

# Bringing Europe into Question - A Longitudinal Study of Domestic Legislators' Questioning Behaviour in EU Affairs

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## Abstract

This paper examines parliamentary questioning behavior of political parties with relation to the European Union. Using a unique data collection of parliamentary questions from the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP) I provide new evidence on the extent of parliamentary involvement in EU affairs in Belgium and Denmark. In one respect EU-related questions seem not to differ from other issues: The number of questions a party asks depends on whether it is currently in government or in opposition. Second, there is evidence that parties follow issue-based strategies. The analysis reveals that party Euroskepticism has a positive effect on EU-related questioning behavior. The results have implications for the study of parliamentary scrutiny in European Union affairs and our knowledge about party politics inside domestic legislatures.

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DO NOT QUOTE, work in progress [Comments welcome]

# Introduction

Domestic parliamentary actors are hardly involved in European Union decision making processes. Even though the latest treaty amendments have provided new opportunities for more parliamentary involvement, such as the Early Warning Mechanism introduced in the Treaty of Lisbon, the marginalization of domestic legislatures in EU affairs is still considered as one crucial reason for the EU's democratic deficit ([Bellamy and Kröger, 2014](#)). Yet, we know that national parliaments reacted to the challenges of European integration. European affairs committees have been established in all member state parliaments. Committee deliberations allow members of parliament (MPs) to discuss European topics on a regular basis and to control the behavior of their ministers in EU decision making ([Hegeland and Mattson, 1996](#); [Norton, 1996](#); [Bergman, 1997](#); [Maurer and Wessels, 2001](#); [O'Brennan and Raunio, 2007](#)). In sum, we have extensive knowledge about institutional adaption, formal rules of scrutiny as well as the factors that account for variation in oversight strength between member states ([Raunio, 2005](#); [Karlas, 2012](#); [Winzen, 2013](#)).

This is why scholars with an interest in the role of national parliaments in European Union politics recently shifted their attention to non-legislative activities in the plenary. Here, researchers are interested in whether parliamentary actors actually make use of the institutional opportunities at their disposal to get engaged in European Union matters. Most contributions focus on the communication function of legislatures and ask questions about the extent of public debate (e.g. [Wendler 2013](#)), when and which EU issues are discussed (e.g. [Auel and Höing 2014](#)), or which arguments are used for the justification of European decision making processes (e.g. [Closa and Maatsch 2014](#), [Wendler 2014](#)). Furthermore, researchers started to explain the differences between domestic legislatures in debating European Union issues (e.g. [Auel and Raunio 2014](#)). Yet, less attention is given to the question whether domestic legislatures *control* the government in the plenary and make use of parliamentary questions.<sup>1</sup>

In this paper, I therefore examine questioning behavior of political parties related to the European Union. I consider the development of EU-related questions over time and provide evidence about the factors that determine questioning activity with regard to European Union

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<sup>1</sup>To the best of the author's knowledge, [Navarro and Brouard \(2014\)](#) is the only contribution that deals with EU related parliamentary questions on the domestic level.

affairs in the plenary. I argue that whether parties choose to ask EU-related parliamentary questions depends primarily on their ideological preferences and the resulting EU issue-based strategies. However, questioning activity will also reflect whether the party is currently in government or in opposition.

The empirical study of this paper is based on data from the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP).<sup>2</sup> I draw on oral, written and interpellation evidence in the Belgian (1988-2010) and Danish (1953-2003) parliament. The statistical analysis reveals that the extent to which parties ask EU-related parliamentary questions to ministers strongly depends on whether a party is a member of the government or not and, to a lesser extent, on party positioning towards the European Union. Opposition parties in both countries ask more EU-related questions than cabinet parties. But there are also differences between the two countries. While in Denmark questioning activity can be explained by party's EU preferences, in Belgium party status is the only reliable predictor of the level of parliamentary questioning behavior in EU matters. The results have implications for the study of parliamentary scrutiny in European Union affairs and our knowledge about party politics inside domestic legislatures.

## Why parliamentary questions?

Parliamentary questions are non-legislative activities. Such activities include all procedures that do not introduce new or modify existing pieces of legislation and have no direct material consequences for society. While legislative activities in parliament feature prominently in the literature on parliamentary behavior, the study of non-legislative functions has been relatively neglected by political scientists (Russo and Wiberg, 2010). Most contributions that discuss parliamentary questions merely describe differences between the various questioning procedures across countries and provide basic information about the use and functions of questions in the political system (e.g. Bergman et al. 2003). It's only recently that scholars have started to pay more attention to parliamentary questions (Martin, 2011; Rasch, 2011; Rozenberg and Martin, 2011; Van Santen, Helfer and van Aelst, 2015). One reason why questions have entered the limelight is that there has been a clear increase in non-legislative activities in Western European democracies (Green-Pedersen, 2010). Hence, researches started to make use of the potential of

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<sup>2</sup>For more information visit <http://www.comparativeagendas.info>

these activities to answer questions about political representation (e.g. Russo 2011, Saalfeld and Bischof 2013), agenda setting (e.g. Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2010, Vliegenthart and Walgrave 2011) and party political conflict more generally (e.g. Seeberg 2013). However, one main function of parliamentary questions is that they allow MPs to keep an eye on the government's plans and actions. Thus, despite the fact that questions serve a variety of other purposes, such as gaining publicity, representing constituency concerns or forcing the government to make a public statement, they are considered as legislative oversight instrument (Martin, 2011).

Surprisingly though, researchers with a focus on domestic legislative behavior and control in EU affairs have yet little use for parliamentary questions.<sup>3</sup> Despite the fact that questions and interpellations allow researchers relatively easy access to information about the topics which legislators care about, much more attention has been given to committee deliberation and parliamentary debate. Even appeals that point to the fact that

*"( . . . ) effectiveness of parliamentary influence cannot simply be measured by looking at formal parliamentary participation rights, but needs to take into account whether and how these formal capabilities translate into parliamentary behavior"* (Auel, 2007, 503),

have not yet led to more knowledge about EU-related parliamentary questioning activities. Therefore this paper investigates the use of parliamentary questions to control the government in European Union matters. The following subsection addresses possible reasons why parties engage in legislative oversight activities in European Union affairs. In particular, I argue that EU-issue based incentives and government participation are important explanatory factors.

## Theory and Hypotheses

### Questioning behavior over time

My first assumption however does not consider differences between parties, but general patterns of questioning behavior over time. It is evident that the European Union has tremendously evolved. Not only has the number of member states grown, also the policy issues covered in EU decision making have expanded from trade to almost all policy areas. The European Parlia-

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<sup>3</sup>In contrast, questioning activity in the European Parliament has been investigated quite extensively (Raunio, 1996; Proksch and Slapin, 2010; Jensen, Proksch and Slapin, 2013)

ment has become a serious co-decision making chamber and many other new institutions have arisen over time. As a consequence, national legislatures have suffered a loss of competencies and therefore have often been called the *losers* of the European integration process (Raunio and Hix, 2000). However, we know that national parliaments have reacted to the pressures of European integration and there is evidence that institutional adaption took place in tandem with European integration (Blom-Hansen and Olsen, 2014). Additionally, non-legislative activities have increased in Western Europe democracies (Green-Pedersen, 2010). As a result, I assume that EU-related parliamentary questions have increased over time as well. The first hypothesis thus is:

H1: *The number of EU-related parliamentary question has increased throughout the time period under consideration.*

## Ideological preferences

Parliamentary questions offer opportunities to get information that is useful to the questioner and force ministers to address issues which they would rather avoid to talk about or to address issues they are very keen to discuss. By asking a question political parties can thus influence the agenda. However, asking parliamentary questions also comes with limitations. On the one hand, the opportunity to ask a parliamentary question is institutionally limited. Procedural rules determine *who* is allowed to ask a question and *when* the question is tabled.

On the other hand, we know that time is a scarce resource. MPs do not only have to take care of their tasks within parliament, but are also expected to be active outside the parliamentary arena (e.g. in their constituency). This implies that they do not engage blindly in asking parliamentary questions but rather select very carefully whether they introduce a question and which issue they pay attention to.<sup>4</sup> It seems evident that the number of questions asked by a party depends on whether the issue addressed in the question maximizes party gains. A party will want to ask a question if it believes that addressing the issue will bring benefits. Here, the crucial consideration is to identify the parties for which the salience of European integration is advantageous. If a party's position towards the European Union is popular EU issue emphasis

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<sup>4</sup>It is important to note that legislative bodies are party political institutions, where individual members of parliament represent political parties (Strøm, 1990). On that note, this paper gives priority to the preferences of political parties rather than the individual.

will pay off in terms of votes (De Vries and Hobolt, 2012). In most European countries, the median voter is on average more Euroskeptic than the mainstream parties (Hooghe and Marks, 2009). This means that Euroskeptic parties in particular stand to gain if EU issues are addressed and politicized, so if there are intense debates surrounding conflictual topics (De Wilde, 2011). Asking a parliamentary question to ministers offers the opportunity to initiate such debates and forces parties which may rather would keep silent about the issue to address it. Euroskeptic parties will want the European Union to be a salient topic in parliamentary daily business and should thus ask parliamentary questions related to the EU most frequently. The expectation concerning party's ideological preferences towards the EU is:

H2: *Euroskeptic parties ask more EU-related questions than other parties.*

Differences in questioning behavior among parties due to ideological preferences do not necessarily have to be related to the European Union only. One argument in the literature is that the distance between parties in parliament and the government matters for predicting the level of questioning activity (Rasch, 1994). Parties that are highly influential due to their number of seats in parliament might not feel the need to make use of formal questioning procedures. This implies that the extent to which (opposition) parties can influence governmental decision-making through their political power should matter, in the sense that small parties that are more distant from governmental power have a greater need and stronger incentives for introducing parliamentary questions (Daamgard, 1994). Nevertheless, we also know that resources matter. As a result, we should not expect that party seats are a perfect predictor for questioning activity. Assumptions that either more or less parliamentary seats increase questioning activity are counter-intuitive. On the one hand, parties with considerable seat share, such as junior coalition partners or large mainstream opposition parties, are expected to use their bargaining power more informally and thus do not get engaged in public parliamentary oversight to a large extent. On the other hand, parties with low numbers of seats lack resources and can thus not be expected to be very active. Hence, party seats do not automatically translate into non-legislative activities. Instead, I argue that distance to the government should be considered in ideological terms. Ideologically extreme parties have stronger incentives to challenge the government than mainstream competitors which hold or adapt positions closer to the ones of the party leading the government (Adams et al., 2006). Hence, the hypothesis concerning party ideology is:

H3: *The greater the ideological distance between a party and the prime minister party, the more EU-related questions this party will ask.*

## Government & Opposition

In addition to party's ideological preferences towards the European Union and a party's ideological distance to the center of power, I argue that government participation should have an effect on questioning activity. Generally speaking, parties in government aim at sustaining, protecting and managing government while, in contrast, opposition parties have a natural interest in unsettling, criticizing and blaming government ([Laver and Shepsle, 1996](#)). We can expect that parties make use of parliamentary questions to destabilize the opponent and to gain leverage for their own party. As a consequence, we should expect that questioning behavior represents conflict between government and opposition. Most questioning procedures allow MPs to face members of the executive. Hence, I assume that opposition parties have greater incentives to get active. Indeed, research on parliamentary questioning behavior in Nordic countries shows that opposition parties use parliamentary questions more frequently than parties in government. Furthermore, there is evidence that parties change their behavior when they switch between government and opposition status ([Daamgard, 1994](#); [Rasch, 1994](#)). It is very likely that EU-related questions display a similar pattern. Even more, I argue that EU issue characteristics increase questioning activity of opposition parties.

The European integration process has changed the power balance between different actors at the national level and, in particular, resulted in a strengthening of the executive ([Crum, 2003](#)). National executives, through their participation in the European Council and the Council of the European Union, can manipulate policies and have access to a steady stream of information, which the opposition, if ever, can only obtain at considerable expense. Since, opposition parties do not participate in the EU policy making process, asking parliamentary questions in the national parliamentary arena offers opportunities to overcome their lack of information.

Thus, parliamentary questions serve two vital interests of opposition parties. They offer opportunities to ask for information on important policy issues and allow to criticize government actions. Government parties, in contrast, do not have the same need to ask for information, nor do they have an interest in criticizing the government in public. If majority backbenchers need

information, they usually make use of more informal channels, such as party committee meetings ([Holzhacker, 2002](#)). The hypothesis concerning government participation is thus:

H4: *Opposition parties ask more EU-related questions than government parties.*

## Data and Method

The theoretical part of this paper makes assumptions about the overall level of EU-related parliamentary activity, ideological preferences and status of political parties. To test these assumptions I build on several sources. The comparative agendas project collected data on legislative and non-legislative activities, including parliamentary questions. In this paper I make use of questions asked in the Danish *Folketing* and the Belgian *Kamer van Volksvertegenwoordigers*.<sup>5</sup> Data from Denmark include written questions tabled for Question Hour between 1953 and 2003. The Belgian data set consists of oral questions and interpellations in the period between 1988 and 2010. No parliamentary questioning procedure resembles another, thus there are various differences between the two legislatures ([Bergman et al., 2003](#)). For example, interpellations in the Belgian *Kamer* can lead to a debate and can be followed by a vote of non-confidence, which is not the case for written questions in the Danish parliament. However, as Vliegenthart and Walgrave ([2011](#)) convincingly argue, all questioning procedures are based on the same political function: parliamentary control. Hence, all three questioning procedures under consideration in this paper have the same purpose. Therefore I assume to see similar behavioral patterns in both countries. Nevertheless, the main models for each country are calculated separately.

### Dependent variable: EU-related parliamentary questions

The dependent variable, EU-related parliamentary questions, is a count output. It counts the number of EU-related questions asked per year for each individual party in parliament. The selection process of questions follows a narrow definition. I use questions that are assigned to the code 1910 of the CAP master codebook. These are questions that are related to general aspects of the EC/EU including European Union institutions, treaties, referendums or the expansion of the European Union. This implies that more detailed aspects, such as specific policies are not

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<sup>5</sup>Future research will also draw on questions from Germany, the Netherlands, Portugal and Spain.

considered. The Danish data include another variable which indicates whether a given policy topic, coded into the relevant subtopic, is related to the European Union. Yet, as this paper attempts to compare the two countries, I decided not to include policy related aspects and use the same variable. The use of a yearly aggregation level is chosen to account for periods where the parliament does not meet. Moreover, the effects on parliamentary questioning activity considered in this study, such as ideological preferences or government participation, are relatively stable. Therefore, in contrast to short term effects on non-legislative behavior, such as media coverage, aggregation on a lower level (e.g. weeks or months) seems not necessary.

## Independent variables

In addition to parliamentary questions I use of information on party ideology, government participation and several control variables.

*Euroskepticism:* According to hypothesis 2 a party's position towards the European Union should have an impact on EU-related questioning activity in parliament. There are several possibilities to conceptualize and measure party-based Euroskepticism. Most commonly, scholars use expert or manifesto measures for party positioning on European integration. This paper relies on data from the comparative manifesto project (CMP) ([Volkens et al., 2014](#)). Manifestos provide information on party positions for the entire period under study. The data set consists of two variables with information on the EU positions. The percentage of negative and positive quasi-sentences in the manifesto. I transformed the two variables to a ratio scale of negative statements. Thus, a variable was created that indicates the percentage of negative sentences divided by the sum of positive and negative statements ([Marks et al., 2007](#)).

*Cabinet party:* A dummy variable was created to indicate for each party whether it was a member of the government (1) or in opposition (0). Information about government participation was derived from the ParlGov data base.

*Ideological distance:* The CMP data set provides information on the left-right positioning of political parties. It includes an additive index aggregating 13 categories seen as being on the left and the right and subtracts the percentage of left categories from those of the right. To get information about the distance between each individual party and the government I subtract the party value from the prime minister party. Negative values were translated into positive

ones, thus, indicating that an increase implies greater distance between  $party_x$  and the party that leads the government.

*Year (lagged):* To account for the number of questions in the previous year, I created a lagged variable which indicates  $year_{t-1}$ .

*Prime minister party:* A dummy variable was created for each party that shows whether it was leading the government (1) or not (0). Again, this information stems from the ParlGov data base.

*Seats:* I measure the size of parties by the number of parliamentary seats it held in the given period as a percentage of the total number of seats in parliament.

*Belgium:* A country dummy variable with the values Denmark (0) and Belgium (1) was created to control for country differences in the global model.

The distribution of parliamentary questions, which is generated by a count process requires a special model for count data. Most often Poisson models are applied. The data used in this study are overdispersed, which means that the conditional variance exceeds the conditional mean. I run an auxiliary generalized linear model to test for overdispersion with the result deviance/residual df > 2. Moreover, a likelihood ratio test shows that the parameter  $\alpha > 0$ . As a consequence, the model used in this paper is a negative binomial regression.

## Results

I begin by presenting descriptive results for the salience of EU-related questions over time. Then I present and discuss the findings of the multivariate analysis. The original data used in this study consist of thousands of parliamentary questions. A first step is to investigate how many parliamentary questions are actually related to the European Union. In sum, there are 639 questions that are assigned to the EU code in the Belgian data and 1212 EU-related questions for Denmark. Figure 1 illustrates the absolute number of questions related to the European Union that were asked in the parliaments of Denmark and Belgium over time. We see that the number of EU-related parliamentary questions is increasing in both countries. In Denmark EU-related questions were not relevant before the access to the EU in 1973. Soon after, the number of questions increases somewhat, but only in the 1990's there are crucial changes in questioning

activity. We can identify three peaks in 1993 (59 questions), 1997 (94 questions) and 2000 (167 questions). These years mark important institutional changes in the European Union including the enforcement (signing or preparation, respectively) of the treaties of Maastricht, Amsterdam and Nice. In the two last years under consideration the number of questions decreases again.

For Belgium the number of EU-related questions is also increasing over time. However, in contrast to Denmark we only see one spike in 2004. Considering the nature of the dependent variable, I suggest that increase is related to institutional developments at the European level, such as the discussion and drafting of the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe.

— Figure 1 about here —

In general though, absolute numbers of EU-related questions indicate that European Union issues are not very salient. Figure 2 presents the relative share of EU related questions per year. Indeed, there is evidence that parties do not pay much attention to parliamentary questions related to the European Union. The issue constantly stays under 5 per cent. In Denmark the share of EU-related questions has increased over time due to considerable activity around the year of accession to the EU and after the ratification of the Treaty of Maastricht. For Belgium we see that absolute numbers are somewhat misleading as the relative share shows that most engagement in EU-related parliamentary questions takes place in the in 1990's. We note that the absolute number of questions has increased in both parliaments. The relative numbers, however, suggest that EU-related questions are not very salient throughout the period under consideration. Only in the period between 1990 and 2000 the share of EU-related questions climbs above 3 per cent. If we take into consideration that the EU variable does not include policies but only institutional and general aspects of the European Union, one can arguably say that a value between 4 and 5 per cent is moderately salient.

— Figure 2 about here —

The results for the negative binomial regression are presented in Table 1.<sup>6</sup> The models for the individual countries reveal crucial differences in questioning behavior between Denmark and Belgium. While the amount of negative party positioning towards the European Union in Denmark

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<sup>6</sup>The measurement of Euroskepticism reduces the total number of observations. Since cases with no quasi-sentences about the European Union are excluded from the ratio scaling the number of observations is 835 for Denmark and 501 for Belgium.

has a positive and significant effect on the count independent variable, the effect in Belgium is negative and insignificant. Given the other variables are hold constant, in both countries the effect of being in government decreases a party's (log) number of EU-related questions per year. In both models government participation is the variable with the biggest effect on the dependent variable. The distance between a party's ideological position and the position of the prime minister party is positive. However, only in Belgium the coefficient reaches a considerable level of significance. The same is true for the share of seats in parliament. As the descriptive analysis has suggested time matters. The lagged year variable has a small but significant positive effect on the number of parliamentary questioning behavior, indicating that the number of parliamentary questions a party asks per year is increasing over time.

— Table 1 about here —

Additionally, I run a global model that combines all parliamentary questions. Table 2 presents the results in terms of incidence rate ratios. We can interpret the ratios as the rate that is occurring when the independent variable is increasing about one unit. This means that given a one unit increase in party's share of negative manifesto sentences about the European Union, the party's rate for the number of parliamentary questions asked per year would be expected to increase by a factor of 1.16. Government participation clearly reduces the rate of EU-related questions asked per year. Ideological distance, positive and significant in Belgium, obviously has no effect on questioning behavior in the global model.

— Table 2 about here —

Graphical illustration of the marginal effect of government participation in relation to Euroskepticism is presented in Figure 3. Additionally, Figure 4 presents government participation at the distance to the government and its effect on the dependent variable. Figure 5 considers predicted margins of the effect of party status over time.

— Figure 3 about here —

— Figure 4 about here —

# Conclusion and Discussion

yet to be written...

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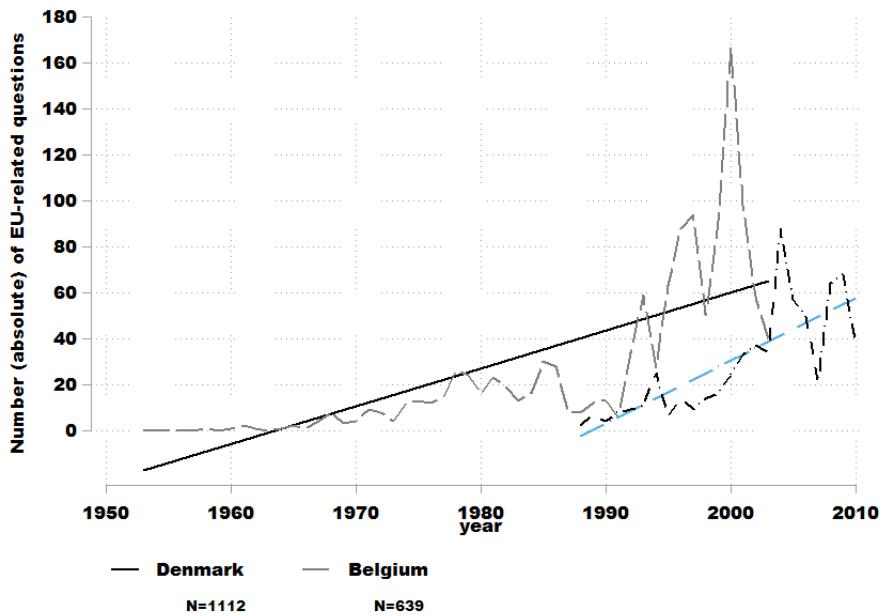


Figure 1: Number of EU-related questions

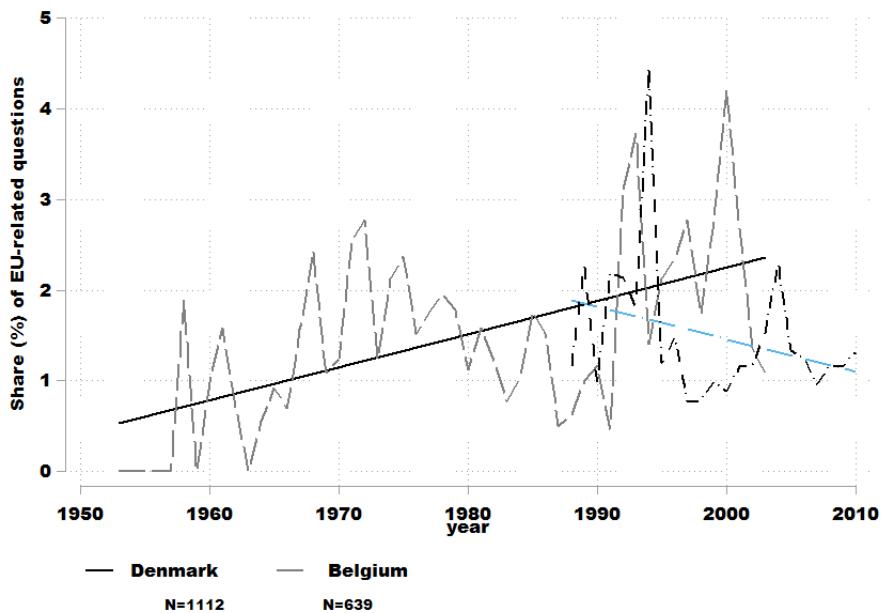


Figure 2: Share of EU-related questions

variables	(1) Denmark count	lnalpha	(2) Belgium count	lnalpha	(3) Global count	lnalpha
year (lagged)	0.0624*** (0.00267)		0.0118*** (0.00238)		0.0385*** (0.00210)	
euroskepticism	0.222*** (0.0736)		-0.141 (0.125)		0.150** (0.0656)	
cabinet	-0.336*** (0.0888)		-0.551*** (0.0581)		-0.696*** (0.0542)	
distance	0.000554 (0.000892)		0.0598*** (0.00574)		0.000920 (0.000921)	
seats (%)	0.000973 (0.00376)		0.0428*** (0.00524)		0.0164*** (0.00305)	
Belgium					73.99*** (4.704)	
Constant	-121.8*** (5.320)	-1.214*** (0.0620)	-118.2*** (11.49)	-2.036*** (0.137)	-74.22*** (4.188)	-1.102*** (0.0497)
Observations	835		501		1,336	
Pseudo R2	0.0734		0.0757		0.0749	

Standard errors in parentheses  
\*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

Table 1: Negative Binomial Regression

variables	(3) Global count
year (lagged)	1.0392*** (.00218)
euroskepticism	1.1616** (.01676)
cabinet	.49873*** (.02701)
distance	1.0009 (.00092)
seats (%)	1.01655*** (.00309)
Belgium	1.3632*** (6.3932)
Constant	5.8533*** (2.4532)
Observations	1,336

Standard errors in parentheses  
\*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

Table 2: Incidence-rate ratios

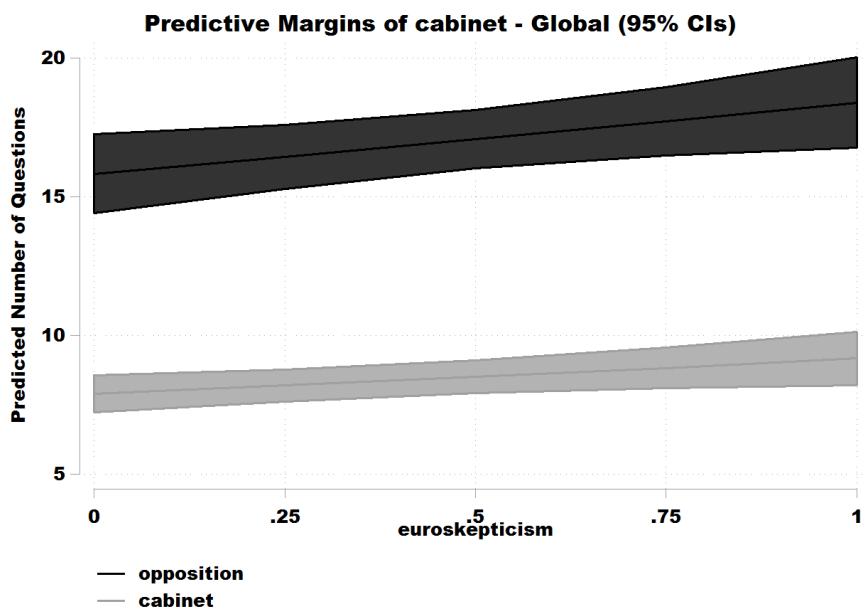


Figure 3: Margins Cabinet-Euroskepticism (Global)

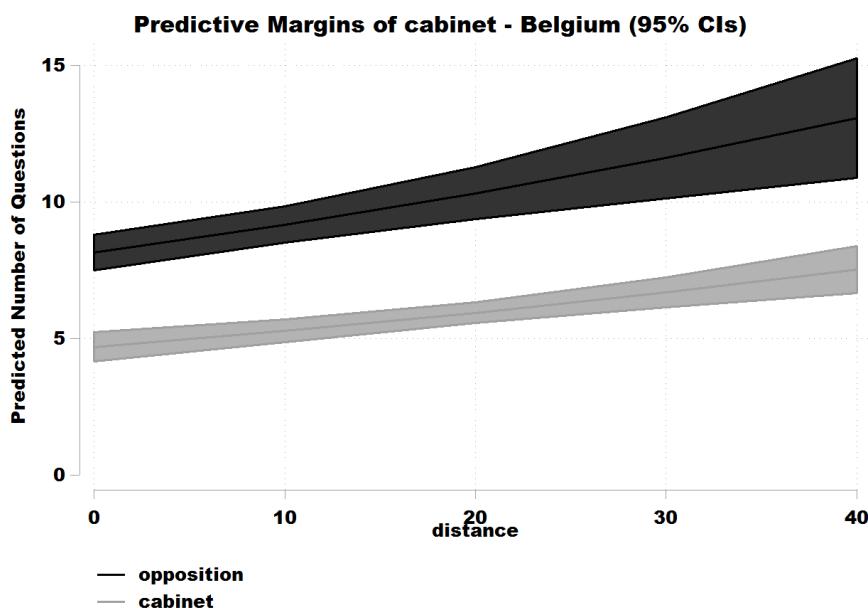


Figure 4: Margins Cabinet-Distance (Belgium)

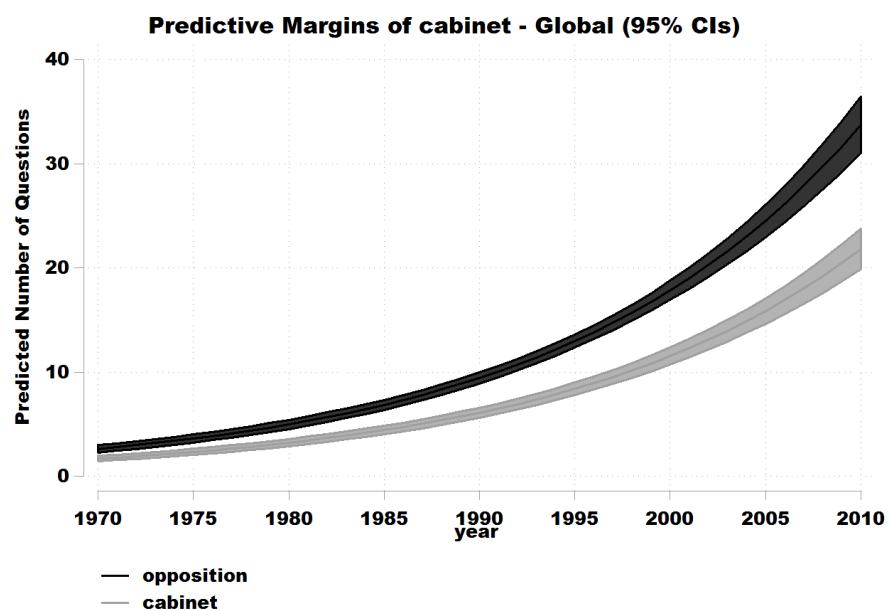


Figure 5: Margins Cabinet-Year (Global)