

'Measuring' Representation: The Use of Parliamentary Questions by Black and Minority Ethnic Backbench MPs in the United Kingdom¹

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Contents
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Introduction2. A Heuristic Model3. Parliamentary Questions in the House of Commons4. Members from BME groups in the House of Commons5. Research Design6. Results7. Discussion8. References9. Tables

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1. Introduction

Since the 1960s, the British House of Commons has become socially more representative of the UK population. This process accelerated in the 1990s. The 1997 Labour landslide was accompanied by a major leap in the representation of women in Parliament. With a slight delay, and to a lesser extent, the number of MPs from Britain's Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) groups increased to 15 in the 2005-2011 Parliament. The concern of the political elite for a more proportional representation of members from such groups in Britain's Houses of Parliament is also reflected in the increase of the appointed BME Members of the House of Lords to 37 in 2008. The primary question of this paper is whether this increased 'presence' (Phillips 1995) of such MP makes a difference in the 'substantive' representation of BME perspectives and interests in Parliament, using – and exploring – parliamentary questions for written answer as an indicator.

The question of substantive representation in Parliament is important for at least two reasons: Firstly, numerous normative arguments have been advanced about the link between descriptive and substantive representation. Building on Pitkin's (1967) classic work, many authors have argued that – given certain (e.g., electoral) incentives – the substance of constituents' interests in a representative system of government can be advocated and promoted effectively by any good representative irrespective of the latter's personal characteristics (in terms of gender, race or other attributes), although there may be a certain 'symbolic' value to adequate descriptive representation (e.g., Norton 2005). Other authors believe that effective substantive representation requires a deep understanding of the experiences of the represented, which is best achieved by a representative from the same group. Mansbridge (1999, 2003), a conditional advocate of descriptive representation, argues that there may be specific conditions where descriptive representation will achieve adequate substantive representation in deliberative processes and bodies (such as parliaments and their proceedings): She highlights what she refers to as 'contexts of distrust' where a 'history of dominance and subordination typically breeds inattention, even arrogance, on the part of the dominant group and distrust on the part of the subordinate group' (Mansbridge 1999: 641). In

this case, higher levels of descriptive representation, as Mansbridge argues (*ibid.*), ‘facilitates vertical communication between representatives and constituents.’ A first analysis of parliamentary questions will not be suited conclusively to resolve the question whether the ‘presence’ (Phillips 1995) of BME politicians makes a difference beyond the symbolic level, but it will help to show the extent to which such MPs use instruments like parliamentary questions systematically to gather information about, and influence, policy in the interest of ethnic minorities in British society.

Secondly, the majoritarian ‘Westminster model’ (Lijphart 1999), a widely accepted construct based on empirical observations of the Parliament in London and other assemblies modelled on it, is premised on the idea of intense two-party competition for office in which the winner takes all. Mansbridge’s ‘vertical communication’ is monopolised by the main political parties. This requires high levels of party discipline, leaving little room and incentives for non-partisan or cross-party activities of individual MPs. Although there is no doubt at all that the inter-party competition and intra-party bargaining within the government party dominate executive-legislative relations in the UK (King 1976), the Westminster system does provide considerable scope and incentives for individual, essentially non-partisan representation, which has been neglected at least in the comparative literature. There is overwhelming evidence, for example, that the relatively non-partisan ‘role’ of ‘constituency members’, seeking to redress grievances articulated by citizens in their constituencies (Searing 1994: 121-160), has grown far more important amongst backbenchers in the second half of the twentieth and early years of the twenty-first centuries (Norton 2005: 178-183; Rush 2001: 199-211) – and that the parties are acutely aware of the electoral value of good constituency communication and local mobilisation. Since parliamentary questions are often linked to matters arising from the MPs’ constituency work and frequently relate to local or sectional issues, their study provides an opportunity to explore the extent to which BME MPs used them to articulate a distinctive minority-related agenda.

This paper presents some new evidence, which helps to scrutinise both theoretical concerns sketched above. So far, the empirical evidence supporting claims on the effects of more

descriptive minority representation has been patchy at best. Much of the work on the UK and other European democracies at the level of national parliaments has had to be relatively anecdotal owing to the low number of cases (BME MPs) that could be studied. Some empirical studies were undertaken in the US, where there has been a larger number of minority legislators both at the national and the state level for a much longer time. Even these studies are inconclusive, however: Some authors (e.g., Swain 2006) found few behavioural differences between minority and non-minority representatives in the US, others report evidence of significant differences (e.g., Whitby 1997). The progress of empirical research on European parliaments has been hampered not only by the much smaller number of cases (MPs) traditionally available for study, but also the different institutional parameters of parliamentary systems of government. Therefore, the focus has been on studies identifying the barriers to fairer representation in the political recruitment process (e.g., Norris and Lovenduski 1995). Some qualitative studies looked at the views and activities of few minority MPs (e.g., Nixon 1998), but did not compare them to any 'control group' of White MPs representing constituencies with large minority populations.

The present paper is part of a larger comparative project funded by the Volkswagen Foundation (directed by Andreas M. Wüst at the Mannheim Centre for Social Research) seeking to improve our knowledge of the parliamentary activities of immigrants and members of visible minorities in the parliaments of liberal democracies. A comparative cross-country approach is used to increase the number of cases available for study and to capture the variation in institutional frameworks that may influence the strategies of the actors involved (e.g., different electoral systems). This paper focuses on *parliamentary questions tabled by UK Members of Parliament for written answer* by ministers in the House of Commons and seeks to establish the extent to which BME politicians *behave* as minority representatives, taking into account the institutional constraints of the Westminster model. The paper employs a quasi-experimental design using data on the content of all parliamentary questions tabled by the 15 BME MPs between May 2005 and 31 December 2008. The control group is a stratified random sample of 15 non-BME MPs whose parliamentary questions provide a reference for comparisons.

The next session sets out a heuristic theoretical model, placing MPs in the context of a competitive evaluation game with asymmetric information. Following a brief description of the use of parliamentary questions for written answer in the House of Commons, the sample of MPs used for this study and the paper's research design, a number of bivariate and multivariate tests will be conducted to establish the extent to which the 15 BME MPs in the 2005-2011 Parliament made greater use of parliamentary questions for the articulation of issues relating to immigration or ethnic-minority interests than a stratified random sample of non-BME politicians. At this stage of a single-country study with a relatively small number of cases, the evidence is limited. There is some evidence that BME backbenchers and non-BME MPs representing constituencies with a high percentage of non-White residents asked more minority-related questions than others. There is also some evidence that a few Labour backbenchers fit the description of a representative of minority interests as suggested in Figure 1 (below), regularly asking large numbers of questions relating to immigration and minorities across a large number of policy areas. However, these MPs are clearly outliers – and all of them are Members of the Parliamentary Labour Party. The majority of BME MPs is indistinguishable from their non-BME peers. Although these results have to be treated with considerable caution (both in terms of the validity of the indicator as well as the number of cases investigated), the tests carried out provide only very limited support for the expectations formulated by normative theorists of representation, claiming a direct beneficial effect of enhanced descriptive representation. Despite the fact that parliamentary questions for written answer impose very few party-related constraints on backbench MPs (i.e., even under a research design offering relatively favourable conditions for the rejection of the null hypothesis), the institutional logic of the Westminster model with strong, cohesive parties seems to overpower any residual 'ethnic' effects.

2. A Heuristic Model

I will treat Members of Parliament and those aspiring to become MPs predominantly as vote-seekers; constituents, by contrast, are largely modelled as policy seekers (Müller and Strøm

1999), irrespective of their ethnic background. Ethnicity is assumed to have an impact on the constituents' preferences, although this need not be framed in ethnic terms (it could be articulated as class, economic, welfare, cultural, legal or similar issue) and need not be different from the majority's preferences. No assumptions are made on the MPs' policy preferences. The 'selectorates' in the political parties (the local constituency parties, along with limited influence exerted by the national party headquarters) constitute important gatekeepers to political recruitment and representation (Norris and Lovenduski 1995: 21-90). Most accounts tend to treat local selectorates as policy seekers, although they are likely to face a difficult trade-off in the candidate-selection process between the candidates' electoral chances and their likely policy positions once they are in Parliament (Müller and Strøm 1999). MPs' behaviour in the constituency, in electoral campaigns and in Parliament is thought to be a strategic response to this competitive environment.

We know from detailed studies of the US that ethnic-minority candidates have a number of choices in presenting themselves and representing their minority constituents: They can

- present themselves as representative of a minority community;
- engage in a deliberate 'deracialization' of their profile (McCormick and Jones 1993); or
- adopt a sophisticated strategy of 'toggling' between 'racialized' and 'deracialized' signals in different arenas and media (Collett 2008).

Further studies suggest that

- political parties are increasingly sophisticated in targeting specific voter groups (Strömbäck 2009), amongst others by offering popular and/or credible candidates;²
- candidates (including sitting candidates for re-election) may use race and gender as 'cues' in low-information elections (McDermott 1998) and
- campaigns are sometimes claimed to have shown a growing level of 'individualisation' (Zittel and Gschwend 2008), with a stronger focus on the personal characteristics of candidates.

²² Ceteris paribus, this process is easier in electoral systems with lists.

Figure 1 near here

Figure 1 provides a stylised general model of an evaluation game with four relevant actors: (a) a constituency party *CP* in charge of selecting candidates for elected office; (b) a voter *V* deciding on the candidate or list of candidates presented to him or her by the party; (c) a Member of Parliament, *MP*, emanating from this choice process; and (d) the leadership of the MP's parliamentary party, *PPL*. The game starts with the constituency party selecting an aspirant as its official candidate thus conferring the party's reputation for certain policy positions (including responsiveness to minority interests) and competence in government on her or him. The constituency party selectorate faces a significant risk of adverse selection and moral hazard in this process. Whether or not it selects a particular person depends on the aspirant's reputation, the voters' expected response to the prospective candidate and his or her expected behaviour once elected to Parliament. A candidate's previous involvement in a party or civic association may reduce uncertainties about their policy preferences, responsiveness, party loyalty and competence. Their ethnicity may or may not be a factor at this stage. It may be seen as a credible signal to voters for certain policy positions. In a constituency with a strong concentration of visible-minority activists, minority status of the candidate may enhance a party's electoral chances. In other cases, minority status may be a disadvantage. We know from the empirical literature (e.g., Norris and Lovenduski 1995) and anecdotal evidence (e.g., Mulholland 2007; White 2007) that the contenders' personal characteristics (including race and gender) play a significant role in the deliberations of constituency parties.

At the next stage of the game in Figure 1 voters have a choice to elect the nominated candidate, or cast their vote for another candidate or party. This choice is again influenced by information asymmetry (the voters are unsure about the risks of adverse selection and moral hazard). The MP's personal reputation may reduce the voters' uncertainty. His or her party

affiliation may be a relatively credible—or confusing—signal. For some voters, his or her ethnicity fulfils the same function, especially if it is costly to obtain verifiable information about the policy differences between the parties (e.g., McDermott 1998).

Once elected, the MP has a choice of a number of representational strategies, which he or she may use as a signal to voters, party activists and leaders in the evaluation game. In Figure 1, which is highly stylised, only a few possible strategies were selected for illustrative purposes. An MP from a visible minority may choose—in this example—to act as (a) a loyal agent of his or her party (essentially pursuing what has been termed a ‘deracialized’ strategy in the US context), (b) a spokesperson for ethnic-minority interests much as Searing (1994) describes the role of ‘constituency member’, (c) a ‘bridge builder’ between communities with a certain amount of leeway both from his or her voters and party. This strategy could also entail a certain amount of ‘togglng’ between (a) and (b) found in the behaviour of ethnic-minority candidates in the US.³ Following the logic of the evaluation game with asymmetric information in Figure 1, the Member of Parliament will choose his or her strategy not only on the basis of their own preferences but also in anticipation of the responses (a) of his or her constituency party before the next election and (b) of his or her voters, taking trust at both levels into account. In addition she or he will also (c) take the response of his or her party leadership in Parliament into account.

In response to the MP’s chosen representational strategy, the MP’s parliamentary party leadership *PPL* can (a) apply party discipline (‘whip’) or (b) allow independent decision-making. When the preferences of the visible-minority MP and his or her party are not identical, the use of both strategies available to the *PPL* may involve costs as well as benefits. The internal costs of employing sanctions against a dissenting MP will have to be weighed against the benefits of maintaining a reputation for unity (see, for example, Laver 1999). Again, the *PPL*’s expected cost-benefit calculus will be taken into account by the visible-minority MP when choosing her or his representational strategy. The MP may have some leeway vis-à-vis the *PPL*, if he or she

³ Typologies of legislative roles have identified many further possibilities such as ‘ministerial aspirant’, ‘policy advocate’, (geographic) ‘constituency member’ or ‘parliament man’, which are not developed here (see, however, Müller and Saalfeld 1997; for an elaborate typology based on the UK case see Searing 1994).

has a strong position in the constituency party or amongst voters. The MP's behaviour could be modelled as that of an agent of his or her *PPL*, who enjoys a certain amount of trust (leeway) depending on the complexity of the situation he or she is faced with in his or her constituency or vis-à-vis voters.

Whatever the representational strategy pursued by the MP, at the end of a parliament the members of the constituency party have an opportunity to update their beliefs on his or her suitability and performance, which may influence their decision to re-select or de-select the member. They are likely to do this, again, in the light of probable voter responses to this process. At the election stage, the voters have their opportunity of judging the MP's performance, weighing his or her personal record as well as the collective record of his or her party. And thus the game continues.

Figure 2 near here

Based on this general logic – and focusing on the electoral connection –, **Figure 2** produces a few intuitive predictions on the likely behaviour of UK MPs in their selection of topics for parliamentary questions and clarifies the conditions for a test. In the fourfold table of Figure 2, two cells would appear to be trivial: If an MP has a BME background and represents a constituency with a large share of BME voters, they would be very likely to raise issues related to minorities or immigration relatively frequently and across a large number of policy areas. If an MP does not have a minority background and does not represent a constituency where minority-related issues play a salient role, they should be less likely to raise such issues, and if they do, the questions should relate to selective policy areas of national significance (for example, immigration and asylum). The 'mixed' cells are more interesting: If the MP's ethnicity plays an important role in their representative activities (as claimed by Mansbridge 1999 or

Phillips 1995), BME MPs should be more likely to ask questions across a large range of policy areas irrespective of the electoral incentives arising from the demographic composition of their constituencies. Conversely, if the 'electoral connection' is more powerful than any ethnic considerations, there should be no difference between BME and non-BME politicians, if we hold the demographic composition of their constituencies (in relation to the share of BME residents or voters) constant. Based on this reasoning, I would propose the following null and alternate hypotheses:

- **H₀**: Holding minority-related demographic constituency characteristics constant, there is no difference between BME and non-BME MPs in the content of their parliamentary questions.
- **H₁**: There is a significant statistical association between the MP's ethnic background and the content of their parliamentary questions, irrespective of the minority-related demographic composition of their constituency.

3. Parliamentary Questions in the House of Commons

Parliamentary questions are one tool (amongst several) to articulate sectional or minority interests and views and, as we shall see, *are* used extensively by a number of BME MPs to articulate such concerns. MPs often table such questions to take up matters arising from their constituency work. According to one standard work on Parliamentary procedure, they are an instrument for backbenchers of both sides of the House to scrutinise the executive 'on behalf of their constituents, or of some pressure or interest group, or simply reflecting their own private interests, experience or beliefs' (Blackburn and Kennon 2003: 517). In many cases, the questions get reported back to constituents via the local media, the MPs' personal websites, the internet-based 'watch-dog' www.theyworkforyou.com and other media. The tabling of such questions is largely free of control by the whips. Therefore, they are a valid indicator to test the two hypotheses above. There are two main types of parliamentary questions:

Questions for oral answer have become 'a monthly opportunity for a series of mini-debates on topics of current interest within the remit of the department concerned. A question for oral

answer gives a Member the chance to ask a supplementary question in his own way at a prime time for media coverage and the attention of other Members. The tabled question has thus become simply the peg on which to hang the supplementary, and the actual terms of the original question therefore become less important' (Blackburn and Kennon 2003: 520). However, the time available for questions for oral answer is relatively limited (usually up to one hour per department and month, with Prime Minister's Questions lasting 30 minutes every week).

By contrast, there is no limit to the number of questions a Member may table for written answer whose purpose of *questions for written answer* tends to be slightly different from questions for oral answer: 'The great majority of questions for written answer are primarily seeking information, although occasionally they may simply be urging action on which a "yes" or "no" answer could be given' (Blackburn and Kennon 2003: 527). Nevertheless, they are often very detailed, asking the government to provide information on its performance across the entire range of executive responsibilities. Some Members make very little use of this instrument, others ask the government hundreds of questions in every Parliament. Ministers are expected to answer questions within a working week and their responses are printed in Hansard. Very occasionally, Ministers deny responsibility or refuse to answer (Blackburn and Kennon 2003: 527-8). Written questions are generally considered to be 'a parliamentary (and published) alternative to a non-parliamentary (and unpublished) letter to a minister' (Blackburn and Kennon 2003: 529).

Table 1 near here

Table 1 demonstrates that UK MPs make extensive use of this instrument. This suggests that MPs attribute considerable – and growing – value to them. There is general agreement that the

use has increased significantly since the 1950s (see also Blackburn and Kennon 2003: 374-5, 401). Even in the short period covered in Table 1 (1998-99 to 2007-08), there was a clear increase. I am proposing to use questions for written answer as an indicator for the extent to which an MP takes up minority-related issues with the government, and does so publicly. Since the use of parliamentary questions for written answer is relatively unconstrained by the party whips, this indicator should be relatively suitable to observe the extent to which BME MPs and their non-BME colleagues differ in making direct references to immigration or ethnic-minority concerns. Further information on the research design can be found below.

4. Members from BME groups in the House of Commons

The first time a few individual BME MPs were elected to the House of Commons in the late 19th and the early 20th centuries. Despite these early beginnings, no further person from a BME background was elected between 1929 and 1987. This number gradually increased to 15 in the House of Commons elected in 2005 – and to 37 in the House of Lords. Although this number is still small (2% of the Members of the House of Commons as compared to a share of around 8% of BME voters in the country), it is beginning to allow analyses beyond the level of anecdotal evidence. **Table 2** provides a breakdown by party. The Table includes a category of ‘White’ immigrants or immediate descendants of white immigrants, who will be eliminated from this analysis. In our further analyses, the Members of the House of Lords are also disregarded. The paper focuses on BME Members of the House of Commons and a stratified random sample of non-BME MPs (see below).

Table 2 near here

5. Research Design

To test the hypotheses above, I have compiled a data set containing all questions tabled by the 15 BME MPs in the current Parliament until the end of 2008 (May 2005 – 31 December 2008). In addition, I have drawn a stratified random sample of 15 non-BME MPs as a control group (see below) and added information on the questions they tabled to the data set. The sample of non-BME MPs was stratified in such a way that it roughly matches the party-political orientations of the BME MPs (13 Labour, 2 Conservative) plus the ethnic composition of their constituencies (non-White population \geq 25.0%, 5.0-24.9%, 0-4.9%). In other words, the intention is to compare the 15 BME MPs to an equal number of non-BME MPs with matching party membership and relevant constituency demographics.

Table 3 near here

The MPs included can be seen in **Table 3**. Persons who held ministerial positions throughout the window of observation were excluded (they do not ask questions). In total the data set contains information about 7,083 questions tabled by all 30 (backbench) MPs in the sample. Approximately half of these questions were asked by the 15 BME MPs, the other half by Members drawn from the control group. For each question (observation), I established the relevant policy area (usually, if not always by the Department or Minister they were addressed to). For coding purposes, I used a slightly extended version of the classification of policy areas developed for Andreas Wüst's comparative project. In addition, the data set contains a dummy variable for each observation registering whether the question explicitly referred to ethnic minorities or immigration. This was established by searching the title for the truncated keywords 'migrat*', 'ethnic' and 'minorit*' and an additional visual inspection of the question texts.

Table 4 near here

Table 4 provides information on the number of questions asked by each MP broken down by the respective MP's ethnicity and the minority-related content of the question (yes/no). It demonstrates the tremendous variability in the overall number of questions asked by individual MPs as well as the number of minority-related questions tabled. The Table is largely anonymised, but it allows to identify an MP's ethnicity and party membership. What will follow in the next section is a first exploratory statistical analysis of these data.

Table 5 near here

6. Results

A first test of the null hypothesis ('Ethnic background makes no difference in the number of minority-related questions tabled by an MP') consists of a simple crosstabulation of a dichotomous independent variable ('BME MP – yes/no') and a dichotomous dependent variable ('Question is explicitly related to immigration or minority issues – yes/no'). **Table 5** reports the results of this test. At first glance, the null hypothesis can be confidently rejected. Nearly three-quarters of all questions relating to immigration and minority issues were tabled by BME MPs. The χ^2 value is high (218.01) and significantly different from zero at the one-percent level. It is also interesting to note that this significant covariation of ethnic background and question topic is statistically significant only for Labour MPs. However, conclusions have to be cautious as there are only five Conservative MPs in the sample.

Figure 3 near here

Figure 3 depicts the results of a hierarchical cluster analysis where the frequency of minority-related questions in 20 policy areas was counted for each MP (for further details see Saalfeld and Kyriakopoulou 2009). In other words, the unit of analysis is no longer the individual question (as above), but the MP. Cluster analysis is an exploratory technique used to uncover groups (clusters) of observations (here: MPs) in data, based on their similarity or dissimilarity across a number of dimensions (here: policy areas) (Everitt et al. 2001). Since the range of the number questions asked by MPs was huge (see Table 3), the raw frequencies for each MP were logged, before the cluster analysis was performed. The similarities and dissimilarities between MPs were established by using an inter-individual distance matrix based on the average (Euclidean) distances between all pairs of MPs.

The dendrogram in Figure 3 illustrates the logic of hierarchical cluster analysis. All 30 MPs are arranged in 'leaves' on the horizontal axis based on the similarity of their questioning patterns across all 20 policy areas. They were labelled by using a unique identification number, the MP's ethnic status and his or her party in order to uncover any clustering of MPs along ethnic or party lines. The horizontal axis provides information on a dissimilarity measure (L2). Some MPs display relatively similar questioning patterns. Hence their dissimilarity values are relatively low and they are combined into a first cluster (e.g., case ids 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 17, 18, 19, 20, 25 and 26 – all of them are Labour MPs and most of them belong to a BME group) and they are generally MPs asking very few questions. This 'branch' is then progressively joined up with other branches, which are much more heterogeneous (in the lower part of the dendrogram). This procedure continues until all clusters are grouped together in a final step. At this point, the dissimilarity value is relatively at its highest.

The dendrogram in Figure 3 is based on the distances between MPs in their minority-related questioning patterns across all 20 policy areas used in our classification. It does *not* suggest that

MPs with a BME background form large distinctive clusters (perhaps even across party lines); similarly, it does *not* suggest that there are distinctive clusters relating to party affiliation. If one were to choose a dissimilarity value of 4 (on the horizontal axis) as a cut-off point, there are three clusters,

- one consisting of a single MP (BME-Lab-29 at the top of the dendrogram),
- one group of two Members (BME-Lab_1 and BME-Lab-16 at the bottom of the dendrogram) and
- a third, large cluster of 27.

Inspection of the raw data confirms that and suggests that the covariation between ethnic background and number of minority-related questions in different policy areas is largely a result of the impact of three 'outliers' in the Parliamentary Labour Party.

- One Labour MP (case id 29, with a BME background) is unique and forms a cluster of his own. He asked over 330 questions explicitly relating to ethnic minorities or immigration across virtually all policy areas except 'housing' and 'science and technology'. Not only did he deal with issues of immigration and asylum in many of his questions, but he also asked wider questions of integration and equal opportunities virtually across the entire range of government departments.
- A further very small cluster of two Labour MPs with a BME background asked 70 and 89 minority-related questions, respectively (case ids 1 and 16). Their minority and immigration-related questions were more strongly concentrated in home affairs, health and education, but they also dealt with a wide range of problems relating to the integration of immigrants and ethnic minorities in these policy areas.
- The largest cluster of 27 subjects includes all other MPs in our sample. They generally asked relatively few minority-related questions (on average 15) – and when they did, these questions were overwhelmingly in the area of home affairs relating to citizenship, immigration and asylum.

In short, only three out of 15 MPs with a BME background (all of them Labour Members) asked minority-related questions relatively systematically across a wider spectrum of policy areas dealing with integration as well as immigration. The dendrogram in Figure 1 demonstrates that they are relative 'outliers'. Nevertheless, a comparison of these clusters with the raw data provides some interesting insights into different approaches to parliamentary questioning.

Table 6 near here

In a final step, I performed a multivariate OLS regression analysis, regressing the number of minority-related questions each MP in our sample asked on a number of independent variables, including

- the MP's ethnic status (a dummy variable given a value of one for membership of a BME group);
- the percentage of the 'non-White' population in the MP's constituency (based on data from the British Census of 2001);
- dummy variables with a value of one, if an MP has held junior ministerial office sometime during the 2005-2010 Parliament (reducing the number of questions asked) or if he or she was a Conservative MP;
- and the number of questions the MP asked in policy areas not related to immigration or ethnic minorities.

The models in **Table 6** are specified in three different ways:

- *Model 1* is based on the absolute number of minority-related (and other) questions each MP submitted for written answer between May 2005 and December 2008. As this may lead to distortions in the OLS estimation due to the very large range of the number of questions tabled by each MP (from a minimum of one to a maximum of 1,357),

- *Model 2* is based on the natural logarithm of the number of minority-related questions as dependent variable.
- *Model 3* also uses the natural logarithm of the number of minority-related questions as dependent variable, but adds an interaction effect of BME status and the percentage of non-White residents in the respective MP's constituency.

Holding party, executive office for a certain period during the relevant Parliament (MPs in ministerial positions throughout the Parliament were excluded) and the number of other questions constant, Model 1 reveals that both an MP's status as member of a BME group and the share of Non-White residents in his or her constituency do significantly increase the probability for him or her to table minority-related questions at conventional levels of statistical significance (two-tailed). This would suggest that the null hypothesis could be rejected with some confidence. In addition to these two effects, the estimated coefficient for the number of questions without explicit references to immigration or minorities is positive and highly significant. This suggests that an MP's ethnicity and the ethnic composition of their constituency matters, but also that industrious backbench MPs generally tabling many questions will also table more minority-related questions than others. If the number of questions is transformed by calculating the natural logarithm for both types of questions (minority-related and other in Model 2), the model's overall fit improves from an R^2 of 0.53 to 0.72, but only the natural log of the number of questions without explicit reference to immigration or minorities remains statistically significant. Both BME status and the share of non-White residents in the constituency retain the expected (positive) sign, but are statistically insignificant at conventional levels. In short, the goodness of fit improves, but the null hypothesis cannot be rejected any more. Adding an interaction effect of BME status and percentage of non-White residents in the respective MP's constituency did not have any significant effect.

This suggests that some MPs generally ask a large number of questions, and this will also have implications for the number of minority-related questions they table. MPs with a BME background and MPs representing constituencies with a large non-White population do tend to

ask more such questions than others, but the strong effect of BME status in Model 1 is largely a result of the few ‘outliers’ amongst the UK’s minority MPs identified in the cluster analysis, who are devoting a lot of parliamentary time to minority-related issues.

7. Discussion

The question of this paper was whether there are significant differences in the way BME MPs and their non-BME peers use parliamentary questions for written answer to articulate a minority-related agenda. Parliamentary questions for written answer, it was argued, are a suitable and valid indicator, because their use is relatively unconstrained, allowing MPs to reveal their preferences in this matter without too many institutional constraints, even under the competitive institutional constraints imposed by the Westminster system. The answer to the question is not straightforward. At this stage, it has to be ‘yes and no’. A small number of BME Labour backbenchers (one-fifth of all BME MPs overall and about one-quarter of the Labour BME MPs) clearly use parliamentary questions for written answer to pursue an agenda with a considerable emphasis on issues important to ethnic minorities. A detailed analysis of their questions does not suggest that they are exclusively or predominantly spokespersons of ethnic groups in British society. Nevertheless, these topics constitute an important part of their parliamentary work. The questioning patterns of the majority of BME MPs in the House of Commons cannot be distinguished from that of their non-BME peers. Whether this is due to their policy preferences, or whether it is a response to the typical institutional incentives of the Westminster system can only be answered partially with the data set used in this paper.

It may be possible to extract some further information through qualitative interviews. Nevertheless, even the limited data on the content of parliamentary questions for written answers provide two interesting cues: Firstly, the best predictor of the number of minority-related questions in the House of Commons is the number of other questions asked by the same MP (i.e., those not explicitly relating to BME concerns). All three of these MPs represent constituencies with a large percentage of non-White residents. None of them has any prospects of promotion to (junior) ministerial office. None of them is White. All have embraced their role

as backbenchers with considerable effectiveness, representing the 'player' on the backbenches of the House of Commons rather than the 'gentleman' characteristic of the chamber until the 1960s (this is drawing on Michael Rush's 2001 analogy with cricket). In other words, they are professional politicians on the backbenches of the Commons, perhaps 'parliament men' (or women), and not 'ministerial aspirants' to use one of Donald Searing's (1994) backbench roles.

Secondly, there is a clear difference in the coverage of policy areas, distinguishing the small clusters of BME MPs with a large number of minority-related questions from the large rest. The three MPs identified as highly active asked questions across a large number of policy areas with a clear focus on equal opportunities and integration issues. The questions of all other MPs, irrespective of their ethnic status, were largely restricted to immigration and asylum.

All of these findings are highly tentative and need further work. Given the small number of cases in European democracies, a comparative cross-country approach is the only feasible way of reducing the small-n problem. In this context, parliamentary questions provide a good, usually well-documented source of information on parliamentary activity. They exist in most parliamentary democracies, although the rules governing their use vary.

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9. Figures and Tables

Figure 1: A Heuristic Candidate Evaluation Game

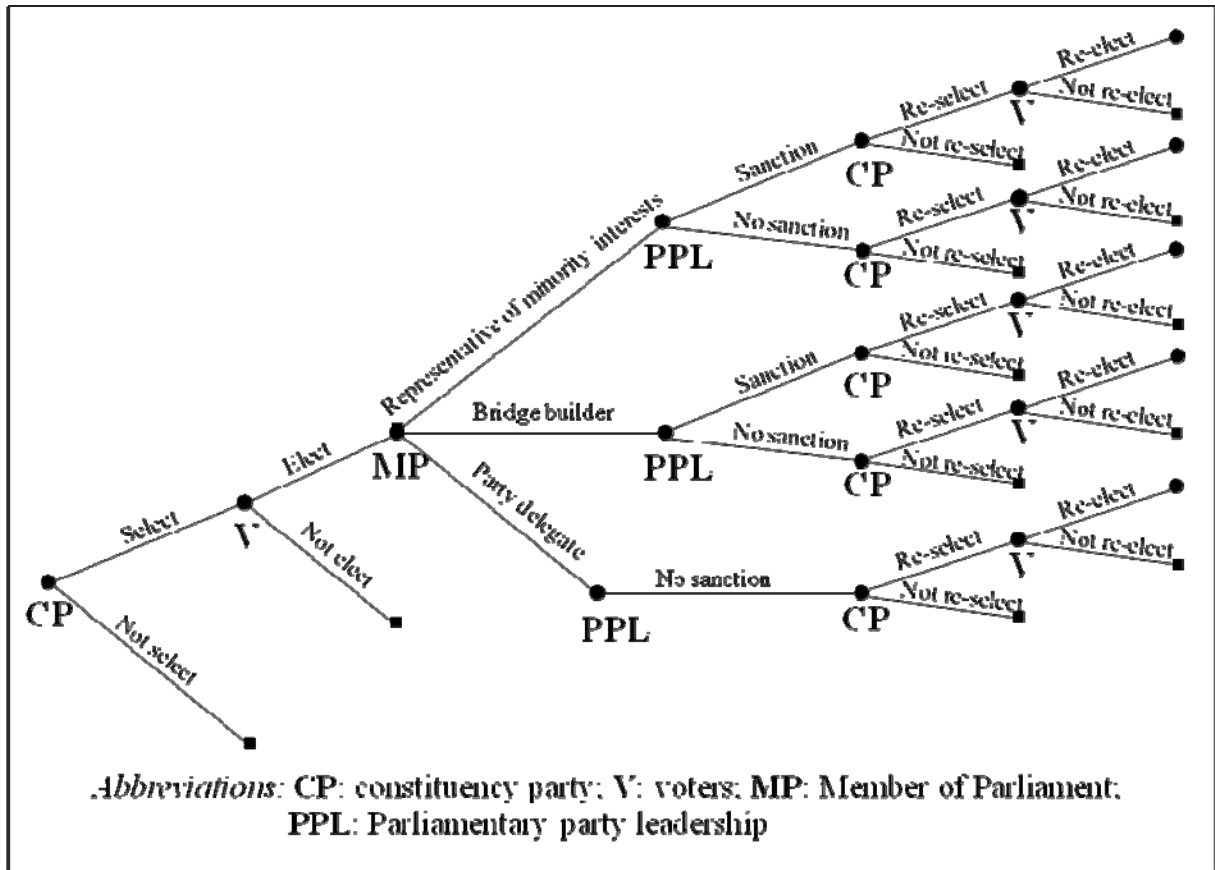


Figure 2: Intuitive Predictions Based on Figure 1 – focusing on the ‘electoral connection’

		Share of minority voters in constituency	
		<i>Low</i>	<i>High</i>
Ethnicity of MP	<i>Non-BME</i>	<i>Few questions explicitly relating to minorities and/or Immigration.</i>	<i>?</i>
	<i>BME</i>	<i>?</i>	<i>Many questions explicitly relating to minorities and/or Immigration. across a large spectrum of policy areas</i>

Table 1: Parliamentary Questions for Written Answer Tabled in the House of Commons based on Hansard

	Total	Oral replies including supplementaries	Oral replies excluding supplementaries	Written replies
2007-2008	80,225	6,760	2,648	73,495
2006-2007	63,792	5,617	1,769	58,175
2005-2006	104,030	8,014	2,734	96,016
2004-2005 ¹⁾	23,552	2,376	847	21,176
2003-2004	55,853	5,844	2,079	50,009
2002-2003	57,886	6,272	2,254	51,614
2001-2002	74,043	6,392	2,201	67,651
2000-2001 ¹⁾	19,278	2,591		16,687
1999-2000	41,410	5,343		36,067
1998-1999	36,423	4,774	1,936	31,649

Source: House of Commons: Sessional Information Digest

(<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm/cmsid.htm>, last accessed 18/02/09)

Notes: With POLIS, the data system used until 2004-2005, several written questions from the same Member, if answered together by the Minister, may have been treated as one question.

¹⁾ Short parliamentary session due to general election

Table 2: First and Second Generation Immigrants in the UK Houses of Parliament

Ethnicity (UK official classification)	House of Commons					House of Lords						Both Houses	
	Lab.	Con.	Lib Dem	Commons Total		Lab.	Con.	Lib Dem	Other	Lords Total			
	N	N	N	N	%	N	N	N	N	N	%	N	%
White	6	2	1	9	37.5	1	0	0	2	3	7.7	12	19.0
Mixed	1	0	0	1	4.2	0	0	0	0	0	0.0	1	1.6
Asian/Asian British	9	1	0	10	41.7	11	5	2	8	26	66.7	36	57.1
Black/Black British	3	1	0	4	16.7	4	1	0	4	9	23.1	13	20.6
Chinese or other	0	0	0	0	0.0	0	0	0	1	1	2.6	1	1.6
Total	19	4	1	24	100.0	16	6	2	15	39	100.0	63	100.0

Sources: Compiled from Dod's Parliamentary Companion and personal websites.

Table 3: Sample of MPs

Party	Percentage of 'non-White' population in constituency					
	0.0% – 4.9%		5.0% – 24.9%		25.0% +	
	BME	Non-BME	BME	Non-BME	BME	Non-BME
Lab.	Kumar	Baird	Dhanda	Caborn	Abbott	Cohen
			Hendrick	McCabe	Sharma	Corbyn
			Malik	Watson	Singh	Gardiner
			Sarwar		Mahmood	Keen
					Vaz	McDonagh
					Butler	McDonnell
					Khan	Pound
					Lammy	Slaughter
Con.	Vara	Baldry	Afriyie	Burrowes		
				Pelling		
Total	2	2	5	5	8	8

Table 3: Number of Questions per MP by Ethnic Background

BME Status and Party	No explicit reference to minorities and/or immigration	Explicit reference to minorities and/or immigration	Total
<i>Number of questions for written answer</i>			
BME-Lab-01	116	88	204
BME-Lab-06	34	28	62
BME-Lab-10	3	1	4
BME-Lab-12	8	1	9
BME-Lab-14	0	1	1
BME-Lab-15	79	42	121
BME-Lab-16	879	69	948
BME-Lab-17	15	1	16
BME-Lab-18	37	1	38
BME-Lab-24	78	19	97
BME-Lab-25	15	2	17
BME-Lab-26	1	0	1
BME-Lab-29	1,020	337	1,357
NonBME-Lab-03	175	1	176
NonBME-Lab-07	6	0	6
NonBME-Lab-08	847	40	887
NonBME-Lab-09	404	43	447
NonBME-Lab-11	2	0	2
NonBME-Lab-13	14	0	14
NonBME-Lab-19	15	0	15
NonBME-Lab-20	11	0	11
NonBME-Lab-21	544	27	571
NonBME-Lab-23	15	12	27
NonBME-Lab-27	35	7	42
NonBME-Lab-30	310	7	317
BME-Con-02	217	14	231
BME-Con-28	338	41	379
NonBME-Con-04	462	84	546
NonBME-Con-05	296	8	304
NonBME-Con-22	215	18	233
Total	6,191	892	7,083

Source: www.theyworkforyou.com (last accessed 28 February 2009)

Table 5: Crosstabulation of MP's Minority Status and Minority-Related Content of Questions

BME MP?	Question explicitly related to immigration or minority issues?			
		No	Yes	Total
No	Total number of questions	3,351	247	3,598
	Column percentage	54.13	27.69	50.8
Yes	Total number of questions	2,840	645	3,485
	Column percentage	45.87	72.31	49.2
All MPs	Total number of questions	6,191	892	7,083
	Column percentage	100	100	100

All MPs: Pearson $\chi^2(1) = 218.0132$ Pr = 0.000; Conservative MPs only: Pearson $\chi^2(1) = 1.2809$ Pr = 0.258; Labour MPs only: Pearson $\chi^2(1) = 270.7103$ Pr = 0.000

Figure 1: Hierarchical Cluster Analysis of Minority-Related Questions for Written Answer by Policy Area for 30 MPs

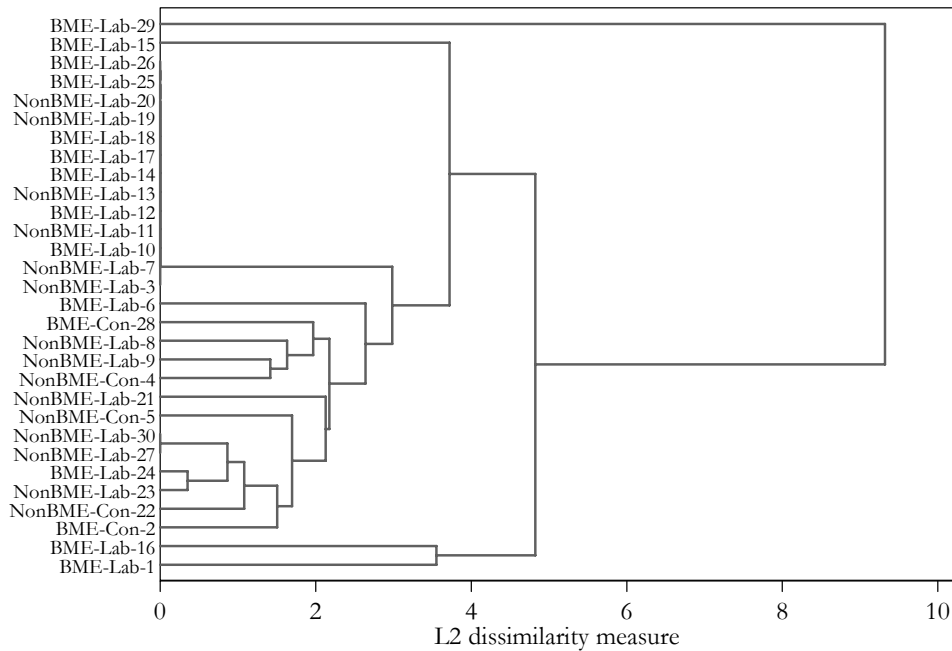


Table 6: OLS Regression of Minority-Related Questions on MP and Constituency Characteristics

Dependent variable: Questions with references to ethnic minorities or immigration	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
	Absolute number of questions	<i>ln</i> of the number of questions	<i>ln</i> of the number of questions
	b (SE)	b (SE)	b (SE)
<i>Independent variables</i>			
BME MP (yes=1)	35.98** (17.13)	0.24 (0.17)	0.45 (0.32)
Percentage of Non-White population in MP's constituency	1.04* (0.56)	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)
Interaction effect Non-White population in MP's constituency and BME MP	–	–	-0.01 (0.01)
Party (Conservative = 1)	17.28 (26.94)	0.05 (0.26)	0.06 (0.27)
Member of government during Parliament (yes=1)	23.19 (22.26)	-0.31 (0.22)	-0.31 (0.22)
N of questions without explicit references to immigration or minorities	0.18*** (0.03)	–	–
Natural log of N of questions without explicit references to immigration or minorities	–	0.74*** (0.11)	0.75*** (0.11)
Constant	-64.99** (30.43)	-0.71* (0.40)	-0.86* (0.44)
N	30	30	30
Adj. R ²	0.53	0.72	0.71

***: p<0.01; **: p<0.05; *: p<0.10 (two-tailed)