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Exercising control and gathering information: the functions of interpellations in Hungary (1990–2014)

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ABSTRACT

The article investigates the factors shaping the number and content of interpellations, a form of parliamentary questions by members of parliament (MPs) in post-regime change Hungary. Four theoretical propositions regarding the functions of interpellations are examined in this context: political control; policy-oriented information seeking; parliamentary group leadership; and constituency service. A new database of 4096 observations for the period between 1990 and 2014 is compiled in order to analyse these hypotheses. Computer-assisted content analysis techniques and count data regressions are used to describe the text of interpellations in terms of their geographical and policy content. Results show that opposition MPs interpellate more, whereas representatives of single-member districts and regional lists interpellate less than their peers. Representatives from single-member districts and regional lists make more reference to local issues in general, but not to their own district or county. Finally, policy specialisation increases the likelihood of submitting pertinent parliamentary questions.

KEYWORDS Legislative studies; parliamentary questions; interpellations; electoral connection; policy specialisation; Hungarian politics

Introduction

Why do members of parliament (MPs) pose oral questions to representatives of the government?¹ This research question has not been put so far to rigorous empirical analysis in the context of the past quarter of a century of the democratic elected Hungarian parliament. Fortunately, a large and rapidly growing body of research offers solutions for precisely this question in terms of both theoretical propositions and empirical research designs.

Mainstream legislative research often investigates parliamentary questions by invoking the somewhat overlapping frameworks of representative (or parliamentary, legislative) *styles*, *focus* (Martin, Saalfeld, & Strøm, 2014, p. 22; Russo, 2011) and *roles* (Andeweg, 2014, p. 204; Blomgren & Rozenberg, 2012; Strøm, 1997; Wahlke, Eulau, & Buchanan, 1962, p. 14), as well as representatives' *behaviour* or strategies (Gross, 1978; Strøm, 2012). The idea here is

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that the self-perceived role/focus/style/etc. of individual MPs will guide their time and resource allocation, as well as the thematic content of their parliamentary activities, including questions.

These are also the most widely used approaches in the academic literature on the Hungarian legislature. In their research on the roles of MPs, Ilonszki and Judge (1995) and then Ilonszki (2011) primarily pointed to the variety of these roles, which is hardly surprising in the light of the heterogeneous composition of parliamentary groups (PGs) in terms of representatives' sociological or regional background (even as the 'trustee style' was the most pronounced at the beginning of democratic parliamentary activity; see Ilonszki & Judge, 1995, p. 149). The problem of multiple principals and the concept of the *focus* of representation have also come to the fore in recent Hungarian literature (see Papp, 2011, p. 292; Sebők, 2015, p. 17), and the analysis by Ilonszki and Judge (1995, p. 12) on the 'role orientation' of representation also touches on this issue. The dominant mode of data collection in most of these studies is the survey method. One example of probing 'role orientations' with questionnaires is provided by Bíró-Nagy (2015), who measured the representational style of members of the European Parliament (MEPs) along two dimensions (political vs. policy; European vs. national).

One alternative is the quantitative analysis of the count data and content of *parliamentary questions*. The advantage of this approach is that in seeking to understand the behaviour of the parliamentary elite it does not rely on attitudes but draws instead on behaviour – the revealed preferences of MPs. In Hungary, the basic institutions of parliamentary questioning were nominally maintained during the socialist era, although these instruments were not able to fulfil their purported function. Current practice is based on the precedent set by the reforms of 1989–1990 of the Standing Orders (except for urgent questions, which were introduced in the mid-1990s with an overhauled edition of the Standing Orders) and have been fairly stable despite numerous revisions to the underlying laws and regulations.

From a historical perspective, interpellations have been the most prestigious of the four question types, and therefore offer a suitable first step for the analysis of our more general research question concerning oral questions. Interpellations are a sought-after tool for MPs to take a stand or make an impact on the political agenda. They are a scarce commodity with an impact that can be matched only by the occasional urgent question to the prime minister (as far as parliamentary questions are concerned). In light of these considerations we conducted an analysis of the number and content of interpellations in post-regime change Hungary for the period between 1990 and 2014 (where the latter marks the end of the last full government cycle for which data are available).

A case study of the functions of interpellations in Hungary offers a twofold contribution to the emerging regional subfield of legislative studies in Central

and Eastern Europe. First, it allows for gauging the external validity of the theoretical frameworks mostly developed in the context of Western European and US legislation. Volume 17 (2011) of *The Journal of Legislative Studies* offers a clear example for this state of affairs. While there are two separate special issues on 'parliamentary questions' and 'post-communist parliaments', respectively, the issue on parliamentary questions only features case studies and comparative articles with regards to Western democracies. Similarly, the topic of parliamentary questions is mostly missing from the special issue on the region.

The present article also offers an extension of ongoing research with regards to parliamentary questions in Hungary. Notably, Papp (2016) presents an analysis of three years of written questions in search of the effect of the electoral system and mandate type on MP behaviour. In contrast, our analysis encompasses 24 years of parliamentary activity with regards to a specific type of oral question. In the process we test hypotheses both related and unrelated to the electoral system.

In the following we proceed by presenting four widely used theoretical propositions regarding the functions of parliamentary questions. Then we go on to outline the methodological framework of our research and the database we used in the process, as well as the hypotheses tested in the paper. In the next section we present an empirical analysis of the factors that had an effect on the quantity and content of interpellations in post-transition Hungary, followed by a discussion of the results. The final section concludes by outlining a few potential directions for future research.

Context: parliamentary questions in Hungary

Our research strategy was informed by the rules and conventions governing parliamentary questioning in Hungary. According to these rules, parliamentary questions can be written or oral. Written questions must be answered in writing in 30 days. The three types of oral question – interpellations, 'regular' questions, urgent questions – are presented in a plenary session of the National Assembly. Each MP has the right to introduce various question types; agenda access, however, is controlled by parliamentary and party group leadership for most parliamentary question types. While in theory each MP is free to introduce oral questions (except for urgent questions), the reform of parliamentary rules in 1994 declared that MPs should have at least 90 minutes per week to present their interpellations and regular oral questions. In practice this means that every parliamentary group has the right to ask at least one interpellation and one regular oral question every week. This poses a hard constraint on MP behaviour, especially in larger parliamentary groups.

Agenda access is even more constrained for urgent questions, which are introduced by the leaders of parliamentary groups (but are presented by issue-owner MPs). MPs have 60 minutes per week to ask urgent questions, and each parliamentary group has the right to present at least one urgent question a week.² Questions can be posed to, *inter alia*, the ombudsman, the chairman of the State Audit Office, the president of the National Bank of Hungary, and, of course, to ministers and the prime minister (except in the case of interpellations, which are reserved for questions to members of the cabinet).

Parliamentary questions differ both in terms of their importance (based on agenda impact) and the rules governing their presentations. Interpellations must be submitted days before presentation, and after the associated plenary debate segment (consisting of the sequence of the presentation by the MP, the response by the minister, and a reply by the MP) the plenary session votes on whether to accept the ministerial answer or, alternatively, to redirect the question to a committee for further examination.

Regular oral questions must be introduced in writing a day before their oral presentation. After the ministerial response the MP does not have the right to reply. The regular version of oral questions is allocated less time in debates and is positioned in the latter half of the question period each week. In a similar manner to interpellations, MPs have to submit a written version beforehand. Urgent questions can be introduced until 60 minutes before the beginning of the session. Introdurers must identify the topic of their urgent question, but a written submission is not required. In the debate of an urgent question ministers also have the right to reply to the MPs' reply.

As for the relevance of each question type for our present purposes, it is important to note that oral questions, by and large, have a stronger role in agenda-setting than written questions. This may be partly due to the fact that party groups do not usually put limits on the introduction of written questions by MPs, which, therefore, often concerns parochial content or the minutiae of specific policy issues (in this respect regular questions are the oral counterpart of written questions). Urgent questions and interpellations have a somewhat elevated role in the Hungarian political process. Both enjoy more in-depth media coverage for a number of reasons. They are positioned towards the front of the daily agenda, which means that more journalists are still following the procedures. At least since 2010 urgent questions also provide a unique opportunity for opposition MPs to address directly a prime minister who is less available to ordinary press enquiries. As for interpellations, they offer the only tool for MPs with a procedural consequence (as opposed to, say, the media effect of an ill-prepared answer to a regular oral question).

Literature review and hypotheses

In the past two decades a subfield of legislative research has emerged that places parliamentary questions front and centre (Martin & Rozenberg, 2014; Russo & Wiberg, 2010). In this line of academic literature two solutions are often employed in the process of conceptualising dependent variables. In some cases scholars look at the number of questions submitted (Dandoy, 2011), and in other instances they investigate the content of questions with some particular objective in mind (Martin, 2011a). In situations involving complex research questions, both may be used (Bailer, 2011).

In terms of the explanatory variables, the available scholarship tends to advance a variety of hypotheses to explain the reasons underlying parliamentary questions.³ Wiberg and Koura (1994, pp. 30–31, as cited in Wiberg, 1995, p. 181) distinguish no less than 14 such functions. Independent variables include: the desire to obtain information; to raise an individual representative's profile; to demand explanations; to attack individual ministers; and also the mobilisation of opposition representatives. Furthermore, various reasons and motivations may manifest themselves simultaneously. Keeping these caveats in mind, we can distinguish four key *theoretical propositions* in the current research that could yield *useful hypotheses for empirical testing* in the Hungarian context as well (see, for example, Bailer, 2011, p. 303, who highlights three).

PROPOSITION 1 refers to *political control as the opposition's responsibility*. The most often cited assumption concerning the function of parliamentary questions is that they serve as instruments of political oversight and government accountability (Bailer, 2011, p. 303; Martin, 2011b, p. 261; Müller & Sieberer, 2014, p. 322; Saalfeld, 2000). Since in a parliamentary democracy uncovering problems in the government's work is chiefly the responsibility of opposition party groups and representatives, the assumption further holds that they are most likely to avail themselves of the instrument of parliamentary questions (see, for example, Dandoy, 2011, who confirms this hypothesis with respect to the Belgian parliament – while Proksch and Slapin, 2011, p. 61, extend the thesis to the 'supranational' European Parliament).

PROPOSITION 2 singles out *policy specialisation as a driver for the demand for information*. The study of parliamentary questions as instruments for obtaining information has spread primarily within the context of research on the European Parliament (but has its roots in the study of the US Congress; see Krehbiel, 1991). This 'informational model' rests on the assumption that as compared with EU bureaucrats, MEPs have an informational disadvantage and hence the goal of parliamentary questions is to remove the underlying informational asymmetry (Proksch & Slapin, 2011, pp. 61–62; also Bowler & Farrell, 1995; McElroy, 2006; Raunio, 1996). Correspondingly, representatives ask members of the European Commission whose portfolio matches their own

committee membership or previous career path. Despite its plausibility, this approach is less common in the case of research on national parliaments (but see, for example, Bailer, 2011, who views parliament as a 'source of information' for less experienced but ambitious representatives). While we only investigate information-seeking with regards to the motivation for committee membership, it is important to note that many other factors may play a role, including distributive or constituency reasons (for a study of the European Parliament combining the distributional, informational and partisan perspective in committee assignments, see Yordanova, 2009).

PROPOSITION 3 looks at *parliamentary group position as a constraint on agenda access*. Another research direction is to examine the effect the status of representatives within their PGs has on their behaviour, and specifically their activities in the context of parliamentary questions. Rasch (2011) scored parliamentary representatives based on various qualities (e.g. their career path and their role within the hierarchy) and examined whether these variables had any impact on the number of questions they asked during a Norwegian institution of parliamentary questions, the *Question Hour*. Among the variables thus investigated only one, the leadership position in the party, had a significant impact. In the period in question, representatives in leadership positions asked more questions than the average representative.

These results also show that the function of a specific parliamentary instrument is highly contextual: depending on the institutional constraints the same parliamentary question type (let alone different question types) may serve as a point of access to the agenda for the leadership or, alternatively, for backbenchers in different countries. On a related note, in their study on the British Prime Minister's Questions, Bevan and John (2015) distinguished empirically between questioning strategies as they manifested themselves in terms of the issues raised by leaders of the government party, government party backbenchers, and members of the opposition, respectively.

PROPOSITION 4 refers to *constituency service*. One of the most intensely researched functions of submitting parliamentary questions is constituency service. By amassing personal votes, a representative may emerge as an autonomous political force within her district regardless of her party affiliation. An important precondition – in addition to developing personal ties with constituents through constituency office hours and correspondence – is that the representative actively represents his or her constituency's interests at the national level (Cain, Ferejohn, & Fiorina, 1987; Carey & Shugart, 1995). The representation of local issues at the national level often takes the form of questions addressed to the national government.

Some of these research projects have not discerned a significant relationship between constituency service and the questions raised in parliament (Martin, 2011b, p. 262), while others have found that such an electoral relationship does obtain (e.g. Rasch, 2009). Among the latter, Russo (2011)

used content analysis of written questions to investigate the willingness of Italian representatives to represent local issues. His analysis showed that those representatives who were born in their own single-member districts (SMDs) were two-and-a-half times more likely to represent local issues than an average MP. Martin (2011a) relied on a similar method.

One way to conceptualise constituency service in a mixed electoral system (as is the case with Hungary) is the theory of the mandate divide. This posits that different types of parliamentary seat induce different legislative behaviour. Thames (2005) arrived at the conclusion that 'a mandate divide did not exist in either the Hungarian or Ukrainian legislatures, which both featured comparatively more institutionalized party systems' (p. 284). Papp (2016) investigated the impact of mandate type on written parliamentary questions for the period 2010–2013, and she found that 'the mandate divide does not structure the questioning behaviour of Hungarian MPs' (p. 15). As a final comment it is important to note that, despite these and similar studies, a general account of the functions of specific oral question types in a post-communist country that spans multiple decades is still unavailable in the literature.

Turning now to our hypotheses, they posit a relationship between the theoretical propositions and the actual interpellation activities of MPs in parliament. We test five hypotheses associated with three dependent variables drawn from extant research.⁴ The most plausible explanation for variations in the quantity of interpellations appears to be the government/opposition divide. Thus, our expectation would be that opposition representatives act more frequently as interpellants (as compared with their actual share of seats) than their government party colleagues (see Hypothesis 1, or H1, in Table 1).

One alternative is H2, which states that representatives without leadership positions will (on average) resort to the instrument of interpellations more often because typically they have no or limited access to other instruments (notably the pre-plenary political debates). A third approach traces parliamentary behaviour back to the electoral ties between representatives and their voters. A mixed electoral system was introduced in 1989 based on two votes (SMD and territorial list) and on three types of parliamentary seat (SMDs, territorial lists, national lists). The MPs from SMDs were elected in a two-round system: mandates were allocated to candidates obtaining an absolute majority in the first round and a relative majority in the second round (where only the top candidates remained eligible for voting). An initial 4 per cent threshold for the two proportional branches was modified to 5 per cent before the 1994 election. The national list performed a compensatory role: its distribution of seats was based on votes of the SMDs' loser candidates and on votes for territorial lists that were not used to win a seat. The seats of territorial lists were distributed according to the Hagenbach-Bischoff

Table 1. Hypotheses.

Theoretical source	Operationalisation	Hypothesis (quantity)	Hypothesis (content)
Political control	Governing party or opposition party	H1: Opposition representatives interpellate more often (Not applicable)	(Not applicable)
Specialisation and information-seeking	Public policy specialisation as it is manifested in committee membership	(Not applicable)	H4: Committee members submit interpellations related to the committee's portfolio
Agenda access and leadership position	Leadership position within the parliamentary party	H2: Representatives without leadership position submit relatively more interpellations than those in leadership positions	(Not applicable)
Constituency service	The method whereby a representative is elected (SMD, regional list, national list)	H3: Representatives elected in SMDs submit more questions	H5: The questions submitted by representatives who represent a certain region will refer more often to municipalities that are part of their SMD's territory

quota. Although the electoral system was revamped by Act 203 of 2011, it is important to note that for the electoral cycles analysed in this paper the 'old' system was in place. In light of these considerations H3 states that representatives elected on a territorial basis will be motivated to ask questions in order to address local issues, which will increase their count of interpellations.

We look at two hypotheses regarding the content of interpellations. On the one hand, based on assumptions about public policy specialisation and informational needs resulting therefrom, we investigate whether the questions submitted by committee members would more frequently refer to public policy issues within the policy focus of their respective committees (H4). On the other hand, we analyse whether, compared with the control group, representatives who are connected to a given SMD through electoral geography are more likely to submit questions that refer to towns/municipalities within the region that makes up their SMD (H5).

Data and methods

Data collection was performed in the framework of the Hungarian Comparative Agendas Project. For the *count data* analysis of interpellations we only used questions that were actually presented in the plenary according the Hungarian National Assembly website.⁵ The dependent variable was constructed by using the aggregated quantity of questions for each term of parliament.⁶

For the geographical variable, which is based on the aforementioned features of the electoral system, we used the National Election Office's (NEO) municipalities' database with the goal of identifying which territorial names can be assigned to each SMD. The resulting database included 3162 municipality names along with 19 counties, the capital of Budapest, the names of 23 Budapest districts, and Lake Balaton. Geographical names in the texts of interpellations were identified using a dictionary-based automated text analysis algorithm (the results were checked manually). In this, we followed the method used by Martin (2011a – expect that we used an automated coding mechanism instead of a manual one). For the 4906 interpellations in the period investigated this analysis yielded 915 geographical names in total, which are distributed over 1597 questions.

As for the coding procedure of the other content-based explanandum, the policy variable, all interpellations presented in the Hungarian National Assembly from 1990 to 2014 were coded manually in a double blind manner for major policy topic using the *Hungarian Policy Agendas Project Policy Topic Codebook* (see: cap.tk.mta.hu/en). Each interpellation was assigned a single policy code out of a codebook of 21 codes ranging from national defence to education. The rate of inter-coder reliability was 70.94 per cent for the entire set of interpellations ($N = 4906$). We also defined the policy portfolio manually for every committee by using these major topic codes.

Moving on to the explanatory variables, we first grouped representatives based on their position in the *government/opposition* matrix (H1). The *party group leader* variable (H2) was used to describe positions held within the parliamentary party group (only deputy party group leaders holding their position for a minimum duration of two weeks were considered). Hence, the three potential values that this variable could assume distinguished between party group leaders, deputy party group leaders and representatives who did not hold any office at the time when the given interpellation was submitted.

To test the two hypotheses regarding *constituency service* (H3; H5), we used a conversion table between the names of municipalities and SMDs. To capture the geographical scope of SMDs, we used the data provided by the NEO to reconstruct the boundaries of each Hungarian SMD as far back as 1990. We distinguished 184 SMDs in total. We also accounted for boundary changes. As a result we were able to assign an SMD to each municipality for each term of parliament. We used separate dummy variables to capture: (1) geographical content in general; and (2) geographical content associated with the SMD of the introducer.

For *committee membership* (H4), we drew up our codebook by collecting official data concerning committee memberships (excluding subcommittees). As 196 committees were established during the period the resulting variable could assume 196 values. The 1320 representatives (including multiple counts for long-term MPs) elected over six cycles between 1990 and 2014

held 5039 committee memberships in total (this number also includes multiple memberships and, in many instances, a lack of committee memberships).

Results

To test the hypotheses concerning the functions of interpellations, we performed regression analyses on the database aggregated at the level of MP/parliamentary cycle. For our analysis of the count data variable we chose a negative binomial regression (following the similar research designs of Dandoy, 2011, and Papp, 2016).⁷ Our database encompasses the total quantity of interpellations presented in the plenary between 1990 and 2014 yielding a panel data table.⁸ Exploiting the said panel structure of our database, we ran random effects models.⁹

The coefficients of factors that have an impact on count data are often presented in the form of incident rate ratios (referred to as IRR in the statistical tables), and we also adhere to this convention (Hilbe, 2014, pp. 60–61). If the value of this indicator is less than one, it points in the direction of a negative causal relationship, while a value over one suggests a positive relationship. Beginning our analysis with those variables that are presumed to have an effect on the quantity of interpellations presented in parliament (H1, H2, H3), a review of our regression coefficients shows that opposition MPs have presented significantly more interpellations than their counterparts in the government party groups (see Table 2).¹⁰

With regard to the second hypothesis, we further observe that neither SMDs nor regional lists as the sources of individual representatives' electoral mandate lead to a higher number of interpellations. In fact, the relationship is negative: all else being equal, seats won through SMDs or regional lists both result in a lower number of interpellations vis-à-vis the results for those gaining their mandate from a national party list. This negative relationship is stronger in the case of representatives elected in SMDs than among those who were elected based on regional lists. All three of the above-mentioned results are significant ($p < .01$). Being the leader of a parliamentary party

Table 2. Results for the quantity of interpellations.

Dependent variable: number of interpellations ($N = 1102$; groups = 766)		First model	Std error	z	$p > z $
	Explanatory variable				
Government/opposition (H1)	<i>Opposition***</i>	1.526	0.082	7.82	0.000
Party group leadership (H2)	<i>Party group leader</i>	0.913	0.213	-0.39	0.695
	<i>Deputy party group leader</i>	1.026	0.078	0.34	0.731
Source of mandate (H3)	<i>Regional list***</i>	0.787	0.053	-3.54	0.000
	<i>SMD***</i>	0.635	0.044	-6.54	0.000
	<i>Constant***</i>	3.111	0.352	10.02	0.000

***Significant at the level $p < .01$. As indicated in the text, the coefficients are IRRs.

Table 3. Results for the general geographical content of interpellations.

Dependent variable: geographical content of interpellation (N = 1102; groups = 766)		Model 2	Std error	z	p > z
	Explanatory variable				
Government/opposition	<i>Opposition</i> ***	-0.014	0.024	-0.57	0.566
Party group leadership	<i>Party group leader</i>	-0.009	0.099	-0.09	0.926
	<i>Deputy party group leader</i>	-0.023	0.031	-0.73	0.463
Source of mandate	<i>Regional list</i> **	0.066	0.028	2.37	0.018
	<i>SMD</i> ***	0.149	0.029	5.20	0.000
	Constant***	0.290	0.027	10.83	0.000

***Significant at the level $p < .01$; **significant at the $p < .05$ level.

group or a deputy leader, however, has no significant impact on the number of interpellations.

Turning to the notion of constituency service (H5), the dependent variables in our next two models refer to the geographical content of interpellations (here captured by a dummy variable). We estimated the strength of the underlying relationship with the help of a linear random effects model.¹¹

In the first round, we *generally* looked at the factors that determined whether geographical names were mentioned without narrowing the analysis to geographical locations associated with the representative's own SMD (see Table 3).

The regional list and SMD seat coefficients both have a positive value and are both significant (at the $p < .05$ and $p < .01$ levels). Nevertheless, this still does not confirm H5, since that implies mentions of municipalities located within the confines of a representative's own SMD. Therefore, another linear random effects regression was used where the dependent variable was the ratio of all interpellations that included a reference to geographical names in the SMD as a share of the larger group of all interpellations that contained a geographical reference. Correspondingly, in the table we only included data concerning representatives elected based on regional lists or in SMDs (see Table 4).¹² In this calculation we did not observe any significant coefficient apart from the constant and the position of deputy party group

Table 4. Results for the geographical content related to a representative's own SMD.

Dependent variable: SMD-related geographical content in interpellation (N = 519; groups = 413)		Model 3	Std error	z	p > z
	Explanatory variable				
Government/opposition	<i>Opposition</i>	-0.032	0.040	-0.80	0.423
Party group leadership	<i>Party group leader</i>	0.088	0.277	0.32	0.752
	<i>Deputy party group leader</i> ***	-0.169	0.062	-2.70	0.007
Source of mandate (H5)	<i>SMD</i>	0.030	0.040	0.76	0.466
	Constant***	0.625	0.039	15.89	0.000

***Significant at the level $p < .01$.

leader (which does not follow as an explanation from our hypotheses); in other words, the data did not confirm the proposition about the role of constituency service.

We also estimated econometric models that control for the effect of mandate divide. We included a dummy variable in our models to indicate whether an MP who earned his/her seat from the national list was also either an SMD candidate or his/her name was included on a regional list. The coefficient of this variable was not statistically significant in any model specification, the additional variable did not affect the direction or strength of the relevant effects, and its inclusion entailed lower goodness-of-fit measures. Therefore, we did not include this effect in our final models.

In the other content dimension, we examined the impact of committee membership on the public policy content of the interpellations actually presented in the plenary (H4). We substituted committee membership with the given committee's public policy competency using a conversion table. Once again, we report the results of the multinomial regression with their IRR values. Just as above, the model left one option out (in this case code 20, government affairs) and measured coefficients against it (where there is no coefficient, the model left out the explanatory variable due to perfect collinearity). Table 5 lists the partial results of the multinomial regression for the pairings of committees and policy content that are relevant for the evaluation of H4.¹³

As is apparent from Table 5, in the majority of public policy areas there was a positive and strongly significant relationship between committee

Table 5. Results for the relevant pairings of committee membership effect on policy content.

Dependent variable: public policy content of interpellation (N = 4906)	Explanatory variable: committee's primary policy portfolio	Model 4 (IRR)	Std error	z	p > z
National economy	National economy	1.93***	0.328	3.87	0
Human rights	Human rights	1.95***	0.414	3.15	0.002
Health	Health	38.26***	10.529	13.25	0
Agriculture	Agriculture	13.22***	3.0328	11.25	0
Labour	Labour	6.02***	1.570	6.89	0
Education	Education	12.73***	2.95	10.96	0
Environment	Environment	5.10***	1.16	7.17	0
Energy policy	Energy policy	2.37	1.60	1.27	0.202
Immigration	Immigration				
Transportation policy	Transportation	1.93	1.49	0.85	0.397
Justice, police	Justice, police	1.71***	0.31	2.9	0.004
Social policy	Social policy				
Finance	Finance	3.46***	0.64	6.65	0
Defence	Defence	7.69***	2.17	7.23	0
Science, media	Science, media	6.22***	2.31	4.92	0
Foreign trade	Foreign trade	2.37	1.41	1.45	0.147
Foreign policy	Foreign policy	1.39	0.3912	1.16	0.244
Land and water	Land and water				

***Significant at the level $p < .01$.

membership and the contents of the interpellation presented in parliament.¹⁴ At the same time, it is important to note that a significant and positive relationship obtained, in fact, in some 50 of the 400-odd pairings of committees and interpellation contents. Meanwhile, we found 83 cases of pairings involving a significant but negative relationship where no logical connection had been expected. We return to these additional findings – beyond the confirmation of H4 – in the ‘Discussion’ section.

Discussion

In our study we formulated and tested five hypotheses in order to analyse the typical features of interpellations presented in the plenary. H1 proposed that opposition representatives would submit more interpellations. The results of the model unequivocally affirmed its validity. H2 also pertained to the quantity of interpellations: it sought to investigate the effect of the questioner’s leadership position within the parliamentary party group on this quantity. In that respect we found that a position in the party leadership has no significant impact on the number of interpellations. This result may also be influenced by the problem of there being many deputy party group leaders over time: in the case of smaller party groups, this position was held by so many (even disregarding temporary deputy party group leaders, here captured by the two-week rule) that the position essentially lost its distinguishing character.

H3 sought to discern whether there is a relationship between regionally or district-based seat allocation and representatives’ behaviour in terms of submitting interpellations. In line with extant studies, the mandate divide thesis has not been confirmed. We found that neither election from a regional list nor election as the representative of an SMD resulted in a greater number of interpellations being introduced by MPs. This result may lead future research to devote heightened attention to alternative explanations (not investigated here due to space constraints) such as *requests for information* that result from the questioner’s public policy specialisation (the substantial weight of issues relating to the operations of government, which is readily apparent in the descriptive statistics, also appears to support this). What seems certain is that the low impact of the factors investigated here (leading position within the parliamentary party or the source of mandate) calls for mapping out the information request model in the context of a quantitative analysis as well.

At the same time, it is also conceivable that the relationship between the territorial electoral basis of an individual representative’s parliamentary mandate and his/her service of a particular territorial constituency emerges only over time, in the course of several elections/terms of parliament. It would be interesting to analyse the impact of a more complex social embeddedness indicator – derived, for example, by combining the database used here

with the approach used by Papp (2016) – and of types of parliamentary career on the number of interpellations introduced by individual representatives. Having said that, and all considered, the only point of certainty regarding the number of interpellations is the higher ratio of questions submitted by opposition representatives. This lends credence to the hypothesis concerning political monitoring, which may be referred to as a more traditional account.

As far as our hypotheses regarding the contents of interpellations are concerned, in analysing H4 we found that there was in most cases a statistically significant relationship between the public policy portfolio of committee members and the issues they raised in their interpellations. Beyond the immediate testing of H4 our modelling results also showed two features that validate a discussion: one requires further work and the other incidentally confirms our results. The above-mentioned significant and positive relationship in a relatively small share of the pairings of committees and interpellation contents may or may not be a matter of coincidence. As no obvious theoretical proposition solves this conundrum further work will be required to address this result. On the other hand, a similar share of the complete list of committee–interpellation pairings in the multinomial regression involves a significant but negative relationship. This result incidentally meshes with our hypothesis. Further analysis of the data, beyond the hypotheses investigated here, could yield plenty of useful information regarding the connection between public policy specialisation and the behaviour of representatives.

One of the most important findings regarding our second content-related hypothesis (H5) was that there is an intense, positive and statistically significant relationship between geographical references in the contents of interpellations and the election of representatives based on regional lists or in SMDs. Moreover, this relationship grows progressively more proclaimed (see Model 2) as we move towards smaller territorial units (thus closer to voters). This *appears* to confirm those findings in the academic literature which suggest that in the case of representatives who were elected on a territorial basis, the desire to serve the electoral district is viewed as important. In fact, the *genuinely relevant* test concerning the validity of H5, namely the mentions of the names of locations within the SMD, failed to yield significant results.

With regards to our results for H5, it may be worthwhile to control for the impact of party group size. Smaller party groups tend to consist mostly of representatives elected on the basis of national lists who were at the same time typically also candidates in SMDs. Moreover, in the case of large party groups the access of representatives elected in SMDs – who are often backbenchers since major figures are frequently shielded from the potential embarrassment of losing their SMDs and are thus only nominated on safe lists – to the parliament's agenda is often more limited. What follows from the above is that further methodological and empirical work is needed to ascertain the validity of the hypothesis. This work would be best performed

by integrating career-related variables and certain institutional factors (e.g. party group size) into the model, while also performing a comparative analysis of question types.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we briefly discuss some thematic focal points that may be worthy of further research since they could prove helpful in interpreting the results presented above. The most important of these may be a comparative analysis of various question types as the results of this paper do not nearly capture the entire range of parliamentary questions. Only a comparative examination of this kind could reveal, *inter alia*, the respective characteristics and usage of oral and written questions. A quantitative analysis of written questions could bring us closer to a definitive analysis of the underlying research question as these could serve to dig deeper still in the process of trying to discover the preferences of representatives.

Similarly, the study of legislative organisation is necessary to achieve greater clarity with regards to the institutional factors that have an impact on control over the parliamentary agenda. Parliamentary groups and committees (and their respective leaders) exercise such power over the agenda, for example, as does the speaker. Good examples of such efforts at controlling the agenda are the speaker-selection for time-limited debates and the delegation of issues (question topics) to individual MPs. A mixed-methods approach – that draws on the participant observation of open committee meetings (and possibly party group meetings) – would go a long way towards explaining the actual role these potential institutional constraints play in shaping the demand for parliamentary questions.

Even this brief survey of the potential directions of future research shows clearly why our study is only a first step towards understanding the functions of parliamentary questions in Hungarian politics. What we have hopefully managed to highlight, however, is why it is important that we learn to understand better the motivations underlying the decisions of representatives as to how they allocate their scarce resources and time.

Notes

1. In the following we shall use the terms *interpellation* and (parliamentary) *question* interchangeably for stylistic reasons. This is not in any way meant to suggest, however, that our conclusions also apply to other types of parliamentary question.
2. See 8/1989 (VI.8.) National Assembly Resolution and 46/1994 (IX.30.) National Assembly Resolution.
3. It is important to note that the academic literature often fails to distinguish between the functions of various types of question (especially the respective

functions of written and oral questions). This is a deficiency that we shall not be able to remedy in the framework of the present study (because we lack a comparable database for each type of question). Having said that, we shall briefly revisit this problem in the 'Conclusion' section.

4. These hypotheses (and the variables attached to them) focus on individual decisions by representatives. Nevertheless, there are also other factors (e.g. parliamentary group decisions) that may influence the number and content of interpellations (see the 'Conclusion' section).
5. At the same time this does not imply that we relied on the transcript of the text actually delivered in the plenary in each and every case. Whenever the written submission was longer ($N = 457$) we used that format.
6. In other words, the study does not aggregate the number of interpellations for a given representative's entire parliamentary career. Aggregating the number of observations at the level of representative/cycle, we get $N = 1102$.
7. The variance of our dependent variable was higher than the standard error. Cameron and Trivedi (2013, pp. 69–70) note that in the case of frequency data the best fitting models are the Poisson or the negative binomial.
8. The fact that some representatives may not be present throughout the entire term is not a problem for calculating the panel regression as statistical software can also handle unbalanced panel structures (Wooldridge, 2010).
9. We failed to reject the null hypothesis of the Hausman test for any of the regressions, which is why running the random effects regressions against the fixed effects models was in order.
10. For our three hypotheses we defined the necessary base variable for such an analysis as follows: H1: government party representative; H2: no leadership position; H3: seat gained based on national lists. These were then used to calculate the IRR for the other values of the respective variables.
11. The Hausman test once again failed to indicate a need for using a fixed effects model. The linear model did not provide an estimated value outside the 0–1 interval, and hence we did not consider it necessary to apply the non-linear model.
12. Since representatives *elected* on the national list do not *formally* have an electoral district (as a mandate source), it would make no sense to look for the effect of any given SMD. Having said that, we pursued this point in our discussions of the mandate divide thesis.
13. We have experimented extensively with other statistical methods. The reason why we chose multinomial regression models was that the independence of irrelevant alternatives assumption can be considered viable in the case of major policy codes whereas the inclusion of explanatory variables enabled us to control for numerous effects.
14. In order to validate the results, we randomly picked three public policy areas (4, 14, 16) and then proceeded to select – once again randomly – 10 per cent of the observations assigned to each category. We verified the observations by manual coding, and in every single case the interpellations had been submitted by a member of the committee that belonged in the given policy category in the database. The accuracy of our calculations is further corroborated by the fact that in all three cases the members of committees whose policy focus fell into the given policy category were over-represented among those who presented interpellations on the given subject area.

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