

Questioning the government in time of crisis. A comparative analysis of the content of parliamentary questions in Italy, Portugal and Spain

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Crises are focusing events which alter the ordinary state of things and demand a greater than usual amount of attention and resources on the part of political actors. Both attention and resources are finite in politics, therefore each decision on how to react to a crisis bears with it a potential trade-off: attention to particular issues closely associated with the crisis may squeeze out attention to other domains. Building on the agenda-setting literature (Kingdon, 1984; Baumgartner and Jones, 1993; Jones and Baumgartner, 2005; Green-Pedersen and Walgrave, 2014), this paper addresses the effect of the recent events connected to the Eurozone crisis on agenda diversity in three Southern European parliaments. Agenda diversity is defined as the relative dispersion of attention across issues debated during question time at any one point in time (Jennings et al., 2011). The empirical analyses will make use of new datasets on “parliamentary oral questions on the floor” in the Italian Camera dei Deputati, Portuguese Assembleia da Republica and Spanish Cortes over the last 4 legislatures.

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Introduction

A growing number of studies have been recently directing attention to the macro-political effects of the euro crisis on parliamentary activities. It has been showed that the crisis severely affected citizens' trust in national parliaments (Roth, 2010). Others discussed what role national parliaments played and should play in the reform of the European economic governance (Wessels and Rozenberg, 2013; Auel and Höing, 2014). The special issue in the *Journal of Legislative Studies* edited by De Giorgi and Moury (2014) offers new insights into the effect of the eurocrisis on interparty agreement by using final votes on adopted legislation. Remarkably, none of these studies have so far focused on the impact of the Great Depression on the overall agenda of parliaments, understood as the complete range of issues parliaments deal with in their day-to-day business.

This research aims at casting new light on how the economic crisis impacted on legislative functions in Southern Europe, by focusing on the content of parliamentary questions in three countries: Italy, Portugal and Spain.¹ Parliamentary questions serve a wide array of purposes in parliamentary democracies (Wiberg, 1995).² Here, the main focus is on the questions' topics, used as sources of information to reconstruct

¹ Compared with traditional studies of legislative processes as such, the analysis of the content of parliamentary questions remains largely unexplored and only one work has gone beyond the single national case study (Vliegenthart and Walgrave, 2011).

² MPs ask questions on specific issues not only to weaken their opponents but also to have their ideas incorporated in a policy. Depending on party control over MPs' capacity to ask questions, goals might also being more self-promoting, such as being appointed to an office, pleasing the constituency or making a career in the party.

the policy agenda of the questioner. The agenda-setting literature in political science defines agendas as the issues which political actors prioritize in the attempt to reach their goals (Kingdon, 1984; Baumgartner and Jones, 1993; Jones and Baumgartner, 2005; Green-Pedersen and Walgrave, 2014). This perspective emphasizes that parties are strategic not only when deciding which position to take, but also which topic to talk about. Setting the agenda, the topics to be addressed, is instrumental to explain outcomes in the subsequent phase of decision-making. By the sheer magnitude of the social and economic challenges facing cabinets, the current economic crisis is expected to deeply affect issue prioritization in parliament. In time of extreme economic downturn, the economy and social concern should become prominent and oust other issues not only in voters' (Singer, 2013) but also in their representatives' agenda.

Yet, this impact should not be simply observed and understood at the systemic level. Indeed, the incentives produced by the crisis context strictly interact with the positions of party actors in the political system. Their preferences on which issues to allow in or out from the agenda may be motivated both ideologically and strategically. First, they are carriers of political preferences, of visions of the world driving their selection of which issues to attend. Second, they might find an advantage in emphasising an issue rather than another, irrespective of its intrinsic values in their eyes: "reward" or "damage" motives underlie their agenda decisions (Vliegenthart et al., 2013). The second aim of this paper is to introduce a preliminary exploration on how the "debt crisis" affected issue competition by distinguishing parties' agendas according to their institutional position. The climate of social discontent created by the adoption of austerity policies is expected to play to the advantage of the opposition. Since they are not required to deliver policy solutions on those issues that they decide to emphasise

(Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2010), they have greater freedom to be responsive to the electorate's priorities and maintain the emphasis on crisis-related issues. Given the particularly severe economic and social fallouts of austerity measures, the opposition will disproportionately focus on these problems. The selective focus of opposition attention will be further accentuated by the impossibility for cabinet parties to offer "painless" policy solutions to these problems, because of external commitments that place limits on their freedom to respond to their electorates. On their part, as partial "takers" of priorities, incumbents will have to continue focusing attention on all issues in the agenda.

The empirical analyses will make use of a dataset on Italian, Portuguese and Spanish question-time activities over the last four legislatures (approximately since the beginning of 2000s up to the end of 2013). The three parliamentary systems differ along the political and institutional dimension. Yet, they followed remarkably parallel paths in terms of economic and social distress after the outbreak of the crisis, so much that - together with Greece - they are often referred through the common acronym of PIGS. All of them had to implement unpopular austerity policies, much to the discontent of their voters and citizens in general. While in Spain and Portugal these domestic reforms were officially agreed with international lenders in exchange for bailout loans, Italian cabinets embarked on an austerity programs without an external supervision. The political price of these decisions was everywhere high. Bad economic record played in the hands of challenger parties, which presented themselves as preferential channels of citizens' dissatisfaction. As foreseen by the economic voting literature, in each post-crisis election incumbents were ousted, although this did not translate always in a landslide for the mainstream challenger. In Italy new parties

made their way in parliament, mostly carrying a new anti-elite, anti-European, populist agenda.

The paper is organised as follows. The first section provides a brief outline of the economic and political impact of the debt crisis in the three countries. The second section presents the state of the art in the field of issue competition, the contribution of agenda studies and outlines the guiding hypotheses. The third section describes the procedures of parliamentary questioning in Italy, Portugal Spain and shows some descriptive evidence regarding their evolution. The fourth presents the results and concludes by discussing the implications of these findings.

Setting the comparative stage: southern Europe in times of austerity

The political science literature have long agreed that, despite their sharing a common geographical area and several other important cultural characteristics, Southern European democracies do not form a distinct cluster (Lijphart et al., 1988). Yet, since the outbreak of the economic crisis their paths have been remarkably similar. Starting approximately in 2008, the year when the economic fallout of the US financial crisis acquired a global dimension, the main economic indicators for the three countries showed a sharp worsening (see Figure 1.1 to 1.3): economies contracted and entered recession, unemployment rates increased, the public debt began to rise again after the efforts of containing it in the late 1990s - early 2000s (as an attempt to respect the Stability and Growth Pact governing the Euro area). The about turn in the figures was particularly striking in Spain, where the first years within the Eurozone had coincided with an era of unprecedented growth (partly built – as it would be later known - on a residential real estate bubble).

In the late 2009, the economic crisis turned into a sovereign debt crisis after news was disclosed about the real dimensions of the Greek budget deficit. Economies with similar structural weaknesses to Greece and reputation for lack of fiscal discipline became the targets of market speculation. Figure 1.4 reports the sharp divergence in 10-year yield premium of bonds in Portugal, Spain and Italy as compared with German bunds. Markets were shaken by a generalised loss of confidence over the solvency of the debt in these countries, which reflected in a substantial downgrading of their credit rating. Since 2010, the ECB has been – albeit slowly - injecting capital into Southern European banks to bailout the sector and lowering interest rates. On top of that, various emergency measures were agreed at the Eurozone level. To regain the trust of the financial markets and EU partners, Southern governments began to introduce austerity measures including labour market reforms and cuts in public spending. This was largely to no avail, as the generalised economic downturn in Europe hindered recovery and affected negatively the countries' deficit and debt levels. After Greece and Ireland, also Portugal (June 2011) and Spain (June 2012) signed up a bailout programme with the Troika. The recipients of the loan were respectively the state in Portugal and the banks in Spain. The flowing of financial assistance was conditioned on a continued commitment to austerity policies.

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

Against the backdrop of contracting economies and rising public debts and unemployment, the crisis had the effect of fuelling social unrest in Southern democracies. Once again, data are not discussed in depth here, but serve the purpose of highlighting the remarkable similarities characterising the three countries. Figure 2

shows that economic outlooks at the level of public opinion deteriorated rapidly after 2008. The image of over spending governments exerting a weak control over an overgrown banking sector (“banks too big to fail”) spread virally across the public opinion. Public satisfaction with democracy and trust in government plummeted after the onset of the crisis. Above all in Spain but also in smaller degrees in Portugal and Italy, protesters took the streets to voice disapproval against the retrenchment of social policies and the soaring unemployment.

Albeit indirectly (respondents were not asked to rate specifically the performance of the cabinet in charge), it might be said that the distrust expressed by Eurobarometer data extended also to current governing elites. Not only they all held governing positions in the past and had co-responsibility in creating the conditions for the crisis, but they by and large opted for presenting their anti-crisis policies as externally imposed by international lenders. If on one side, the strategy of blame-shifting allowed incumbent cabinets to partially deflect criticism, on the other it reinforced the perception of public decisions being out of democratically elected governments’ control.³ Using Mair’s words (2011), the crisis contributed to widen the already existing schism between responsiveness and responsibility affecting contemporary party representation. The economic downturn brought into sharper relief the difficulty in reconciling the need to respond to the demands of the electoral base (for instance, by easing the economic pain they are going through) and to external commitments made to a variety of international actors (EU partners and

³ Borrowing Krastev’s words to describe the situation in the Balkans, Southern Europe is trapped in a “democracy without choices” (Krastev, 2002)

institutions, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), bond markets and rating agencies).

Especially the mismanagement of the crisis by EU institutions and the tight constraints derived from European and Euro membership came under the spotlight. Not only EU institutions' actions to reassure the markets were slow and insufficient, but the rules of fiscal discipline and low inflation at the base of the common currency ended up tying the hands of national decision-makers. Although the majority of citizens in these countries remain favourable to the European project, the economic storm worsened the perception of Europe as a symbol of economic prosperity (Figure 2.4). These conditions bolstered the claims of Euro-sceptic parties, which found a more fertile soil for their attacks against Europe, pointing at traditional weaknesses in "input legitimacy" (democratic deficit) alongside new concerns about "output legitimacy" (measured in terms of perceived benefits deriving from EU membership).

INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE

Overall, the political impact of the crisis has been undeniable. Snap elections were called in Portugal (June 2011) and Spain (November 2011) and led to the ousting of the incumbent. Italy went down a different path in late 2011 after the markets withdrew their confidence in Berlusconi leadership to steer Italy out of the crisis and forced his resignation. Instead of choosing to go to the polls, a heterogeneous coalition of parties rallied behind the technocratic figure of Mario Monti, former EU commissioner. Heading a unity cabinet composed entirely with independents, he was appointed to carry out a series of unpopular austerity reforms and lead the burgeoning Italian debt under control. The end of the 16th legislature brought to the first Italian

political elections after the outbreak of the debt crisis (February 2013). Remarkably, these elections did not yield a clear-cut win of one of the two blocs which has been governing Italy for the last two decades. In 2013, following long negotiations, a new grand coalition between mainstream centre-left and centre-right parties was formed. The real novelty was the electoral success of a third non-aligned party into parliament, the 5-Star Movement (M5S), advocating a provocative anti-elite euro-sceptical agenda. Together with the regionalist xenophobic party of the Northern League (LN) and the left-wing formation of Left Ecology and Freedom (SEL), they represent an opposition front, which – in the same vein of the majority supporting the government – cuts across the traditional right-left divide.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

Exploring the crisis impact on parliamentary activities through question time

The core of this project draws from the literature on the dynamics of policy agendas, defined as “the set of issues that are the subject of decision making and debate within a given political system at any one time” (Baumgartner, 2001: 288). Governmental and legislative bodies are regularly faced with a constant flow of information regarding questions of national and international importance that they are expected to deal with. The goal of agenda-setting studies is to explain how and why any of the “endless” number of issues takes precedence over others when entering the “constrained” agenda of public decision-makers.

Agenda-setting studies are currently going through a third phase. Inspired by the work of Baumgartner & Jones (2005) on the “politics of attention”, this new wave of studies shifted their focus from the study of specific policy areas, to the study of

entire political systems. Their key idea is to open new windows on “politics” by studying how issues are processed by political systems. Like tracer liquids injected into a body allow physicians to understand its (mal-) functioning, similarly analysing the flowing of issues through actors and venues and across time provide researchers with a fresh perspective on political dynamics (Green-Pedersen and Walgrave 2014). In other words, we learn about actors and institutions (the focus of politics) by understanding how they process real world problems and information. This research program comes also with a distinct methodological design. Agenda-setting scholars map attention across “issues”. It is the content of the political struggle which gains centre stage. This is also the approach chosen in the current work to assess the impact of the crisis on parliamentary agenda dynamics. If, as it is argued, asking questions is strategic in nature, so it represents a suitable setting to study issue competition in times of economic crisis.

The first dimension to be considered is systemic, in other words it tracks changes in the agenda of all parties, not distinguishing their number of seats (which influences the number of questions they are allowed), policy preferences and position in/out of government. One of the insights of agenda studies has to do with the impact that shifts of attention on an issue have not just on that issue, but on the rest of issues competing for the restricted agenda space. The concept of “agenda diversity” measures how attention is distributed across all issues composing the agenda at any one time. Studying policy agendas from the point of view of diversity is important for two reasons. On the one hand, given the finite nature of attention, it is problematic to account for the rise of an issue on the agenda without considering its interrelationship with the rest of competing issues. On the other hand, variation in diversity affects how

a political system processes information and reacts to societal signals. Agenda diversity and representation are positively correlated: the greater the diversity of the parliamentary agenda, the more opportunities for the representation of interests (Schattschneider, 1960).

In a recent comparative analysis, Jennings et al. (2011; see also Alexandrova et al., 2012 for an analysis of the European Council agenda) explored the determinants of agenda diversity. They offered compelling evidence that the concentration of government agendas around key core functions (i.e. economics, defence, foreign policy, government operations and the rule of law) contracts the diversity of executive agendas consistently across a range of political systems and over time. They measure executive agendas as the proportion of sentences or quasi-sentences contained in executive speeches and devoted to a specific policy topic. Their theoretical premise is that a rise of attention on a core issue has consequences not only for policy-making in the domain, but for the structure of attention to all issues across the agenda. This occurs even though other great challenges – such as climate change – have not gone away. This work takes cue from these findings to enquire about the effect of the current financial and economic crisis on legislative agenda diversity.

Hypotheses

Since the crisis has put under increased stress one of the core functions of the democratic state, the sustainability of the public debt, economic and social problems should become prominent at the expense of other issues, which will experience a contraction in their agenda space. Due to limitation in the carrying capacity of parliamentary, it is to be expected that while economic issues in the agenda will

receive a disproportionate attention, others will receive very little. Theories of economic voting argue that the economy has an advantage over other factors guiding how voters weigh issues (for a review Singer, 2011). The worsening of economic conditions is more easily perceived by the public opinion and, partially as a consequence, it is more likely to be covered in media reports. These signals are read by politicians which strategically decide to act or not act upon them, depending on whether doing so is deemed beneficial from their point of view (Walgrave and Van Aelst, 2006). As a result of the extreme gravity of the current crisis, it is expected that politician will not be able to openly disregard economic issues and that economic issues will enjoy an extraordinary surge in attention. Most importantly, this should hold true not only during electoral campaign (as already shown by Singer, 2013) but in everyday institutional activities. In terms of agenda diversity, the hypothesis states that one effect of the crisis is to congest the working of national parliaments at the expense of other less pressing issues.

H1: In times of economic austerity, overall agenda diversity should decrease by shifting disproportionate attention towards economic issues

Talking solely of displacement of “other issues” from the political agenda could end up giving a simplified account of agenda-setting in times of austerity. Issue prioritization would be treated as a direct function of incoming information about most important problems. Importantly, this perspective leaves out the intervention of political party agents. In one of the first studies on the content of parliamentary questioning, Green-Pedersen and Mortensen (2010) exposed a model of issue competition. Parties focus not only on issues that they “own” (a party “owns” an issue

when there is a widespread belief among the voters that it is the most competent to deal with it, e.g. Petrocik 1996), but strategically engage in their competitors' issues to gain some advantage. The result of the interplay between parties' agendas is the so-called party-system agenda. Ignoring an issue on the party-system agenda may be deleterious for a party's image, thus influencing its content is of primary importance in the struggle for power. Yet, the opportunities of influence (not control, which is impossible) differ for majority and opposition parties. When majority parties emphasise an issue, they are required (to some extent) to also deliver policy solutions. As a result, they should be more prone to independently steer attention towards past or future accomplishments of the executive or a specific minister. On the contrary, opposition parties are not accountable for providing policy solutions. This gives them a structural advantage over the selection of which issue to address and emphasise and for how long. At the same time, it provides them with a weapon to try to influence those in power. For instance, it was shown that opposition MPs can politicize specific problems with the aim of eliciting the executive's reaction on issues the latter would rather keep away from public discussion (Seeberg 2013).

In line with this theoretical argument, I expect that the contraction of the agenda results mainly from a change of opposition's issue emphasis. It is in the opposition's interest to politicize economic issues, because it shows that it is addressing public discontent with austerity measures (without being required to offer policy solutions). Moreover, it hits the cabinet where it is the most vulnerable, when the confidence in the cabinet performance is on a decreasing trend. Finally, since the executive tied its hands in the core area of public spending and committed to specific reforms in front of its EU partners, it will have fewer resources to avoid or counter the

blame, thus depoliticising the issue. On their part, incumbent parties should be expected to modify only marginally their issue emphasis, which should be as diverse as the range of activities undertaken by the cabinet.

H2: In times of economic austerity, opposition parties should display lower agenda diversity than the majority and focus more prominently on economic issues

Data

The content of parliamentary questions was coded according to respectively the Italian, Portuguese and Spanish policy agenda national codebooks. These projects are part of a transnational network of research teams involved in developing and applying common methods for the comparison of policy agendas (Comparative Agendas Project [CAP], <http://www.comparativeagendas.org>). The common methodological approach envisages the coding of each document or activity traceable to a given agenda (for example: laws -> law-making agenda; statements in electoral platforms -> agenda of political parties; newspaper articles -> media agenda; and so on) according to a specific policy sector. The final dataset contains 11426 oral questions to the government tabled on the floor between 2000 and 2013. Details on the title, date and sponsor were collected from the official websites of the three parliaments (dati.camera.it, www.parlamento.pt, www.Congreso.es). Each question was then assigned to one of

the 19 topic codes by two coders working separately.⁴ To ensure comparability across codebooks, the code “immigration” and “culture” were respectively aggregated with “labour and employment” and “education” in the Italian and Portuguese case. Table 2 reports the absolute number of question per topic across the three country cases.

INSERT TABLE 2 HERE

Question time in the three countries

To measure the legislative agenda the present analysis relied on oral questions put to the government on the floor, also known by the name of its British version as “question time”. The reasons for an MP to ask a specific question are the most various, ranging “from highly focused issues – for instance obtaining an official commitment about the funding of a school – to very large issues – for instance sympathising after a natural catastrophe in a foreign country” (Rozenberg and Martin, 2011: 394). Only in extremely rare cases, asking a question is sufficient on its own to lead to the adoption of a legislative act or the dismissal of a cabinet. In a theoretical agenda-setting cycle, non-legislative activities would be located at the very first steps of a process (which culminates with the public decision being taken). Yet, in the presence of certain conditions, such as their being televised or the provision of follow-up discussions on

⁴ As regards Spanish questions, the author completed the database created by the Spanish Policy Agendas Project (Chaques-Bonafont et al., 2014) with information on questions introduced between the beginning of 2009 and the end of 2013.

the floor, they may generate cascading effects over the whole policy-making process.⁵ At a minimum, all questions focus on a topic and, as a result, it can be said that they all contribute, in a more or less intentional way, to shape the overall “party system agenda” (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2010), the list of “hot topics” under debate in parliament at any given time. No single party actor is entirely in control of the party system agenda (ibid.), since this is affected also by actors outside of the parliamentary arena such as the media and interest groups. At the same time, all party actors are to some extent affected by the issues making up the party-system agenda, since it might be risky or counterproductive not to have at the very least a position on each one of them.

Putting questions to the government may be one of the institutionalised channels available to parties to influence the party-system agenda and emphasise issues that are advantageous to them. This can be done, among others, by politicizing issues which are momentarily out the public spotlight or bringing new issues into the debate. Question time has some properties which make them arguably a better instrument to shape the party-system agendas with respect to written questions. First, they are mostly about general issues, they are scheduled at regular intervals and they are shown on television. These characteristics make question time by and large an inter-party repeated game, a fundamentally strategic tool to table new topics or drawing attention to issues. What is more, TV coverage ensures that questions and the unfolding debates engage actors outside of the parliamentary arena (Salmond, 2014).

⁵ This is part of the reasons why their number increased substantially in most European countries over the last decades (Green-Pedersen, 2010).

Second, since available time is constrained, the selection of questions is under the supervision of the party whip, if not entirely pre-arranged at the level of party group (Rozenberg and Martin, 2011). This should reduce – but not entirely rule out (Rozenberg et al., 2011) - the use of oral questions for reasons of self-promotion or constituency service (which are more typical of written questions).

Before moving on to testing the hypotheses, it is fundamental to look more in depth the main procedural properties of question time in the three countries under exam. As the literature on parliamentary questioning amply documented (Russo and Wiberg, 2010; Rozenberg et al., 2011), each country institutionalized question time differently, so part of the observed cross-country variation is expected to originate from institutional design. What is more, the comparison proposed here is also longitudinal, contrasting the period before and after the outbreak of the crisis. This calls for a particular attention to changes in the rule of the game within the same chamber.

The Italian question time is officially referred to as “parliamentary questions with immediate answer” (*interrogazioni a risposta immediata*). It exists in both Houses although, for the sake of the present work, only question time in the lower house (Chamber of Deputies) will be examined.⁶ It has been established since 1993 and it was last reformed in 1997. It is generally held once a week, normally on Wednesdays and, depending on the topic of the tabled questions, it envisages the intervention of either the President/Vice-President of the Council or the minister/s in charge of the portfolio

⁶ Procedural rules between the two houses are minimal, see art. 135-bis of the Chamber of Deputies and art. 151-bis of the Senate Standing Order.

under debate. Each parliamentary group is allowed one question per session. The latter is put by an MP, who has the obligation to submit it one day in advance through the president of his/her parliamentary group. Questions are expected to be concise (less than a minute) and address a topic of general interest. The cabinet representative is conceded a three-minute answer, followed by a two-minute reply by the applicant.

In Portugal, some form of question time has been in place since the onset of the democracy. Yet, at least until 2000s, it remained one of the “most criticised scrutiny device” because of “its occasional occurrence, its lack of flexibility, and the government’s right to choose the questions it wishes to answer” (Leston-Bandeira, 2004: 80). A major upgrade of the rules occurred in 2003, with the introduction of a specific prime ministerial debate to be held in the first week of the month on a date agreed by the Speaker, the cabinet and the Conference of Leaders.⁷ The 2007 reform (and its partial revision in 2010) made the debate more frequent (twice a month) and it envisaged the possibility to choose among two debate formats: the first (type A) allowed the PM to speak first and then receive one round of questions on matters related to his/her intervention; the second (type B) left MPs free rein to ask one round of questions. Both the PM (type A) and MPs (type B) have to communicate the general

⁷ Questions for prime ministerial debate did not have to be submitted in advance. After an intervention of the Prime Minister, he/she had to answer three rounds of questions: during the First round, time was allocated among parliamentary groups according to their size; during the Second round only the four biggest groups were allowed to ask questions; during the Third round, only the two biggest groups intervened, giving priority to the opposition party.

topic of their speeches with at least a 24-hour advance. Time is allocated among parliamentary groups proportionally to their size and can be used all in one round or partitioned.⁸

The Spanish Cortes have their version of “question time” taking place every two weeks on Wednesday mornings (*Preguntas orales em pleno*, oral questions in the plenary). The definition of debatable topics is left rather open and should be communicated in writing to the Bureau of Congress no later than 48 hours before the debate. It lasts generally a maximum of 4 hours, which constrains the number of questions to be asked (a ceiling of 25 was set after 2011). The distribution of questions across parliamentary groups has undergone alterations over the years, although the general rule is for each of them to be allocated a number of slots somewhat proportional to its strength.

From this summary of procedural rules, it becomes evident that the three countries considered differ not only in the way question time is conducted, but in the level of institutionalisation of this scrutiny device and the frequency of its use. As regards the former aspect, Portugal is clearly the country where question time underwent most changes over the studied time period. The current format was introduced only in 2007. It largely originated from the willingness to empower the opposition after criticism mounted against rules allowing the cabinet to choose the topic of debate and which questions to answer (Filipe, 2009). Both in Spain and Italy

⁸ It is also possible to present questions of a sectorial character to Ministers using a similar procedure to the one used for the PM question time. Their frequency has been far lower (Filipe, 2009: 7), so for the time being, they were not included.

these procedures had more time to set in and become engrained in the working practice of the assembly.

Also the number of questions varies substantially across countries and longitudinally (see Figure 3). Portugal, where only Prime Ministerial question time was included, displays clearly a lower frequency of questions. The PM appeared in front of the Parliament only 6/7 times a year up to 2007. The reformed Standing Orders made question time a fortnightly appointment, although the obligation for the PM to attend the plenary has not been rigorously respected. Conversely, question time is scheduled with more regularity in Italy and Spain. These two countries share also the tendency to ask less questions in election years, which is probably due to the parliament adjourning its regular activities when elections are held. In addition, the time series plotted in Figure 3 shows that Portugal and Italy present two peaks characterised by a surge in questioning activity. The Portuguese peak corresponds to the period immediately following the reform of the Standing Orders. Reporting on the 2007 reform, an expert witness acknowledged that: “The prime ministerial debates system was the most important change and the one with most impact upon the public image of the parliament” (Filipe, 2009: 6). Arguably, this created incentives for both the Prime Minister and opposition leaders to make the most of the publicity derived from attending question time.

INSERT FIGURE 3 HERE

In the Italian case, the peak coincides with a single year, 2007, when MPs asked a notable number of 497 questions. A tentative explanation for this result might come from considering the distribution of questions between ruling and opposition parties.

The stacked bar plot in figure 4 shows for each legislature the average number of questions per month and their distribution between government and opposition. Differently from its Westminster version, questions put to ministers by members of the governing coalition are not rare. The proportion of questions asked by majority MPs is quite remarkable in Italy and not negligible also in Spain and Portugal.⁹ According to the data, almost 2/3 of the 30 average monthly questions in the XV Italian legislature were put by members of the coalition majority. Understanding whether these were “friendly” questions pre-arranged for credit-claiming on the part of the minister or they were used by coalition partners to keep tabs on ministers belonging to different parties is beyond the scope of this work. For sure, this figure seems to originate from the conjunction of the high party system fragmentation characterising the XV legislature (especially in the majority) and the possibility for each group to ask one question, no matter the size.

INSERT FIGURE 4 HERE

⁹ It is difficult to account for the decrease of questions asked by majority MPs in Spain without a deeper inspection of the procedural and tactical changes involved (Chaqués-Bonafont et al., 2014). Before the alteration to the standing orders in 2008, those oral question slots not used by majority MPs were available for opposition MPs. Thus, there was an incentive for the formers to ask as many questions as they were allowed. Since 2008 the number of questions for each group has been fixed in advanced.

Analysis

Issue diversity and the salience of the economy

To address the first question about the impact of the crisis on issue diversity, it is first provided a measure of overall agenda entropy for each country and legislature. This is measured through the normalised Shannon's H entropy score (Boydstun et al., 2014). This score varies between 0 and 1 and it increases as the spread of attention across all issues evens out. Assuming a maximum of 20 topics in the agenda, it will get: a 1 if each topic receives exactly 5% of the attention; a 0 if the speech deals with just one topic.¹⁰ This is considered a better measurement of entropy with respect to a non-normalised Shannon's H entropy score in a comparative setting as it discounts the lower number of topics touched upon in debates involving only the Prime Minister (Portugal).

Figure 5 shows that the level of variation in mean entropy scores varies over time. Yet there is no common trend across the three countries. Only in Spain and Portugal there is a plunge after the outbreak of the crisis (which approximately coincides respectively with the start of the second Zapatero and the second Socrates cabinet): almost .10 in Spain from the 8th to the 10th and .19 in Portugal from the 10th to the 12th

¹⁰ It is calculated as follows:

$$\text{Shannon's } H_{\text{norm}} = \frac{-\sum_{i=1}^n (p(x_i)) * \ln p(x_i)}{\ln(N)} \quad \text{where } x_i \text{ represents an issue, } p(x_i) \text{ is the}$$

proportion of total attention the issue receives, $\ln p(x_i)$ is the natural log of the proportion of attention the dimension receives and N is the total number of issues (Boydstun et al., 2014: 183) .

legislatures.¹¹ Conversely, in Italy there is a marginal increase of diversity at the beginning of the 16th legislature and a decrease with the most recent 17th legislature. The overall distribution of attention across topics did become more concentrated as expected by H1, but only in two of the three cases.

INSERT FIGURE 5 HERE

The change in the overall legislative agenda can also be analysed at the topic level. Figure 6 calculates the percentage change of attention 5 years before (2004-2008) and 5 years during (2009-2013) the crisis for each of the 19 topics. A positive value indicates that the topic was granted more attention in the overall agenda after 2009, vice versa for negative values. As expected, the bar plot reveals an increase in attention for macroeconomics, although Italy once again distinguishes itself for the considerably smaller change. The second most salient topic, state operations, is less clearly crisis-related. It captures topics surrounding the functioning of the central and subnational administrative actors as well as institutions. While in Portugal and Italy this might be related to processes of domestic institutional reforms as a response to the drop in government and party approval rates, in Spain the bulge of questions is likely to originate from issues related to regional governments' autonomy. The relevance of labour and employment issues in the Spanish and Portuguese agenda reflects the gravity of the unemployment issue in the countries since the outbreak of the crisis

¹¹ The low level of entropy for Portugal during the 9th legislature is induced by the faculty for the Prime Minister to set the topic of the debate (and the question he/she would accept) in advance. This advantage was partially offset after the 2007 reform of standing orders.

(with rates peaking at about 25% in 2012 in Spain, more than 50% among young people).

These increases in attention occurred at the expense of most other issue areas. This is less evident in the Italian case, which preserves a relatively high degree of similarity between the pre- and post-crisis outbreak agendas but for two sectors: “Justice & Crime” and “Transport”.

INSERT FIGURE 6 HERE

Difference use of questioning by majority and opposition parties

Figure 7 plots the evolution of mean entropy scores per legislature by distinguishing between government and opposition parties. Contrary to the hypotheses set out in H2, majority and opposition entropy scores in Italy followed similar paths over the period. This might suggest that the use of the majority/opposition divide to group Italian parties might have lost part of its explanatory power after the recourse to two grand coalitions supporting respectively the Monti (16th legislature) and Letta cabinet (17th). In Portugal, the two trajectories followed a common pattern up to the 11th legislature when entropy score for majority MPs dropped substantially. This resulted from the sharp decrease of questions directed to the socialist Prime Minister from his backbenchers: only 7 in 3 years. The reading of question time debates in the period reveals that majority MPs decided to use the time available for questions to issue public statements in support of the government instead of putting “friendly” questions to the cabinet leader. It is during the last legislature which unfolds under the shadow of the “memorandum of agreement” that the two trends diverge and there is a first visible superiority of entropy scores for majority parties. In Spain the lower level of

opposition parties' entropy scores starts already during the 7th legislature and continues also in the subsequent "crisis" legislatures. On the other hand, the entropy of majority MPs' agenda starts declining with the 9th (Zapatero II) legislature. Overall, H2 holds although only in a weak way in Portugal and Spain. The crisis meant a change in the diversity of issue emphases particularly for opposition groups and parties not directly holding government responsibilities.

INSERT FIGURE 7 HERE

Similarly to figure 6, figure 8 calculates the percentage change of attention for majority and opposition parties 5 years before (2004-2008) and during (2009-2013) the crisis for each of the topics. It is difficult to identify either decreases or increases shared by the three countries. The closest we get to a general tendency is the increase for both majority and opposition groups of attention for macroeconomics. As one would expect in an economic crisis context, they are asking more questions related to macroeconomic areas. Yet a dramatic shift of attention is more evident for opposition parties. The exceptions are Italian opposition parties. This result has to be read alongside the above-mentioned peculiar trend of entropy scores and might be related to the over-sized (technocratic during Monti) majorities facing opposition parties in Italy during the last two cabinets. The second finding is that opposition and majority share a decrease of attention for topics which are not directly connected to the social and economic realm, such as justice and crime and transport. While the latter can be explained with reference to curtailed funding for infrastructure, the decrease of attention for justice and crime comes as a surprise. Indeed, it was shown that weak economies distract voters from other policy topics but not from crime and corruption

(e.g. Singer, 2013). One possible explanation is that most attention was directed towards government and administration corruption, a topic that is captured by the category “State operation”. Another possible reason is the stability of the topic in the agenda of these countries over the last decade.

Conclusions

This chapter set out to explore the impact of the economic and financial crisis on the parliamentary agenda of Italy, Spain and Portugal. It defined parliamentary agenda as the distribution of attention across policy areas. It used the proportion of parliamentary questions per policy area as a proxy of parliamentary attention. The empirical analysis made use of data on the content of question time over the most recent 4 legislatures. Each oral question was classified according to one policy topic of the Italian, Portuguese and Spanish policy agenda codebook.

The core of this project draws from the literature on the dynamics of policy agendas, which starts from the acknowledgement that attention is a limited resource in politics. Legislative bodies are regularly faced with a constant flow of information regarding questions of national and international importance that they are expected to deal with (Jones and Baumgartner, 2005). This plethora of information has to be examined and sifted before it can lead to any real action by elected representatives. Crises are, by definition, focal events which cannot be disregarded. In most cases, they call for a government response proportional to the magnitude of the challenge facing the community. They act as external shocks triggering change in the system. The Great Depression, by its sheer magnitude, is expected to sweep away all other issues from the agenda and install itself as “The Topic” to confront. The expectation was that the

extraordinary magnitude of the crisis diverted policy attention, traditionally more evenly diffused across policies, towards specific areas related to the crisis. This is not to say that all other issues have been forced out of the agenda. For instance, questions asked in parliamentary committees still allow the simultaneous handling of different specialized issues. Nonetheless, one of the expected effects of the crisis is the contraction of the party-system agenda space on the floor.

The first exploratory findings show that indeed the post-crisis period records a marginal contraction in the parliamentary agenda for Portugal and Spain. Vice versa Italy displays a greater stability in terms of entropy. The second expectation was that this pattern should result by and large from questions asked by opposition parties. Their tactic should be to “ride the wave” of public discontent towards austerity measures (Wagner and Meyer, 2014). This way they would profit from the low popularity of cabinet parties and, simultaneously, from their lower capacity to offer a valid countermove to attacks given their tied hands with respect to spending and policy choices. Indeed, these findings speak to recent arguments on how the debt crisis poses outstanding political challenges for office-holders in debtor countries (Laffan, 2014). De Giorgi and Moury (2014; for an application to the Spanish case see Palau et al., 2014), for instance, found out that a dilemma haunts opposition parties after the outbreak of the crisis. The choice is between acting responsibly and promoting patterns of cooperative relations with the executive so as to promptly adopt the required measures of economic reform or act in an adversarial manner, attacking the incumbent in the hope of weakening its political support and increasing the possibilities of turnover at the next elections. The results point to a generalised increase in conflictuality on those bills whose content might be related to the crisis.

The present analysis finds that mean entropy scores per legislature diverged marginally for opposition and majority during the crisis in Spain and Portugal. In Italy, there is no clear difference, a result which warrants further investigation into how the recent experience of grand majority coalitions affected the agenda of opposition parties.

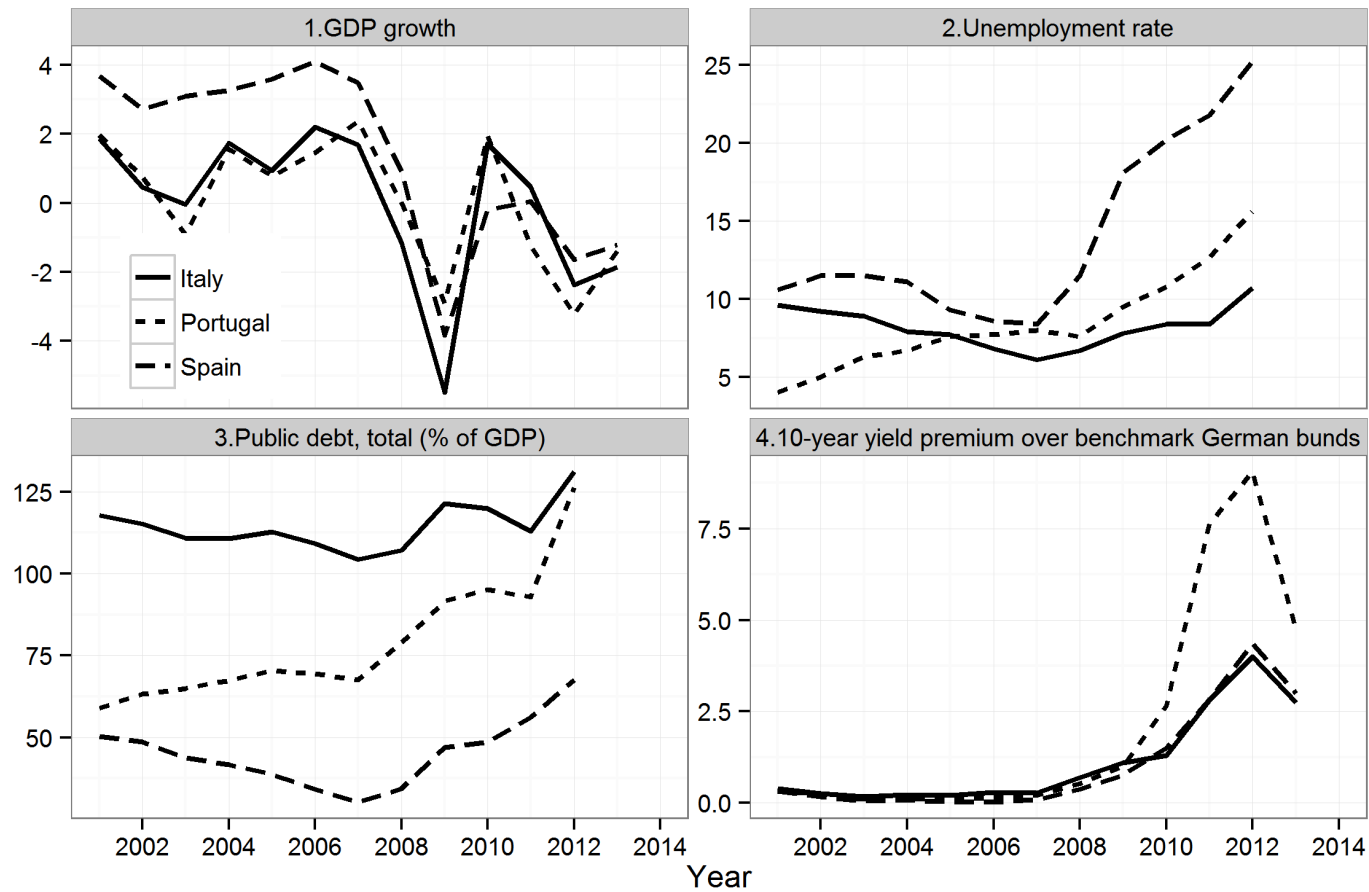
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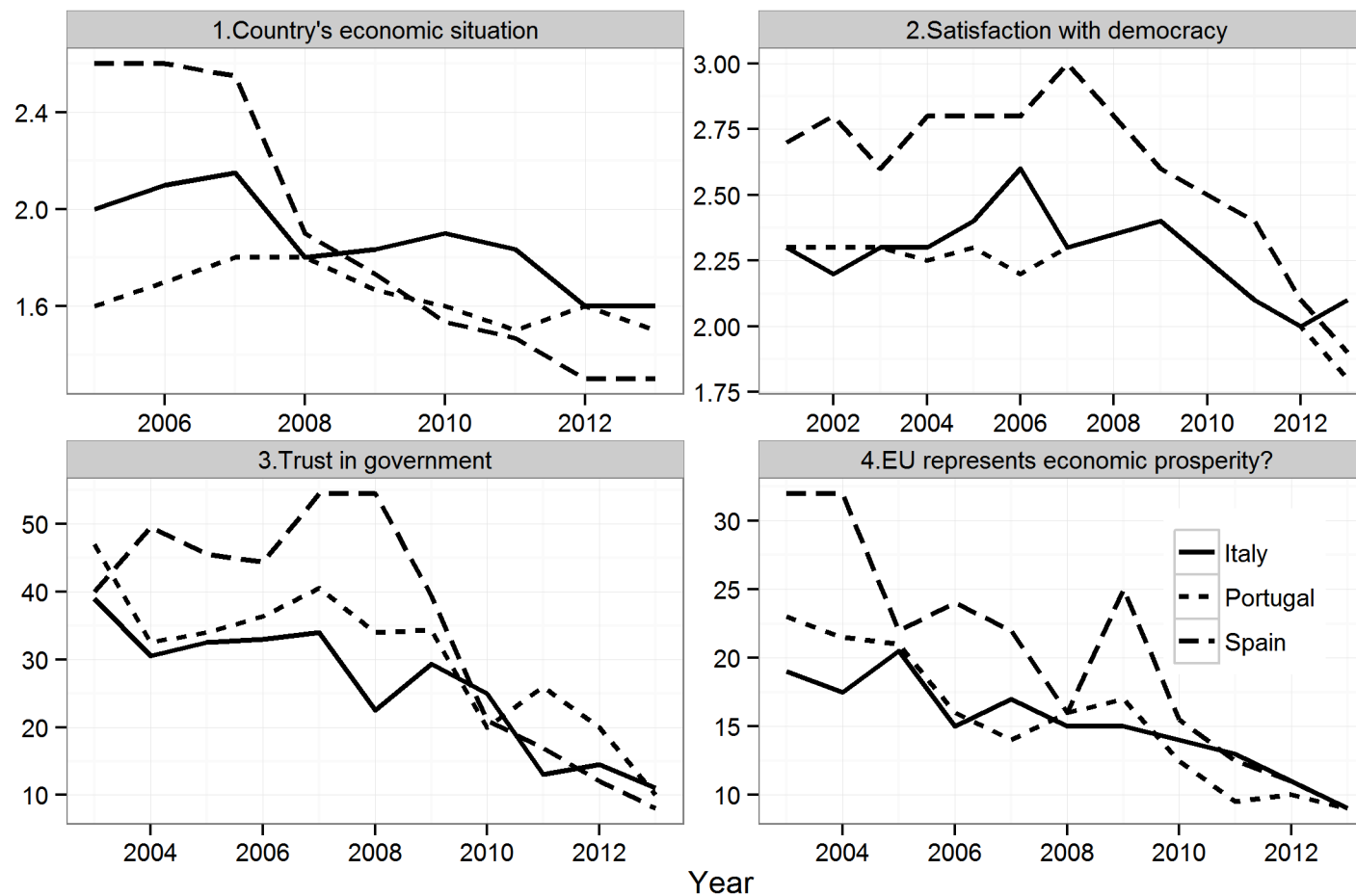
Figure 1 Economic indicators of the debt crisis impact



Note: Figures 1 to 3 use World Bank Data (<http://data.worldbank.org/>), Figure 4 uses European Central Bank Data (<https://www.ecb.europa.eu/stats/money/long/html/index.en.html>)

- 1) Annual percentage growth rate of GDP at market prices based on constant local currency.
- 2) Share of the labor force that is without work but available for and seeking employment
- 3) Central government debt, total (% of GDP)
- 4) 10-year yield premium over benchmark German bunds (Harmonised long-term interest rates for convergence assessment purposes)

Figure 2 Public opinion and the debt crisis impact



Note: Eurobarometer data downloaded from “Portal da Opinião Pública”(www.pop.pt)

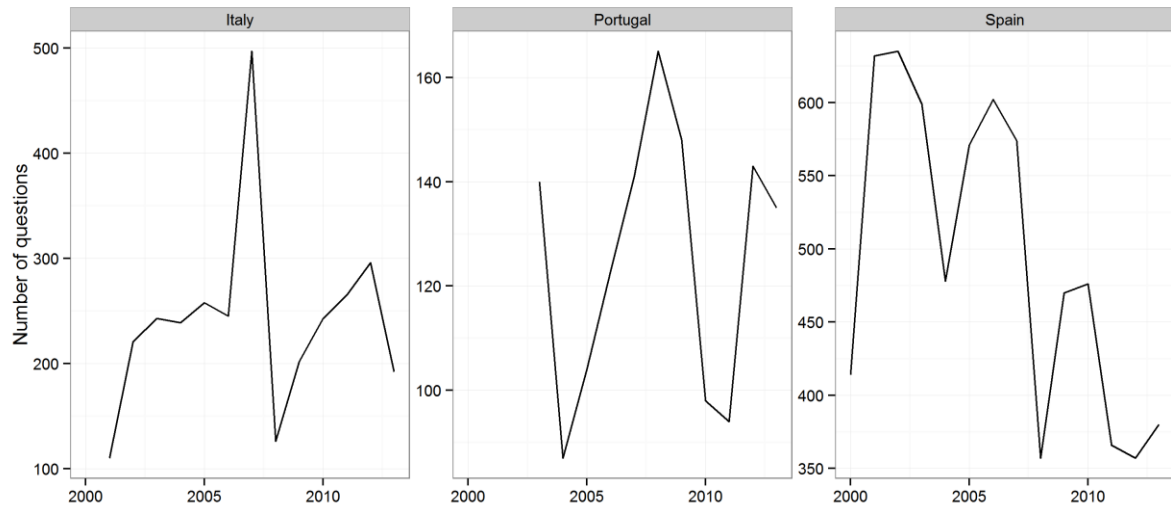
1) How would you judge the current situation of the country economy? Mean value, in a scale of 1 (very bad) to 4 (very good)

2) On the whole, are you very satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied or not at all satisfied with the way democracy works in our country? Mean value, in a scale of 1 (not at all satisfied) to 4 (very satisfied)

3 For each of the following institutions, please tell me if you tend to trust it or tend not to trust it: The Government. % that tend to trust the government

4) What does the European Union mean to you personally? % that say EU represents prosperity

Figure 3 Absolute number of questions per year



Year	Italy	Portugal	Spain
2000	NA	NA	414*
2001	110*	NA	632
2002	221	NA	635
2003	243	140	599
2004	239	87	478*
2005	258	104*	571
2006	245*	123	602
2007	497	141	574
2008	126*	165	357*
2009	202	148*	470
2010	243	98	476
2011	265	94*	366*
2012	296	143	357
2013	192*	135	380

Note: * indicates electoral years

Figure 4 Distribution of questions between majority and opposition parties

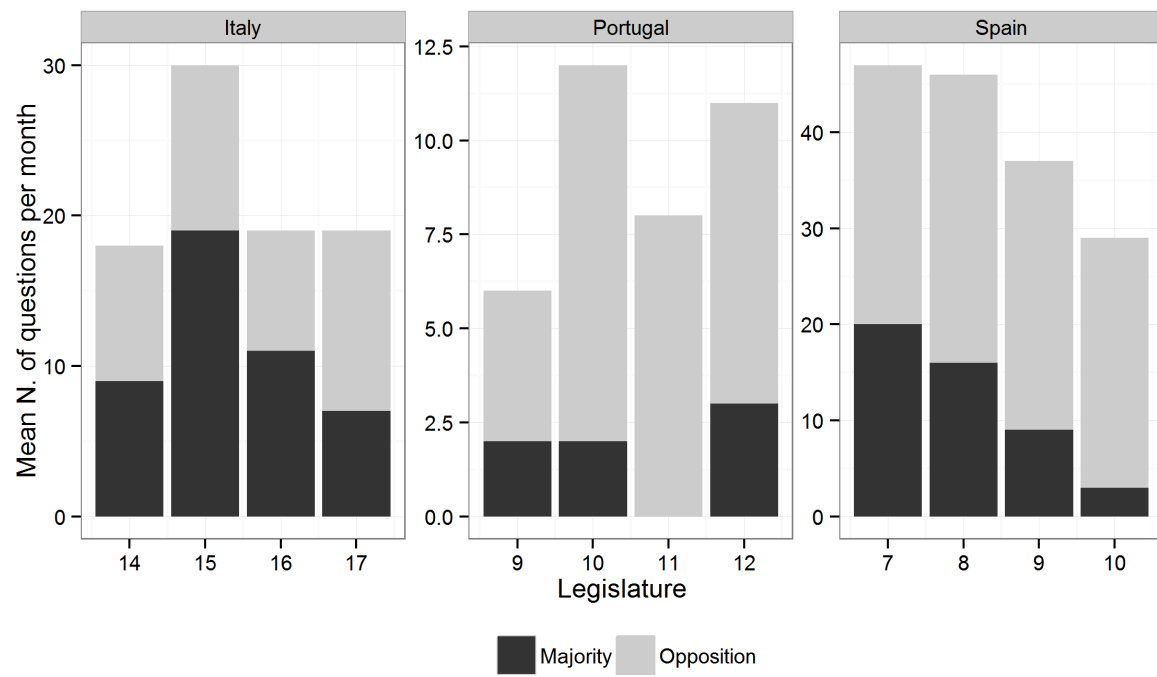


Figure 5 Mean entropy scores across legislatures

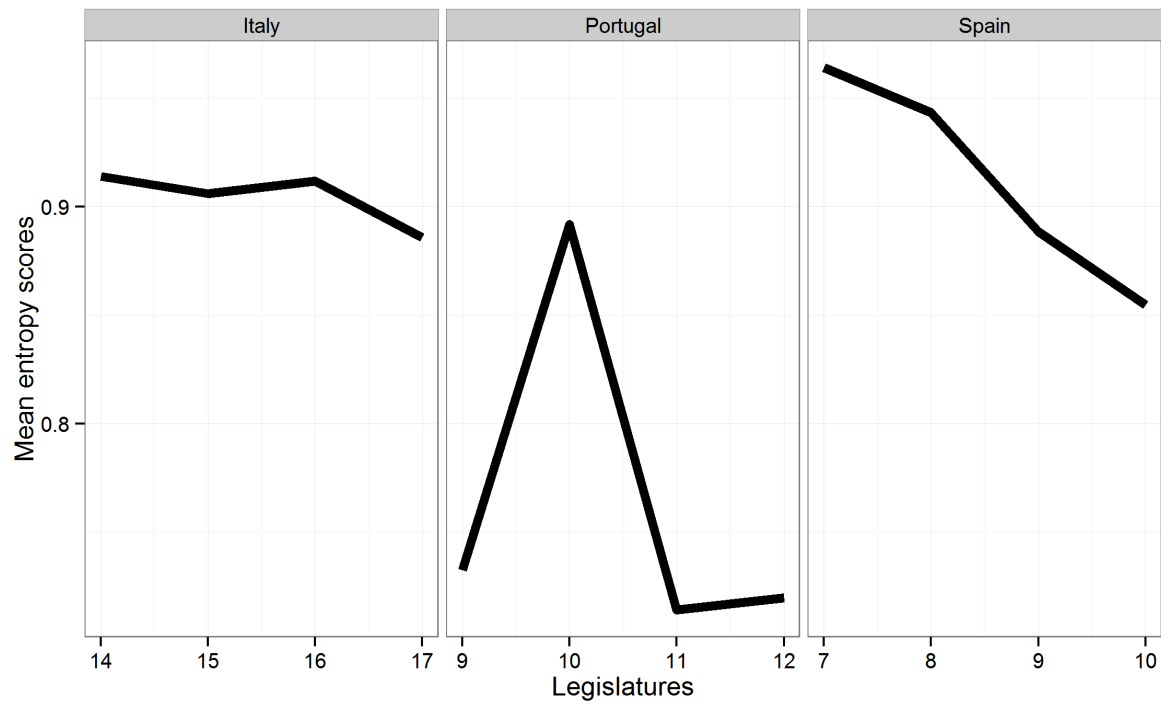


Figure 6 Gap between pre-crisis (2004-2008) and post-crisis (2009-2013) distribution of attention across topic

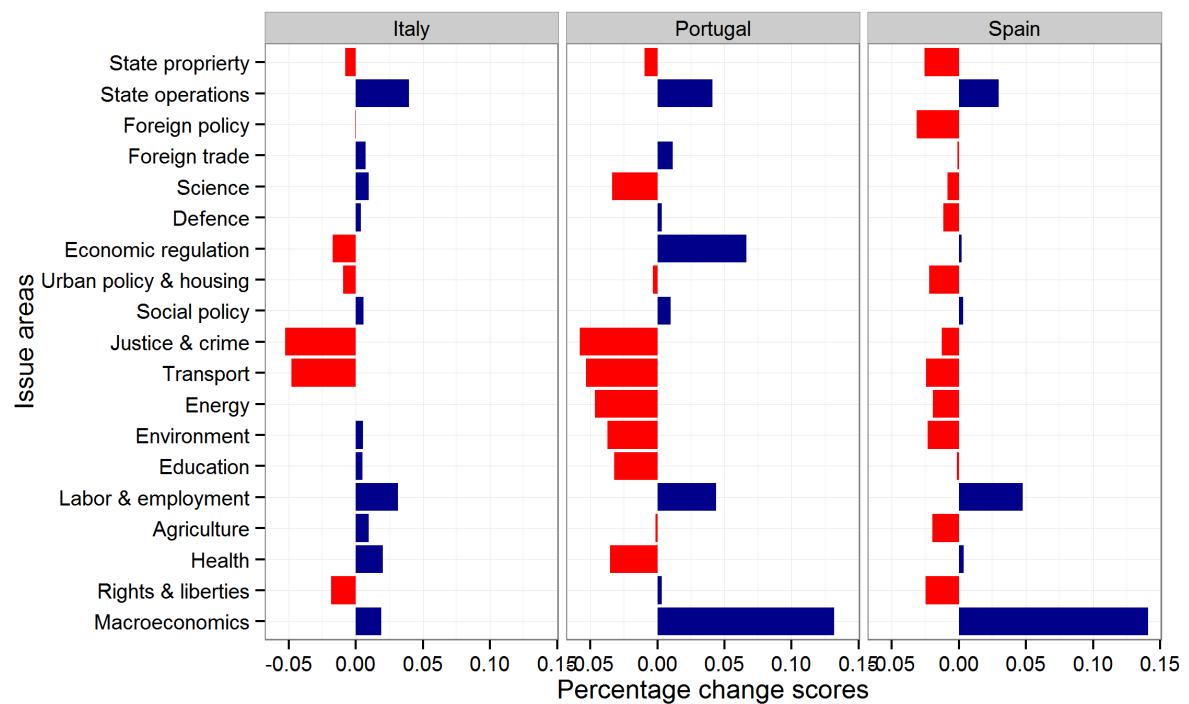


Figure 7 Mean entropy scores across legislatures: majority and opposition

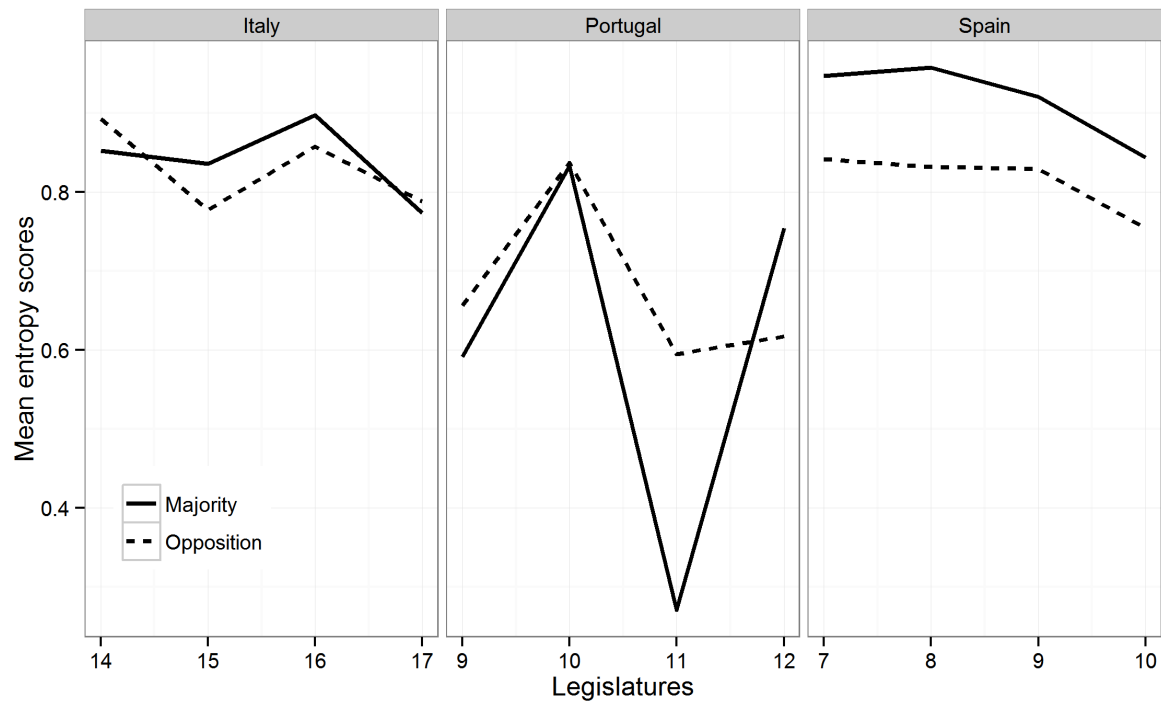


Figure 8 Gap between pre-crisis (2004-2008) and post-crisis (2009-2013) distribution of attention across topic: majority and opposition

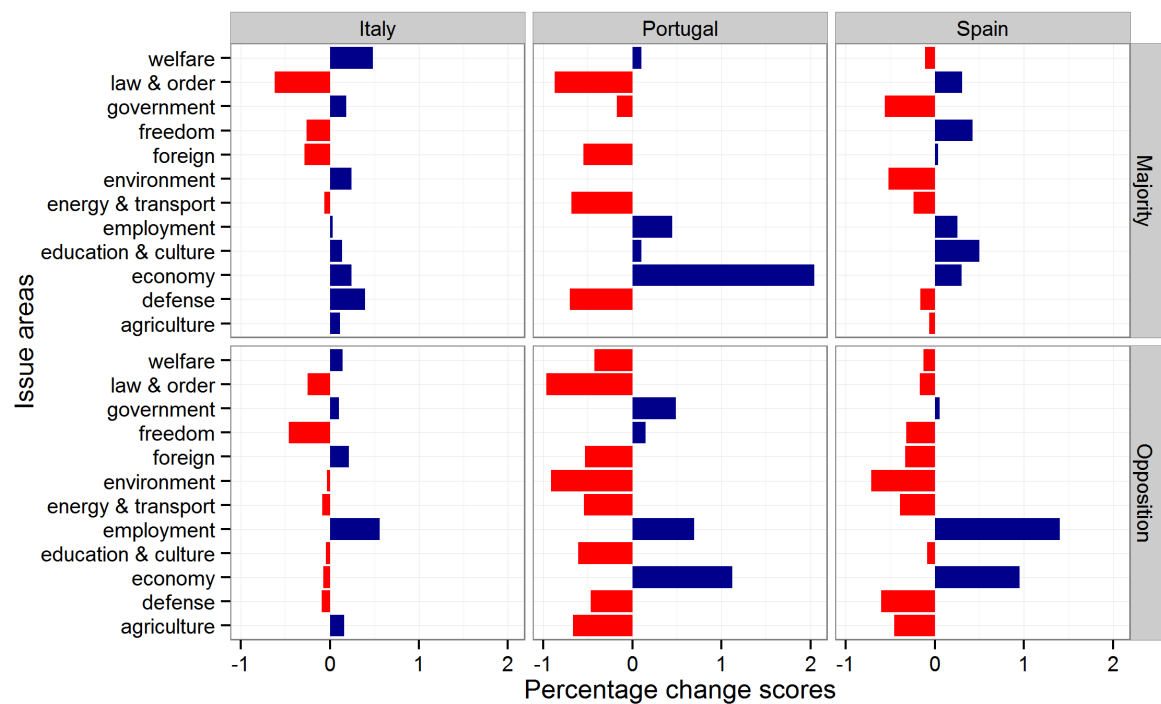


Table 1 Party membership of questioners in Italy, Portugal and Spain

Country name	Legislature	Election date	Party type	Parties
Italy	14	2001-05-13	Majority	North League(LN), National Alliance(AN), Go Italy -- The People of Freedom(FI-PdL), Christian Democratic Centre / United Christian Democrats(CCD+CDU)
			Opposition	Democracy is Freedom -- The Daisy(DL-M), Mixed group(SVP), Communist Refoundation Party(PRC), Democrats of the Left(DS)
	15	2006-04-09	Majority	The Union-Prodi(LUP), Radicals(R), Communist Refoundation Party(PRC), Party of the Italian Communists(PdCI), Union of Democrats for Europe(UDEUR), Italy of Values(IdV), Federation of the Greens(FdV)
			Opposition	Mixed group(SVP), North League(LN), Union / Centre(UC), National Alliance(AN), Christian Democracy for the Autonomies(DCA), Go Italy -- The People of Freedom(FI-PdL)
	16	2008-04-13	Majority	North League(LN), Union / Centre(UC), Go Italy -- The People of Freedom(FI-PdL)
			Opposition	Mixed group(SVP), Democratic Party(PD), Italy of Values(IdV)
Portugal	17	2013-02-25	Majority	Civic Choice(SC), Democratic Party(PD), Go Italy -- The People of Freedom(FI-PdL)
			Opposition	Mixed group(SVP), North League(LN), Five Star Movement(M5S), Left (Ecology) Freedom(SL)
	9	2002-03-17	Majority	Social Democratic Party(PSD), Democratic and Social Centre -- People's Party(CDS-PP)
			Opposition	Ecology Party -- Greens(PEV), Portuguese Communist Party(PCP), Bloc of the Left(BE), Socialist Party(PS)
	10	2005-02-20	Majority	Socialist Party(PS)
			Opposition	Social Democratic Party(PSD), Ecology Party -- Greens(PEV), Democratic and Social Centre -- People's Party(CDS-PP), Portuguese Communist Party(PCP), Bloc of the Left(BE)
	11	2009-09-27	Majority	Socialist Party(PS)
			Opposition	Social Democratic Party(PSD), Unified Democratic Coalition(CDU), Democratic and Social Centre -- People's Party(CDS-PP), Bloc of the Left(BE)
Spain	12	2011-06-05	Majority	Social Democratic Party(PSD), Democratic and Social Centre -- People's Party(CDS-PP)
			Opposition	Unified Democratic Coalition(CDU), Bloc of the Left(BE), Socialist Party(PS)
	7	2000-03-12	Majority	People's Alliance-Party(AP-P)
			Opposition	United Left Communist Party(IU PCE), Basque Nationalist Party(PNV), Canary Coalition(CC), Mixed group(BNG), Convergence and Union(CiU), Spanish Socialist Workers Party(PSOE)
	8	2004-03-14	Majority	Spanish Socialist Workers Party(PSOE)
			Opposition	United Left Communist Party(IU PCE), Basque Nationalist Party(PNV), Canary Coalition(CC), Mixed group(BNG), People's Alliance-Party(AP-P), Republican Left of Catalonia(ERC), Convergence and Union(CiU)
	9	2008-03-09	Majority	Spanish Socialist Workers Party(PSOE)
			Opposition	Basque Nationalist Party(PNV), Mixed group(BNG), People's Alliance-Party(AP-P), Republican Left of Catalonia(ERC), Convergence and Union(CiU)
	10	2011-11-20	Majority	People's Alliance-Party(AP-P)
			Opposition	United Left Communist Party(IU PCE), Basque Nationalist Party(PNV), Mixed group(BNG), Union, Progress and Democracy(UPyD), Convergence and Union(CiU), Spanish Socialist Workers Party(PSOE)

Table 2 Absolute number of questions per sector

Sector	Italy	Portugal	Spain
Macroeconomics	188	297	786
Rights & liberties	105	11	297
Health	235	60	259
Agriculture	132	29	322
Labor & employment	306	98	336
Education	204	82	566
Environment	130	25	193
Energy	81	59	236
Transport	348	69	476
Justice & crime	418	76	668
Social policy	77	42	181
Urban policy & housing	51	18	191
Economic regulation	184	76	318
Defence	71	51	274
Science	56	33	254
Foreign trade	18	19	47
Foreign policy	127	111	477
State operations	353	214	826
State proprierty	53	8	204
	3137	1378	6911