this task to a parliamentary state secretary of his, and most notably in the vast majority to the same one (Christian Schmidt).

Lastly, regarding the procedures followed, national equivalents of the British weekly “question time”⁶ (*Fragestunde*⁷ in Germany, *la pregunta oral en pleno*⁸ in Spain, *questions au gouvernement*⁹ in France) have proved possible and particularly relevant to compare. Indeed, they all share common formal characteristics: they represent institutionalized moments for short oral questions to be formulated in the realm of a session dealing with many topics and being covered by media. In Spain, the totality of the questions enters into that procedure. In Germany, 87.5% of the OQD originate from the *Fragestunde*, the other procedure being the German “Current hour” (*Aktuelle Stunde*¹⁰). In France, 39% of the questions are asked during

⁶ Oral questions are questions asked and answered on the floor of the House of Commons. Questions shall be taken in the first hour of business on Mondays to Thursdays. The Department that answers is designated according to a rota decided by the Government. An MP must table an orderly question at least three days in advance, in order to allow Ministers and their advisers to prepare answers and being briefed on possible supplementary. All tabled questions are subject to a random computer ballot (« shuffle »). The selected questions are printed in the Order Paper. The member whose questions had been selected will be able to ask the supplementary question, which is often the main point. The Speaker may call other members to put supplementary, usually altering between the Government and Opposition sides of the House. When the Speaker decides that enough supplementary have been asked, he calls the Member who has question number two. If the Speaker calls too many supplementary, the Minister will be put under close scrutiny on a few issues. If he calls two few supplementary, more questions will be answered (McKay 2004)

⁷ The weekly question time, called *Fragestunde*, takes place each Wednesday afternoon for two hours and is dedicated to questions. These have to be written and handed in on the Friday noon before the session, allowing the government to prepare answers. Each MP is allowed to ask two questions pro session, and have the right to formulate two follow-up questions in the wake of each question. Complementary to these common oral questions (*mündliche Fragen*), there are also the so-called urgent questions (*dringliche Fragen*), relating to some current issues. These have to be handed in before 12 a.m. the same day. Other MPs can tie themselves to a question in formulating an additional one. When follow-up questions are asked by the MP that asked the first questions, they have not been taken into account. When they are asked by other MPs, they have been counted. It is still to be noticed that questions can be answered in a written form, thus diminishing the number of actual oral answers – those questions have not been considered.

⁸ The question should be handed at least 40 hours before the session. The questions and the answers can be followed by a comment of the questioning MP and a final answer of the minister. The whole question should not last more than 5 minutes. One question time session of two hours is organised each week.

⁹ In order to develop a spontaneous exchange, the wording and even the topic of the question remains secret before the session – even if majority MPs tend to adopt a more cooperative behaviour. The whole question should not last more than 5 minutes. Two question time sessions of one hour each are organised each week.

¹⁰ The *Aktuelle Stunde* is a procedure through which one fraction, unsatisfied of the governmental answer related to a current issue, can call for an additional time dedicated to this precise theme. It takes place in the wake of the *Fragestunde* and is organised around 5-minutes speeches by fraction. The *Aktuelle Stunde* is counted there

a special procedure (rather irrelevantly) called the “questions without debates” (*Questions sans débats*), that are longer, sent in advance and possibly followed by a short comment to the minister’s answer. To the exception of the Commons, all those various procedures have been taken into the picture in order to grasp all the means through which MPs were able to get oral answers by the Ministry of Defence. The case of the UK is indeed special for several reasons. Within the oral questions, we operate a distinction between two series of questions of the same size: the questions asked during the “question time” when MPs deal with a wide variety of topics, and what can be called “specific debates”, that are initiated by the government with a statement from the Defence Minister¹¹. The exclusion of questions related to specific debates enables to analyse the allocation of attentiveness of Parliamentarians without overestimating some issues¹². Thus, the following analysis is realized on the basis of 443 questions in the UK (49% of the OQD), 122 questions in France, 59 in Spain and 56 in Germany.

3. Fighting against asymmetric information

A first motivation for asking OQD can be the will to reduce the information gap between the government and the parliament. A five minutes oral question could be regarded as a loose mean for fighting against asymmetric information in contrast to written questions, parliamentary reports or hearings. Yet, it should be noted that the challenge with an agency problems such as moral hazard derives less from the substantial complexity of public affairs but rather from the temptation of the delegate to take “unobservable action contrary to the principal’s interest” (STRØM 2003: 86). Asking oral questions could be then understood as an attempt to force the cabinet to reveal hidden activities and also to commit itself on future behaviour.

taking into account only the speaker from the fraction having initiated the question. Additionally, we have considered other cases where questions and/or answers were originally in written forms (written question and also “big question”, *grosse Anfrage*), but which have eventually led a Ministry of Defence representative to answer oral questions.

¹¹ For instance during the 2004-2005 session there were two question periods devoted to the discussion of the Pension and Compensation bill, one devoted to the debate about the 2004 White Paper, one concerning Veterans June 9 2004 after the 60th anniversary of D-Day. The following extract from the *Hansard* can also be given: “21 Oct 2004 : Column 1035, The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. Geoffrey Hoon): With permission, Mr. Speaker, I would like to make a further statement about the deployment of UK forces in Iraq” (*Hansard*, 21 October 2004).

¹² For instance the attention devoted by MPs to the veterans issue would be overestimated if we took into account the long time of questions following the 60th anniversary of D-Day. The same is true for pensions if we took the Pensions and Compensations Bill into account.

In that perspective, it makes sense to consider that the members of the Defence committee could be more present among the questioning MPs since they have developed a relative knowledge on those issues. In the follow up of Keith Krehbiel's informational theory, asking questions during the plenary session could also be understood as an incentive for the members of the committee to provide and to share policy-expertise (KREHBIEL 1991)¹³. A public question offers an incentive for the questioning MP since he/she may expect personal publicity from asking it on the floor of the assembly. It is also a way of sharing expertise with other legislators given the presence of non-expert members during the question time and since the formulation of the question already provides information for those members. As defence issues are closely connected with foreign affairs, the proportion of the members of the foreign affairs committee has also be considered. The Figure 2 presents the committee background of the MPs asking OQD for both committees.

Figure 2. Committee background of the MPs asking OQD

	France	United Kingdom	Germany	Spain
1. Defence committee				
OQD asked by members of committee	26%	5%	5%	61%
Committee members asking questions	27.5%	82%	6%	50%
2. Foreign Affairs committee				
OQD asked by members of committee	16%	1%	24%	10%
Committee members asking questions	14%	28%	8%	13%

The distribution of the questions asked by the members of the defence committee distinguishes the German case. In Germany, the proportion of OQD asked by the members of the defence is close to the proportion of those members among the whole house whereas in the UK, France and Spain they are over-represented among the questioning MPs¹⁴. The three latter assemblies are yet distinct regarding first the proportion of committee members during the question time (from 5% to two-thirds) and second the distribution of the questioning MPs among the members of the committee. Half of the 39 members have asked OQD in Spain against 27.5% only in France. In the defence committee of the French National Assembly, a small group of eight deputies concentrates two-thirds of the questions. Thus, it appears that in

¹³ “[...] the focus in informational approaches is on choosing rules and procedures that provide incentives for individuals to develop policy expertise and to share policy-relevant information with fellow legislators, including legislators with competing distributive interests” (KREHBIEL 1991: 5).

¹⁴ The members of the Defence Committee represent 12% of the house in France, 11% in Spain, 5% in Germany and 1.7% in the UK.

that country a special role of policy expert in the field of defence is played by a limited and recognized number of MPs as a result of the division of work and topics among them and also of their personal taste and emotional incentives (SEARING 1994).

In contrast to the defence committee, the members of the foreign affairs committee are more present in Germany among the MPs that ask OQD: one quarter of the questions are asked by some of them while they represent about 5% of the assembly. Their over-representation reflects the division of competencies among committees since the foreign affairs committee – rather than the defence committee - is responsible for scrutinizing military operations, which have represented an overall theme along the period studied. The process of specialisation of a small group of MPs that has been observed in the French defence committee is similar in the German foreign affairs one since only three members concentrate most of the questions. In the three other countries, the proportion of members of the Foreign Affairs committee asking a question to the Defence Minister is close to the size of the committee in the assembly. This process is all the more so striking in the German case when taking members of the budget committee into the picture, as well as the possibility for MPs to be substitutes in other committees. The Budget committee is an important veto player in the definition and execution of defence policy, since the government has to get its approval for the annual budget but also for any modification and for the implementation of armament programmes whose costs exceed 25 millions euros. 16% of OQD are indeed asked by three members of the Budget committee. Among them, two MPs concentrate 14% of all OQDs. It is interesting to notice that these two MPs are full members of the Budget Committee but also substitutes of the Defence Committee.

Oral questions on defence share some common features in terms of content, such as the importance of the military operations, while showing interesting national differences in the prioritization of themes dealt with by OQD. In the UK, the different themes can be categorized into four big groups: almost half the OQD deal with the military operations (41% of OQD); the British army comes as the second most important theme, followed by defence industrial issues, both themes representing about one quarter of the OQD (see: FOUCAULT IRONDELLE 2009). The last question is the defence policy orientation regarding NATO and the European Union and its European Security and Defence Policy, which amounts to a marginal part of OQD (2%). Within these big categories, several sub-themes can be distinguished. First, not only do external military operations dominate the agenda on defence, but Irak is overrepresented in contrast to other operations such as Afghanistan or the Balkans.

Industrial policy, changes in the territorial organisation of the army as well as reform in the military recruitment represent other important themes on the agenda.

The OQD asked by Spanish MPs show a different prioritization. Here local issues seem to play a bigger role. They are mostly concerned with the question of military facilities being privatized or being made over to autonomous communities. Moreover, the second more important theme is the soldiers. Questions deal with issues such as recruitment policy, living conditions of soldiers, the gender evolution within the army and the consequences of the professionalization process ended in 2001. Surprisingly, military operations have only triggered a small percentage of oral questions. They are mostly about checking the situations of the Spanish troops abroad (with operations in Congo, Haïti, Pakistan), the safety level of troops in Afghanistan and also about few accidents.

The theme dominating the OQD in the Bundestag is the German participation to NATO *International Security Assistance Force (ISAF)*, as well as to the Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan. Other important themes though are the use of military means within national boundaries; local issues are very marginal. The use of OQD in the German Bundestag is characteristic of informational strategies deployed by MPs to exert control on the government. Indeed, a vast majority of questions make either explicit or implicit reference to the issue of power relations between the government and the parliament. Explicit questions mention the insufficient information or communication on those matters emanating from the government. MPs criticize the closed nature of the decision-making process, this in spite of the German tradition of *Parlamentsarmee* and the constitutional background subordinating the military to the Parliament. They also question the tendency for the executive branch to monopolise this policy, comparing it in many respects to the US tradition. Here, the debate surrounding the publishing of the 2006 German White Book on Defence (WBD) is particularly illustrative: the three opposition parties have used the *Fragestunde* to question the Minister although the latter did not want to make any statement one week before the WBD being publicly presented. The WBD had been drafted behind closed doors, without any parliamentary debate before the government presenting it to the parliament and public – all the more so infuriating MPs when considering that some elements of its content had obviously been given to the press before any presentation in the parliamentary arena. This issue of gathering information is also clear in the questions on Afghanistan: in most cases are MPs asking for information and for guarantees regarding the very possibility for parliamentary control to be exerted, as well in the decision-making process as in the implementation phase.

4. Fighting for party politics

Another hypothesis on explaining incentives for MPs to formulate oral questions on defence puts the emphasis on the importance on party politics. Asking the Ministry of Defence to answer for his/her activities is a way for MPs to follow party-oriented strategies, in so far that questions and answers are formulated orally in the parliamentary realm and therefore also open to public scrutiny through high media coverage. One ought to observe the presence of two complementary dynamics: on the one hand, the naming, blaming and shaming strategies, given that parties are given the opportunity to openly criticize opponents; on the other, supporting and praising strategies inside opposition or majority parties. In that last case, answering questions give one government member the opportunity to deliver regular speech on the assembly chair. Both vote-seekers and office-seekers MPs may engage in electoral and partisanship patterns of parliamentary control since asking an aggressive question is a way a signalling oneself to the voters as well as to the party gatekeepers. Blaming and prasing strategies are both observable from majority or opposition MPs: majority ones can also criticise opposition's current posture or past policies, whereas opposition ones can also praise their own members or past policies. Such a perspective on parliamentary control demands for checking the level of politicization of OQD in the first place (figure 3), and then come to an analysis of the use of these questions as party politics' instruments.

Figure 3. The political significance of the OQD: procedure, questioning MPs, respondent minister (by year)

	France	United Kingdom	Germany	Spain
OQD asked during the "question time"	15	443	15	16
OQD asked by frontbench MPs	0.8	(missing)	0.9	2
OQD answered personally by the Defence Minister	14	175 ¹⁵	2.4	16

Note: all the figures present the mean by year for the periods considered

The political significance of OQD among countries shows variation between three patterns. Compared to other cases, politicisation proves the most important in the UK, as shows by the very high number of questions directly answered pro year by the Secretary of

¹⁵ During the open part of the question time only (49% of the OQD). See note 2.

State himself. Answering parliamentary questions within the question time appears to be a fully acknowledged and institutionalised task of the minister. Thus Geoffrey Hoon answered 115 questions on the Iraq War, which was one the two most controversial and politicized issue in 2004¹⁶. The politicisation of OQD among France, Spain and Germany can be distinguished between the two former and the latter country. Yet they share one common point which distinguishes them from the UK: the number of questions answered to by the Defence Minister as well as the number of questions formulated by frontbench MPs show that institutionalized question times within the parliamentary realm can hardly ever be regarded as high politics as concerns OQD. Both French and Spanish Defence Ministers appear on average once to twice a month to answer parliamentarians' questions. In Spain, the Defence Minister does not seem to take this task as a fundamental issue, for his answers are short and relatively terse. At the end of the spectrum, Germany shows a marginal number of questions being directly answered by the Defence Minister. Accounting for governmental action in the parliamentary realm appears not to be one of the Minister's duties. The vast majority of questions are answered by the same of the parliamentary state secretary attached to the minister, Christian Schmidt. This delegation of accountability in front of parliamentarians can be interpreted as a sign of both depolitization of those issues and of specialization within the Minister's staff.

Party politics strategies have been studied through the proportion of OQD formulated by majority and opposition MPs and their relative overall weight in the respective lower houses (figure 4).

Figure 4. Party background of the questioning MPs

	France	United Kingdom	Germany	Spain
OQD asked by majority MPs	61%	44.5%	7%	54%
Majority MPs in the house	63%	62.5%	73%	50.5%
OQD asked by opp. MPs	37%	55.5%	93%	32%
Opposition MPs in the house	33%	37.5%	27%	45%

In regard to party politics strategies followed in defence matters, France and Spain can be associated. In both chambers, the proportion of OQD emanating from both majority and opposition is very close the overall weight of parliamentary groups. This result derives from the institutional arrangements of the question time since the duration of speech of parliamentary groups is proportional to their size. Yet, this correlation also shows that defence

¹⁶ The other one, the reorganization of the Army is clearly delegated to the Minister of State, Minister of Defence (Adam Ingram) and the Parliamentary Under-Secretary for Defence (Ivor Caplin).

is neither being used by the opposition parties as a major tool to criticise ruling parties nor totally neglected. This relatively unpoliticised nature of debates on defence can be explained by the fact that defence has historically appeared as one of the few “apolitical” policies, since it was meant to rely on large consensus among parties. Eventually, it should be noticed that despite that consensual feature and despite the low salience in public opinion, opposition and majority parties do use OQD with competitive electoral views in both countries.

A large proportion of questions are asked by majority members in order to enable the minister to support his/her activities and to give details about it. Anecdotal evidences even indicate that the minister’s staff often suggests the topic (if not the wording) of the questions to backbench majority MPs. Both in France and Spain, the questions from majority MPs and the answers of the Defence minister are also used in order to attack opposition for its past policies and its current platform¹⁷. In February and March 2006 in France, the insults of a socialist leader, the mayor of Montpellier George Frèche, against some members of the Harki community¹⁸ provoked several waves of questioning by majority MPs during two months. The number of questions as well as the clapping and jeering reported in the official minutes indicate that blaming Frèche was a collective strategy one year before the elections in a period where the right-wing majority was strongly divided between President Chirac’s supporters and Sarkozy’s ones. Similarly, French parliamentary opposition used the question time in order to foster its cohesion and attack the majority. However the strategy was hardly effective since the socialist party’s views and defence were not too far from Chirac’s policy regarding NATO, Afghanistan and European defence. In Spain, the oral sessions about defence are less tense as indicated by the low profile of the Minister when answering. Around one fifth of OQD leads to disputes, among which the half relates to the imprisonment of two militants of the Popular Party. Questions are also being used by regionalist parties, which have not been categorized into the majority/opposition divide. If their questions mostly deal with local issues, they are often characterised by an aggressive tone against the central State and the government.

The results for the UK illustrates the well-known role played by the institutionalized Majesty’s Opposition at Westminster. British opposition parties are acknowledged in their task of controlling the executive and enjoy in this respect extended rights in comparison to other countries. Indeed, more than half the OQD are formulated by opposition MPs. Still, the

¹⁷ The fact that a period of alternation was selected in both cases obviously increased that feature.

¹⁸ Muslim Algerians serving as auxiliaries with the French Army during the Algerian war from 1954 to 1962. Some of them were repatriated in France after the war.

percentage of OQD formulated by majority MPs, amounting to 45.5% is not to be downplayed. The qualitative analysis of OQD underlines two dynamics for explaining this repartition of questions. First, debates in their majority do not lead to disputes: governmental answers are quite precise and technical, showing the expertise of the MoD on those matters. Second, the confrontational nature of MPs' questions is not a prerogative of the sole opposition. It is much rather concentrated on certain issues, such as military restructuring in Scotland or armament programmes. Complementary to the idea that confrontation is issue-dependent, one observes that both majority and opposition MPs use OQD as tools to criticise the government. On those confrontational issues, Labour MPs appear as critical as opposition ones. Indeed, the Blair government was being criticized for its military stance on Iraq, emanating both from opposition and from its own party. Moreover, it faced at this time some backbenchers' rebellion on other public policies debate (COWLEY 2005). This all contributed to a climate of party fragmentation regarding defence issues and allowed for majority MPs to use oral questions as a tool to criticise their own government.

The case of Germany exemplifies the use of oral questions as a tool in the hands of opposition parties to criticize the ruling coalition. Indeed, in the period of time studied, only 7% of OQD have been formulated by majority MPs. This number seems all the more significant when their content is also analysed: these questions all relate to local issues. Opposition MPs use therefore the media coverage of the *Fragestunde* as a way to contest the majority large coalition. This is observable on debates on military operations, but also more generally on the governmental stance towards the use of military means. The opposition is indeed composed of three parties, among which the left-wing party *Die Linke*, known for its anti-militarist posture. The fact that oral questions are used as a favoured tool of the opposition to question the government should be understood in the light of the strength of the committee system and of the specificity of the defence committee. The defence committee is one of the few ones whose sessions take place behind closed doors. The secrecy is justified by the strategic feature proper to defence policy but it also contributes to the making of consensus between executive and legislative branches regarding defence issues. In that perspective, oral questions are all the more an instrument of party strategies in the hand of opposition that they are the only opportunity to voice dissent opinions on defence. The central role played by the defence committee eventually contributes to reduce the political significance of the questioning procedure. The question time is in the hand of the opposition but it is regarded by the government and majority parties as a secondary aspect of the executive / legislative relation regarding defence.

5. Fighting for the constituency

Concerning the local dimension, we chose a parsimonious approach. We understand a question as a local question when there was an explicit reference to the constituency or to the constituents of the Member of Parliament in the text of his / her question or in the answer from the member of the Government.

Figure 5. Local issues raised by OQD

OQD raising local issues asked...	France	United Kingdom	Germany	Spain
... in general	45%	20%	22%	30.5%
... by majority MPs	38%	21%	100%	25%
... during question time	25%	21%	21%	30.5%
... by members of the defence committee	25%	21%	0	25%

TO BE COMPLETED:

France:

- Significance of local issues explained by the plurality electoral system and by the original and massive plurality of offices (*cumul des mandats*)
- Substantively, local issues are clearly different from general and expert debates about defence (as indicated by the lower proportion regarding members of the defence committee)
- Two different kinds of political use:
 1. Technical/local with low political salience as indicated by the low level during question time
 2. Political/local with localised attacks from the opposition: local questions are hardly ever politically neutral. For instance, the troubles of the defence industry (GIAT Industries) are raised by pointing at the lack of foresight of the government.

The UK:

- Even if only 20% of the questions are local, it represents a significant number of questions in absolute terms. To be explained by the plurality electoral system.

- All the discussions on restructurings, on weapons programs, industry or on recruitment show a strong local dimension.
- It appears yet then that the electoral dimension counts less than suggested by the literature on Parliamentarians and defence issues.

Spain:

- Local questions by regionalist MPs in a context of tense relations between regions and the central State. In that sense, local issues cannot be only understood as electoral signals.

Germany:

- Very few questions being answered within the parliamentary debate are clearly related to local issues. A consequence of: 1. the political use of the procedure by the opposition for gathering general information; 2. the Federal system: local issues can be raised at lower level.
- Local issues are dealing with the impact of military installations or practices on constituencies. For instance, several questions deal with the disturbance caused by the flights of military aircrafts. Other themes are the possible damages caused by the use of weaponry, or the possible environmental consequences of such practices. In that sense, local issues are often related to both public health as well as to environmental concerns.

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In conclusion, it appears that, despite the similarity of the procedure, the four assemblies have developed different ways of practicing OQD. Such differences are grounded both on the general use of parliamentary questions in each legislature and on the specific relation to defence policies of those countries. At the Commons, questions are intensively asked to the MoD on a weekly basis on a large variety of topics by all sorts of MPs. In Spain and France, questions are answered by the Minister of Defence once or twice a month and also cover a large variety of political uses. In Germany, the procedure is more specific – and to a large extent more marginal – since questions are asked mostly by opposition MPs and hardly ever answered by the leading minister.

The quantitative and qualitative approaches confirm that the three patterns of parliamentary control identified in the introduction are developed through OQD. Many questions seek first at gathering information about defence policies. The members of the Defence and Foreign Affairs Committees are generally more present among the questioning MPs but, in each assembly, they are far from exercising any kind of monopoly on that procedure. Indeed, they generally prefer other parliamentary tools like committee hearings – Germany being the best example of the lack of interest towards oral questions from policy experts. Subsequent research will work on the hypothesis of a trade-off between parliamentary control based on committees and plenary session. In France, asking publicly a question constitutes all the more an incentive for expertise that committees hardly ever impact public policies. In Germany, incentives are to be found on the daily working of more powerful committees.

The use of OQD by MPs that are not regarded as specialists of defence policies also derives from the significance of the two other finalities of parliamentary control: party controversies and constituency issues. Regarding first party controversies, OQD are not always used for political purpose since some defence issues call for unanimity from the elected representatives. That is typically the case after the death of soldiers. Yet, controversies can be paradoxically more significant when they occur since political parties can blame each other for neglecting the national interest as indicated by the common reference to the 1938 Munich agreement in France and Britain (ROZENBERG 2009). Regarding local issues – and contrary to the politisation dimension – it is difficult to establish a clear distinction between questions with local inputs and questions without. Asking about the closure of a precise barrack settled in the constituency is by definition driven by local and electoral concerns. But, it cannot be considered that more global issues as the latest developments regarding NATO or CFSP are totally exterior to electoral considerations. Whatever the extent of local and electoral inputs, the significance of that dimension highlights the fact that MPs are not always acting as *information seekers* but also – but mainly? – as *information vectors* according to a bottom-up process. The stress placed on the information gap by the delegation chain model has probably led to neglect that the accountability process is also a way of providing information to the governmental agent about the ultimate constituent (i.e. citizens).

Lastly, various ways of grouping the three dimensions of parliamentary control have been identified throughout the comparison of the four assemblies. In Germany and in the UK, most of the questions that aim at gathering information from the cabinet cannot be regarded as purely technical or neutral and participate to the electoral competition. Accusing the

government of hiding some aspects of its policies and plans constitutes therefore a way of both obtaining strategic information and blaming the cabinet. In other cases, information gathering is driven by local inputs and beyond by the will to support constituents. Many questions asked by French MPs can thus be regarded as pork seeking strategies but despite their particularistic feature they contribute to force the Defence Minister to deliver some information. Likewise, some local issues are sometimes – but not always – used in order to attack a given political party. Opposition deputies in France, representatives of regional parties in Spain and both kinds of MPs in the UK tend to echo local concerns of their constituents by stressing the failure of the government. In that case, obtaining information – and *a fortiori* some pork – seem to be less significant than electoral motivations. On that purpose, oral questions operate both at the national level with the attacks against the government, and at the local one by the public manifestation of the MP's concerns for his/her constituency.

Those various kinds of combination of the three identified dimensions of parliamentary control call for two final remarks. Firstly, the ways of grouping the three dimensions depend of institutional factors like, among others, the *cumul des mandats* in France, the regionalisation in Spain, the weakness of personal vote and the strength of the committee system in the Bundestag or the majoritarian feature of the Westminster model. Secondly, to come back to the diversity of the purposes reached by MPs evoked in introduction, it appears that the grouping of various kinds of parliamentary control enable to insert into the process a large variety of deputies. Specially, *vote* and *office seekers* are induced to engage themselves in making the government more accountable and reducing the information gap even if they are less interested by the substantive aspects of defence issues than *policy seekers*. Combining policy, conflict and local inputs thus appears as a way of developing heterogeneous aspects of parliamentary activities despite the uniqueness of the purposes of individual MPs.

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