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ARTICLE



The politics of the Brexit debate abroad: an analysis of parliamentary questions on Brexit in Belgian parliaments

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ABSTRACT

The Brexit referendum in June 2016 marked a critical point for European integration and has quickly attracted attention from scholars. However, the literature so far has focused on the UK and the EU level, neglecting the symmetric risk exposures and the diverging views around Brexit within the Member states. This article aims at contributing to filling this gap by analyzing to what extent the attention paid to Brexit differs across parliaments in a multilevel setting and whether parties emphasize the same issue across different levels? It relies on a unique database of parliamentary questions in the Belgian (regional and federal) parliaments between 2013 and 2017 and combines social network analysis and a loglinear modeling to analyze how Brexit has been framed and discussed in Belgium.

KEYWORDS

Belgium; Brexit; European Union; parliamentary questions; social network analysis

Introduction

The Brexit referendum in June 2016 marked a critical point for European integration. Brexit has remained a significant issue: it has not only evidenced a deep rejection of the European Union (EU) by large segments of the UK population but has also triggered an existential crisis for the European political regime, with a Member state deciding to leave. Given the unprecedented nature of the event, it is not surprising that a burgeoning literature has quickly developed to understand its causes and consequences. Most of these analyses have focused on explaining the Brexit vote (Hobolt 2016; Jensen and Snaith 2016; Vasilopoulou 2016; Clarke, Goodwin, and Whiteley 2017), estimating the political and economic consequences of Brexit for the UK (Dhingra et al. 2017; Gamble 2018; Van Reenen 2016) and exploring the way it has been framed in British political debates (Bulmer and Quaglia 2018; Butler, Jensen, and Snaith 2016; Vasilopoulou and Keith 2019). A common conclusion within this literature is the high degree of contestability in the definition of a negotiating position for the British government. Yet, with the exception of the work of Oliver (2016, 2017) which focused on inter-state divergences in the negotiating position of their *political elites*, little research has been done on the domestic debates around Brexit in other EU member states.¹ Indeed, the process has, so far, generally been managed by the EU as a unitary actor and has been mostly dominated by the executive powers. And yet, beyond the European Commission's negotiation position, there are conflicting views on how the EU should negotiate with the UK as the different Member states are differently exposed to the hazards created by Brexit. And an important locus of potential conflict is situated at the parliamentary level.

Long considered as the losers of the integration process, national parliaments have now come back. Since the 2000s, they have played a more active role in EU affairs (Auel and Christiansen 2015; Fromage 2015; Winzen 2012). As highlighted by the 27th COSAC report, a vast majority of national

parliaments want to be informed on Brexit by their national government and intend to ask regular questions about the negotiations (Buth, Högenauer, and Kaniok 2018; Cosac 2017).

Although there is no reference to national parliaments in article 50 of the Treaty on the European Union, the role of national and regional parliaments is not just a formality since they will have to vote on any future agreement. And yet, how they address Brexit has been overlooked so far. Given the increasing involvement of regional and national parliaments in European affairs (Högenauer 2015, 2017), it is essential to understand how Brexit as a crisis has been discussed by regional and national MPs. It will give us insights into how regional and national assemblies address major crises in EU politics, how they are framed and discussed and whether variation occurs depending on the party (meso-level), but also the institutional context (macro-level). This article concentrates on a case-study and is structured around two main questions: How does the attention paid to Brexit differ across parliaments in a multilevel setting? Do parties emphasize the same issue across different levels? We will also examine whether regional divergences occur and if the different « risk » exposure to Brexit impact parliamentary discussions. The aim is thus not to examine the salience of EU affairs in Belgium or the interest of Belgian MPs for Brexit but rather the politics of the Brexit debates in Belgium and the potential divergence across parliaments and political parties.

In order to answer our two questions, this article relies on a unique database of parliamentary questions in the Federal, Flemish and Walloon parliaments since the former British Prime Minister David Cameron announced his intention to hold a referendum on the 23 January 2013 until October 2017. It combines social network analysis and a loglinear modeling to analyze how Brexit has been framed and discussed in Belgium.

Parliamentary questions as a tool to monitor EU affairs

Parliamentary questions are certainly not the most powerful legislative mechanism but their use entails very low costs for legislators and makes it easy for them to address issues of interest to them. It is therefore an excellent indicator of their priorities (Chiru and Dimulescu 2011; Navarro and Brouard 2014; Raunio 2009). Indeed, unlike most other parliamentary activities, party leaderships exercise less control over parliamentary questions and these questions provide a reliable perspective on the focus of parliamentarians on national or international issues (Rozenberg and Martin 2011). Moreover, as noted by Navarro and Brouard (2014), since national parliaments have increasingly used their power of control to scrutinize their government, through the use of questions, we can use this tool to assess the content and issues that parliaments are debating.

The literature on parliamentary questions on Europe has shown that they can be used for very various reasons. They perform several macro-functions (i.e. for the institution as such) such as gaining information, controlling the executive and developing a reputation on a specific topic. Most scholarly work has used parliamentary questions to study issues of accountability and control or test for policy specialization among MPs (Martin 2011; Proksch and Slapin 2011). In his seminal study on parliamentary questions in the British House of Commons, Judge (1973) showed that institutional settings such as a decentralized authority and a delegate style of representation would lead to a higher degree of specialization than in parliamentary systems with centralized authority and a trustee style of representation. In a similar vein, Navarro and Brouard (2014) showed that, in France, the Europeanization of parliamentary questions depends more on the nature of the institutional setting than on party-based factors. But through a comparative analysis, Sciarini et al. (2019) found that the Europeanization of parliamentary questions remains rather limited: MPs do not seem to use questions extensively to scrutinize their government or politicize EU affairs. Finally, in multi-level settings, Finke and Herbel (2015) have argued that parliamentary questions on Europe could be understood as a multiple level game with national MPs asking questions in order to influence the national position and constrain the government's internal room of maneuver.

But parliamentary questions also perform micro-functions (i.e. individual-level functions) for legislators such as generating publicity, defending territorial interests and showing concern for the

interests of constituents (Bailer 2011, Lazardeux 2005, Raunio 1996). Indeed, according to the rational choice approach, MPs choose to emphasize issues on which they know that they can garner votes. In his seminal book, Mayhew (1974) argued that MPs' main driver for their behavior was their prospect for re-election: their activities in parliament are meant to signal to voters that they are working for them in the hope of maintaining the electoral connection and be re-elected. For instance, 'MPs sponsor legislation, table questions and speak in parliament to improve their chances of re-election' (Mayhew 1974 cited in Louwerse and Otjes 2016). In a similar vein, Kellermann (2016) has recently analyzed how the electoral context affects the number and type of parliamentary questions asked in the British House of the Commons. According to him, MPs ask questions as a reputation-building tool and become more active when their prospective margin of electoral victory decreases. MPs may thus use parliamentary questions to cultivate more personal relationships with their constituents and maintain an electoral connection (Saalfeld 2011). In the Belgian case, Dandoy (2011) shows that questions are mostly used to collect information, control the executive and force Ministers to voice an opinion on delicate matters. He also noted that because journalists tend to scrutinize MPs' activities at the eve of elections, through the publication of 'reports on legislative output', MPs are tempted to be very active in questioning the government in order to receive a 'good mark' from the media for re-election.²

Finally, meso-level factors such as party-level factors have been less explored. This is surprising since parliaments do not behave as unitary actors (Andeweg and Nijzink 1995), they are arenas of contestation between different parties (Raunio 2009). As Cole (1999) already remarked, MPs from governmental parties often ask parliamentary questions to support their ministers, while MPs from opposition parties may use these questions to delegitimize governmental policies. A widely observed common characteristic is that opposition parties tend to be more active in asking questions than governmental parties (Green-Pedersen 2010). This is also generally the case in Belgium (Vliegthart and Walgrave 2011). Yet, the impact of party competition on the issues that MPs choose to emphasize has been less explored (Vliegthart and Walgrave 2011). As far as the EU is concerned, scholars have evidenced that opposition parties sometimes tend to use parliamentary questions as a way to obtain information on European affairs (Bergman 1997). More recently, Senninger (2017) has shown that Eurosceptic opposition parties in Denmark have tended to ask more general questions on the future of the EU than on specific EU policies. Besides, MPs may also dissent from their party lines. Parliamentary questions may also reveal tensions within governmental coalitions. Indeed, parliamentary questions could be used as a tool between coalition partners to ensure that each of them respects their commitment. This would allow coalition partners to overcome their delegation problem (Brouard, Costa, and König 2012; Holzhacker, 2002). In this regard, Navarro and Brouard (2014) have shown that MPs from cabinet parties tend to ask more questions to ministers who belong to a different party than their own within the governmental coalition.

Brexit might be considered as a 'special' or unique case on which general frameworks cannot be applied. However, we argue that although Brexit is indeed a uniquely radical event for the UK, for the other Member states it is yet another crisis to deal with. It is thus quite similar to other crises and other debates on the future of European integration that have taken place in the recent period. EU issues have been increasingly politicized, especially in the so-called age of crisis (Dinan, Nugent and Paterson 2017) and Brexit can be seen as yet another crisis (Brack and Gürkan 2020). Furthermore, it is an interesting case to examine whether debates are Europeanized, i.e. whether the EU dimension is present or if the national frame is still predominant.

Therefore, we will rely on the literature on parliamentary questions and EU issues in order to understand how MPs talk about Brexit. Based on this literature, it can be expected that MPs from opposition parties will ask more questions to the government than MPs from governing parties as they will use parliamentary questions to scrutinize the executive. Indeed, opposition parties have less opportunities to influence EU politics as they do not have a voice in the Council or the European Council and they use the national parliament as a platform or alternative 'route' to impact EU politics (Proksch and Slapin 2011). It is also likely that MPs from the opposition will ask more general

questions since they have less information on the negotiations than MPs from the governing coalition. However, based on Navarro and Brouard (2014), we expect that when MPs from governmental parties ask parliamentary questions, they will be more likely to ask ministers from a different party than their own within the coalition.

Hypothesis 1a: MPs belonging to parties in the opposition will tend to ask more questions on Brexit than MPs from governmental parties. (H1a)

Hypothesis 1b: MPs from governmental parties will tend to ask more questions to ministers coming from a different party within the coalition. (H1b)

Hypothesis 2: MPs from parties in the opposition will tend to ask more general questions than questions on specific Brexit aspects. (H2)

Besides, given the differential economic impact of Brexit on Belgian regions and given the multilevel structure of competences, one could hypothesize that these relationships between governmental status and the number of questions or their level of specificity will be different according to regions. It is likely that the saliency of some issues will vary according to the level. Indeed, Flanders and Wallonia are differently exposed to the hazards created by Brexit, the former being more dependent on trade with the UK. This asymmetric risk exposure is likely to lead to more salience in the Flemish parliament. Moreover, regional parliaments in Belgium have specific powers, mostly related to economic policies whereas the Federal parliament has a more general 'EU affairs committee' like most national parliament in the EU. Given their competences, we expect that questions asked in regional parliaments will reflect the constitutional distribution of power within the federal state and focus on specific sub-national issues.

Hypothesis 3: MPs from the region most exposed to Brexit consequences will ask questions on more issues. (H3)

Hypothesis 4: MPs from regional parliaments will tend to ask more specific questions on Brexit than MPs from the federal parliament as a reflection of the constitutional distribution of power. (H4)

The Belgian case

The Belgian case appears particularly adequate to test the alternative hypotheses of a rational or structural-institutional driver of parliamentary attention. As a small economy, very integrated with the UK market, Belgium is one of the countries that is most likely to suffer from a British exit from the common market. The British market is the fourth largest export market for Belgian products. According to Vandebussche, Connell and Wouters (2018), a 'hard' Brexit could generate between 10,000 and 42,000 job losses in Belgium. However, the different regions are not equally exposed to the risk of a Brexit. As of today (2019), 87% of Belgian exports to the UK come from Flanders, around 10% from Wallonia and 3% from Brussels. As a result, Flanders is likely to be more impacted by trade losses if the UK leaves the common market. Besides, the variation in the positions of the political parties towards the EU and the multilevel structure of government make Belgium a relevant case study.

As far as party positioning is concerned, the general consensus around European integration has not been fundamentally questioned by the main political parties in the recent political campaigns. Across all parties, MPs have expressed high levels of support for a deepening of European integration and the level of polarization of MPs on this issue is quite low.³ For a long time, the EU has tended to be a 'non-issue' in Belgian politics (Crespy, 2011). The 'permissive consensus' seems still firmly embedded in

Belgium as there is little popular Euroscepticism. According to the latest survey, 62% of the Belgian citizens consider EU membership to be a good thing, 61% are optimistic about the future of the EU and 53% trust the EU (well above the EU28 average) (Eurobarometers 88 and 88.1). Eurosceptic citizens are still a small minority which tend to turn to radical (left or right) parties to express their dissatisfaction with EU policies (Brack and Hoon 2017). Beyond extreme-right and populist parties, the only outlier to this general Euro-enthusiasm is the N-VA. Since 2012, N-VA MPs' attitudes towards European integration have been more lukewarm than in other parties (see Figure 1). Although they are still in favor of European integration, they are among the least enthusiasts for a deepening of the European Union. In 2014, the party also modified its stance on European integration in order to adopt a more 'Eurorealist' position (FitzGibbon, Leruth, and Startin 2016). Since the 2014 European election, the party has also decided to sit with the British Conservative in the European Parliament. Besides, as Deschouwer and Hoon (2015) have recently shown, their voters appear much more Eurosceptic than the party's position suggests.

This ambivalent position of the N-VA towards European integration is particularly interesting to consider when studying MPs' attitudes towards Brexit (Brack and Crespy 2019; Leruth 2016). On the one hand, MPs from the N-VA may feel ideologically close to the British Conservatives (and have endorsed a number of the critiques expressed by the Brexiteers, claiming that this should be a 'wake up' call for the EU to engage in reforms); on the other hand, they want to preserve the interests of their region without weakening the existing European institutions.

Besides, Belgium's multilevel structure of governance allows us to test for differences according to the type of institutional settings. Since 2014, Belgium has presented the interesting case of asymmetric governmental coalitions at multiple levels. In Flanders as in the Federal government, Flemish nationalists of the N-VA are governing with Christian-Democrats and Liberals, while in the Walloon region, the Social-Democrats were governing with the Christian-Democrats until June 2017. Besides, it is worth mentioning that only one French-speaking party is represented in the federal government, the French-speaking liberal, MR. This creates a particular situation for political debates in the Belgian multilevel setting with very different policy preferences at the regional and federal levels. In this configuration, a paradigmatic example of an emerging politicization of European matters in domestic debates has been the debate around the Transatlantic Free Trade Agreement (TAFTA) and the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) in Wallonia, with grassroots mobilization (Bollen, Gheyle, and De Ville 2016; Crespy 2016). While the negotiation mandate had been smoothly adopted after little parliamentary debate at the Flemish and Federal level, the Walloon government

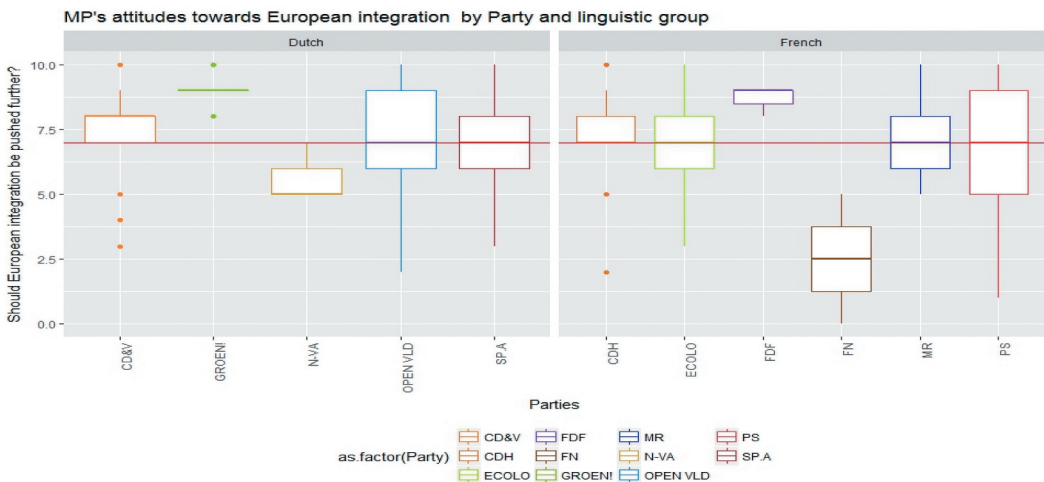


Figure 1. Belgian MPs' attitudes towards European integration.⁴

decided to politicize the issue and opposed the negotiation mandate in order to leverage additional guarantees on the court arbitration system provided by the Treaty. Indeed, since the francophone Socialist Party (PS) is in the opposition at the federal level, it tended to take a more critical standpoint on specific EU-policies such as trade and the economy at the regional level. Paul Magnette (Minister President of Wallonia at the time of Brexit) even labelled himself the ‘first Social Democratic Eurosceptic’⁵.

Finally, explicit connections have been made by Belgian governmental representatives between Brexit debates and debates on the future of Europe. After the results of the Brexit referendum, Walloon Minister President Magnette explicitly pleaded for a potential exit of Poland, Hungary or Romania from the EU. At the same time, Flemish Minister President Bourgeois was deploring the Walloon attitude towards the UK and proposing of the creation of a sort of ‘North Sea Union’, a type of advanced free trade agreement between Britain, Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, Denmark, Sweden and Norway to promote cooperation on managing resources such as energy and fisheries, as well as research and development.⁶

Data and method

The empirical analysis is based on an exhaustive dataset of parliamentary questions on Brexit in the three parliamentary assemblies (Federal-level, Wallonia and Flanders). Data were retrieved from the website of each of these assemblies.⁷ This dataset was also used in Sierens and Brack (2019). In most legislatures, MPs can ask either written or oral questions. At the federal level, the analysis focused on the parliamentary questions asked in the Chamber of Representatives as they were only two parliamentary questions on Brexit in the Belgian Senate during the period under study. At the federated entities level, we decided to focus on Flanders and Wallonia as there were almost no debates dedicated to Brexit in the Brussels Parliament and very few debates at the level of the Wallonia-Brussels Federation. We relied on each parliament’s indexation system. At the federal level, the electronic archives used the keyword ‘Brexit’ to categorize all questions that dealt with this topic. At the regional levels, we selected all the questions mentioning ‘Brexit’ in their titles. Within Belgian Parliamentary assemblies, different types of questions are possible: written questions, oral questions or interpellations. Covering the period between 23 January 2013, date of David Cameron’s Bloomberg Speech, until the 1st of October 2017,⁸ we retrieved 146 parliamentary questions on Brexit in the Federal parliament (94 oral questions and 52 written questions), 88 parliamentary questions in Flanders (57 oral questions and 31 written questions) and 37 parliamentary questions in Wallonia (12 oral questions and 25 written questions).⁹

In a first step, this paper proceeds with a descriptive comparative analysis of Parliamentary Questions in each of the parliamentary assemblies. Let’s note that, as each parliamentary assembly has its own agenda, rules of procedures and composition, we have chosen to analyze their debates separately. However, in some cases, questions raised in one assembly might be related to the question previously asked in another assembly. In a few cases, some questions asked at the Federal level could be related to questions that have been asked in the Flemish or Walloon assembly (and vice-versa). Assuming that the debates in the three institutions are independent of each other allows here to better map the differences between these assemblies. The descriptive analysis relies on Social Network Analysis that allows us to focus on the structural relationships between the different units of analysis. In a second step, it proceeds to a loglinear modeling of the frequency of associations and interactions between categorical variables.

To structure the comparative analysis, this paper divides it into a series of questions explored at the three parliamentary levels (the federal level, the Walloon region and the Flemish region)¹⁰:

- Who asks whom?
- Who asks what?

For the ‘who-question’: each MP was categorized according to his/her party and his/her presence or absence in the governmental coalition

For the ‘what-question’: each parliamentary question was categorized according to the main issue at stake in the PQ. In a first inductive and exploratory step, parliamentary questions were manually coded according to their main topic and the Chamber’s categorization according to Eurovoc keywords.¹¹ Based on this first coding, in a second step, parliamentary questions were recoded into the four most frequent categories: Questions asking general information on Brexit (such as ‘How does the government intend to solve this crisis?’, ‘how will article 50 be activated?’, ‘After the Brexit referendum, which European project does the Belgian government defend?’, ‘Which relations will we have with the UK after Brexit?’),

- Questions on Trade & Economic Consequences (such as ‘How has the Trade Balance between Belgium and UK evolved in the last five years?’, ‘Are we going to renegotiate fiscal conventions with the UK?’, ‘Which measures are taken to attract British investments in the Belgian economy after Brexit?’),
- Questions on the Negotiation Strategy (such as ‘Will Belgium seek a common position with neighboring countries such as the Netherlands and Denmark on Brexit?’, ‘What is the impact of British election on Brexit negotiations?’, ‘How is Brexit debated in the other Belgian Parliaments?’), and
- Questions on Specific Issues (such as questions ‘What is the impact of Brexit for space policy and Galileo?’, ‘Are there European crisis mechanisms to support agricultors impacted by Brexit?’, ‘What will be the position of Belgium towards British low costs flight companies after Brexit?’)

Empirical analysis

Descriptive analysis of the pattern of parliamentary questions

Before testing our hypotheses, we suggest to combine contingency tables and social network analysis (SNA) to map the relationship between MPs and government (i.e. the flux of questions from MPs to Ministers). The contingency tables allow to identify a pattern of relationship at the aggregate level (macro-level). The SNA allows here to identify more fine-grained patterns of relationships between MPs and ministers at different levels (micro- and meso-levels). For each level of government, we have drawn networks of parliamentary questions.¹² For each of these networks, we have then computed several indicators: density, average degree and homophily. The density of a network is defined as *the proportion of existing ties over all possible ties in that network* (Wasserman and Faust 1994, 271). *The average degree of a network measured the average number of edges leaving from a node.* (Opsahl et al. 2010). The homophily coefficient measures how nodes who share the same characteristics tend to connect to each other. The homophily coefficient is positive if similar nodes (based on some external property) tend to connect to each other, and negative otherwise. The coefficient is measured on a scale from -1 (perfectly heterophile network) to 1 (perfectly homophile network). The homophily coefficient of these graphs was computed based on party affiliation. The degree of a node corresponds to the number of edges of each node. In each of these graphs, the size of the nodes has been weighted according to its ‘out-degree’ coefficient. This means that bigger nodes correspond to MPs who have asked more questions. The color of each node corresponds to the governmental status of the MP or minister. MPs from governmental parties have been represented in red, while opposition parties have been represented in green.¹³ The control variable, gender, was added to the models to contrast the effect of party coalition affiliation and gender.

Who asks whom?

A first general observation is that, at an aggregate level, if one considers the absolute number of questions asked in each parliamentary assembly, there have been more questions asked by the

opposition than by the majority. These absolute differences do not allow us to infer the activity degree of MPs on these issues as they do not take into account the divergent numbers of MPs in each parliamentary assembly. At the federal level, there are 150 MPs, of which 61 French-speaking and 89 Flemish-speaking, and during the period under study, 85 MPs from the majority and 65 from the opposition. At the Walloon level, there are 75 seats, of which 43 were held by majority parties from 2014 to 2017 (38 after 2017) and 32 were held by MPs from the opposition. At the Flemish level, there are 124 seats, of which 89 were held by the majority and 35 by the opposition. If one uses a relative measure of parliamentary questions that consider the average number of questions asked by MPs of the majority or of the opposition, different average degrees of activity on Brexit are observable. On average, they were around 0.38 questions on Brexit asked by opposition MP in Wallonia, 0.6 in Flanders and 1.01 at the federal level compared to 0.58 questions asked by majority MP in Wallonia, 0.75 in Flanders and 0.95 at the federal level. Let's also note that, overall, in each of these assemblies, the number of parliamentary questions specifically dedicated to Brexit represents less than 1% of all the parliamentary questions asked during this period.

This descriptive analysis already provides some information on the way majority MPs behave. However, as mentioned in the theoretical framework, even within a majority coalition, divergences may appear between parties and MPs. SNA is a useful tool to get a more fine-grained picture of these differences.

First, as can be observed in the graphs of [Figure 2](#), in each region, a few MPs have been more active on Brexit than others. As already evidenced in [Table 1](#), [Figure 2](#) visually confirms the dominance of the coalition parties in asking parliamentary questions. [Table 2](#) provides some additional descriptive statistics about the structure of the different parliamentary networks. The densities of these networks are relatively low. This is due to the fact that these are directed networks where the different nodes (MPs) are connected only to a couple of other nodes (Ministers). The average weighted degree is higher at the Federal level and in Flanders than in Wallonia. This means that, at the Federal and at the Flemish levels, some particular individual MPs have, on average, been more active in asking questions on Brexit. Finally, the measure of homophily also allows to partially test hypothesis 1B. Party homophily is negative at all levels. This means that MPs from cabinet parties have been more active in asking questions to minister coming from a different party than their own.¹⁴ To further explore these relationships between coalition partners, a principal component analysis of MPs' targeted questions was performed (see tables A-B-C-D in annexes). This additional analysis reveals that in Flanders and at the federal level, main governmental parties have been particularly active in asking questions to their ministers.¹⁵

In order to complete this analysis, it is also useful to look at the individual characteristics of these MPs at these different levels. In each of these parliaments, there are different commissions who prepare the legislative work. At the federal level, MPs who have been the most active in asking parliamentary questions (Crusnière, Flahaux, Jadin, Luykx, Van Peteghem, De Vriendt) are all members of the Foreign Affairs Committee. In Flanders, most active MPs on Brexit (Vanlouwe, Van Overmeire, Turan and Hendrickx) also belong to the parliamentary Committee on Foreign and European Affairs. By contrast, in Wallonia, quite surprisingly, few of the active MPs are members of the committee on European Affairs (Lambelin and Simonet) or of the committee on Foreign Affairs (Dock and Prevot).

Who asks what?

Networks of parliamentary questions do not necessarily need to be conceived as networks of interrelations between MPs and ministers but may also be conceived as a network of interrelations between MPs and specific topics. This completely changes the perspective on the same phenomenon. In each of these graphs, the size of the nodes has been weighted according to its 'in-degree' coefficient. This means that bigger nodes correspond to the topics that MPs have asked about the most.



Figure 2. Social network of parliamentary questions. Majority vs opposition.

Table 1. Descriptive frequency of parliamentary questions (majority vs opposition).

Status	Federal	Flanders	Wallonia
Opposition	66	21	12
Frequency	0.45	0.24	0.32
Majority	80	67	25
Frequency	0.55	0.76	0.68
Total	146	88	37

Table 2. Descriptive network statistics.

	Density	Average weighted degree	Party homophily (nominal)
Federal level	0.046	2.561	-0.062
Flanders	0.054	2.146	-0.020
Wallonia	0.057	1.423	-0.097

As can be observed in Figure 3 and Table 3, at the federal level, the density and the average weighted degree of the network are the highest. This means that, at this level, many MPs have asked questions about more than one issue but have tended to focus on one dominant general issue concerning general information about the Brexit process. Overall, there is a low level of specialization among MPs. At the

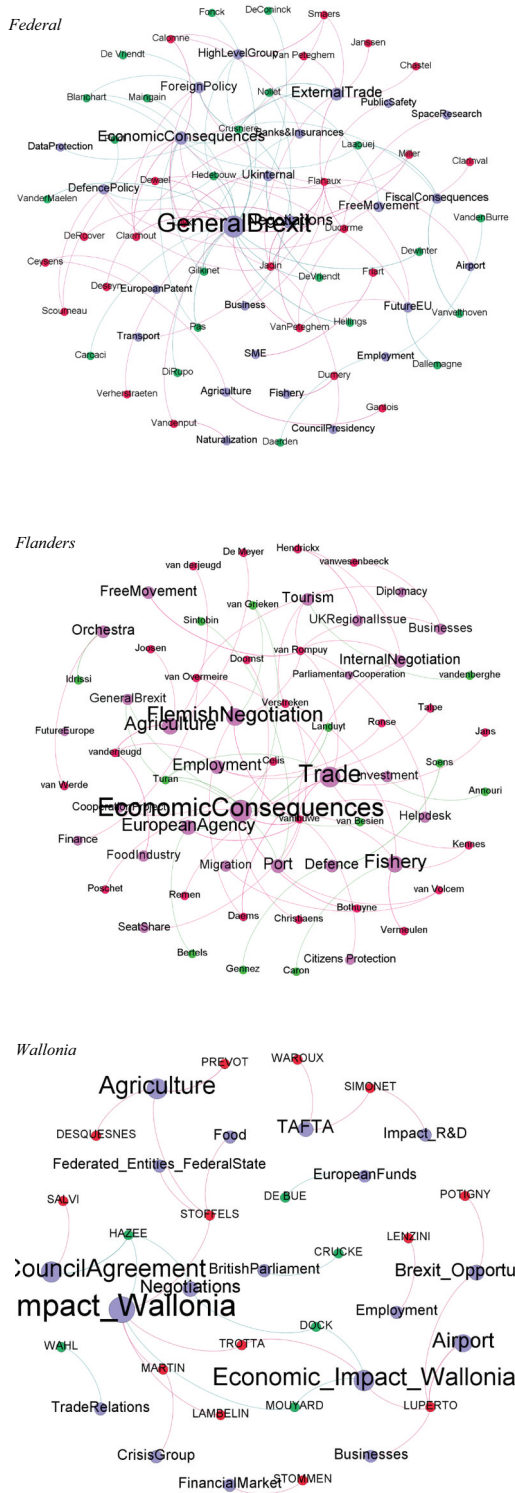


Figure 3. SNA parliamentary questions by topic. Majority vs opposition.

Table 3. Descriptive network statistics.

	Density	Average weighted degree
Federal level	0.030	2.086
Flanders	0.022	1.349
Wallonia	0.028	1

Flemish-level, the density of the network is the lowest but the average weighted degree is higher than in Wallonia. This means that MPs have tended to specialize more on certain issues than in Wallonia or at the Federal level. Finally, in Wallonia, the density of the network appears a little bit lower than at the Federal level but the average weighted degree is much lower. This also tends to indicate that MPs have tended to specialize on one issue. Overall, these observations tend to confirm hypotheses 3 and 4, stating that MPs from regional assemblies would tend to specialize on more specific issues and that MPs from the region most affected by Brexit would tend to ask questions on more numerous topics.

Loglinear analysis

In order to test the different hypotheses more precisely, a loglinear analysis was performed. This type of analysis is particularly adequate when studying relationships between categorical variables as it is the case here. Log-linear models are a special case of generalized linear model for multivariate cross-classified categorical data (Nelder 1974). They can be conceived as an extension of chi-square tests on two-way contingency tables (Allen 2017) ‘where the conditional relationship between variables is analyzed by taking the natural logarithm of the cell frequencies’ (Antonisamy, Premkumar, and Christopher 2017, 290). Log-linear modeling is used to identify ‘the main effects or interactions that are needed to describe the joint distribution in the cross-classification’ (Von Eye and Mun 2013, xi). The general idea behind these types of models is to consider contingency tables as special cases of Poisson regression where the counted occurrences of the different associations between categorical variables are the dependent variables and each dimension of the table is a categorical predictor. To ease the interpretation of this model, the different categories of topics were reduced to four main categories: General questions on Brexit, questions on Trade & Economic Consequences, questions on Negotiation Strategy and questions on Specific issues. The reference level chosen for the analysis was Opposition parties asking general questions over Brexit. The results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Loglinear models (governmental participation and topic of parliamentary questions).

	Federal	Flanders	Wallonia
Majority	−0.611** (0.285)	0.000 (1.000)	0.182 (0.606)
Topic « Negotiations »	−2.862*** (0.727)	−0.693 (1.225)	−0.916 (0.837)
Topic « Specific »	−0.611** (0.285)	1.872** (0.760)	−0.916 (0.837)
Topic « Trade&Eco »	−1.253*** (0.359)	0.916 (0.837)	−0.511 (0.730)
Majority: « Negotiations »	2.403*** (0.815)	2.197 (1.453)	−0.875 (1.366)
Majority: « Specific »	1.163*** (0.405)	1.073 (1.050)	1.609* (0.975)
Majority: « Trade&Eco »	1.081** (0.494)	1.281 (1.121)	0.511 (0.931)
Constant	3.555*** (0.169)	0.693 (0.707)	1.609*** (0.447)
Log likelihood	−18.024	−14.697	−12.676
Akaike Inf. Crit.	52.048	45.395	41.351

* $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

First, at the federal level, the coefficient for MPs from governmental parties is negative and significant. This means that compared to the reference level (opposition parties), MPs from governmental parties have asked (significantly) fewer general questions. As a matter of fact, the negative coefficients for the different categories of question topics are negative when compared to the reference level. This further confirms the idea of a lower specialization in the type of questions asked by opposition parties. Interaction effects between MPs from governmental parties and the different types of topics at the federal level indicate how the effects of these different topics change for majority parties as compared to opposition parties. Majority parties have been much more active on specific issues, while opposition parties have been much less active asking questions on specific topics. This tends to confirm hypothesis 2 and Senninger's (2017) idea that opposition parties mainly use parliamentary questions as a tool to gain (general) information on the European Union. Interestingly, the degree of specialization differs across the parliamentary assemblies. In Flanders, parliamentary questions have been significantly more specific even when asked by opposition parties. This observation tends to confirm hypothesis 4 of a greater specialization at the regional level. However, in Wallonia, only MPs from governmental parties seem to have asked more specific questions.

Conclusion

Research on parliamentary questions is quite recent (Martin 2011) but it provides a heuristic tool to assess the evolution of parliaments' scrutinizing power. In recent years, the role of national parliaments in overseeing EU policies has been at the heart of theoretic debates around the democratic legitimacy of the EU (Auel, Rozenberg, and Tacea 2015). And given the increasing role of national and regional parliaments in EU affairs, as evidenced recently by the CETA ratification, it is crucial to understand the domestic parliamentary debates on Brexit outside the UK. Indeed, Brexit is not only a priority on the European agenda at the moment, but it also gives insights into the domestic debates surrounding the future of the EU and the management of EU crises by national parliaments and parties.

Relying on the literature on parliamentary questions as a scrutiny tool, this article explored Belgian parliamentary debates on Brexit at three different levels: the Federal one, Flanders and Wallonia. Based on a meso-level analysis, we looked at the extent to which MPs and parties discussed Brexit and how they did so. Indeed, a unique dataset of parliamentary questions on Brexit raised in the different Belgian parliamentary assemblies since Cameron's Bloomberg Speech in January 2013 allowed us to investigate how party-related variables influence MPs' behavior on Brexit. Relying on Social Network Analysis and Loglinear modeling, it shows that, contrary to general expectations in the literature, opposition parties have not been very active in asking parliamentary questions on Brexit. Actually, in all the parliamentary assemblies considered, MPs from governmental parties have generally been the most active on Brexit. This is rather surprising given the potential detrimental consequences of Brexit for the Belgian economy. This lack of involvement from opposition parties could be due to a relatively low salience of Brexit (and European politics) in Belgian political debates (the number of questions on Brexit was particularly low when compared to the overall number of parliamentary questions). It could also be due to the nature of the Brexit debates, with the almost exclusive involvement of the executive power during the negotiation phase or to the timeframe selected for this research (2013–2017). Further research and especially a comparative analysis of the debates on several European crises would allow to test whether the Brexit debates are, contrarily to our assumption, a unique and exceptional event, explaining the lack of involvement of opposition parties compared to governmental parties.

Overall, the low salience of Brexit reflects the idea of a low politicization of EU issues within national and regional assemblies (Sciarini et al. 2019). Although they are supposed to play an increasing role and pay more attention to EU issues, it seems that even a crisis such as Brexit is not enough to trigger a strong politicization of European integration in Belgium. More research

would in any case be needed to further investigate the Europeanization of regional assemblies and the politicization of European affairs at the regional level.

Nevertheless, differences exist between parties and regions. Not all the parties from the governing coalitions have been as active on the issue. Besides, there are signs of greater specialization and more technical discussions at the regional levels than at the federal one. This confirms the idea suggested by Högenauer (2015) that regional assemblies tend to specialize more on technical and subnational issues. In fact, the different issues emphasized at different levels seem to depend on the formal distribution of competences (agriculture, fishery), and the main regional infrastructures (ports and airports). Moreover, it seems that the differentiated impact of Brexit on the Belgian regions has had an impact on the salience of the issue in parliamentary debates. As Flanders is expected to face a greater impact of Brexit, Flemish MPs, from the governmental coalitions and the opposition asked questions on more numerous topics and their questions were more specialized.

Although the research focuses on the Belgian case, it has the potential to question the effect of party-related factors in a broader context. Future research could also examine the relative impact of micro-, meso- and macro-level elements in shaping legislators' behavior in EU affairs. A comparative analysis would then be better suited to analyze whether MPs' actions are better explained by their strategy to increase their visibility and build a personal reputation or by their party affiliation or also by institutional factors such as the electoral system.

More generally, national (and regional) parliaments are no longer satisfied with rubber-stamping in EU affairs and want to play a role in key issues such as important trade deals. As Brexit and debates on the future of the EU are likely to remain on the agenda for years to come, it is crucial to analyze parliamentary debates and the role of national parliaments in EU affairs, through various case-studies as well as comparative analysis.

Notes

1. For an exception, see the project "Negotiating Brexit: national governments, EU institutions and the UK", <http://ukandeu.ac.uk/brexitresearch/negotiating-brexit-national-governments-eu-institutions-and-the-uk/>.
2. And this strategy seems to work as shown by Bouteca and his colleagues: Bouteca et al. (2019), 'A Fair Day's wage for a Fair Day's work? Exploring the connection between the parliamentary work of MPs and their electoral support', *Journal of Legislative Studies*, 25(1), 44–65.
3. Based on data from PartiRep, we have computed a degree of polarization of 0.24 according to van der Eijck's polarization measure for ordered rating scale. On the project, see https://cevipol.centresphisoc.ulb.be/sites/default/files/centre_cevipol/uploads/project_partirep.pdf.
4. Source: PartiRep (2012) Partirep Comparative MP Survey 2012. *Data file*. Brussels/Leuven/Antwerp: PartiRep. This database comprises an individual attitudinal survey carried out among national and regional legislators in 15 European democracies. Data reported here correspond to a weighted average of Belgian federal and regional MP's positions by party.
5. Magnette cited in Stroobants, J-P., « Après le Brexit, le Wallon Paul Magnette prône la sortie de l'Union pour certains pays de l'Est », in *Le Monde*, 05/02/2017.
6. This idea was proposed during a speech in Göttingen by G. Bourgeois, Minister President of Flanders at the time and has been discussed in the media in Belgium and abroad. See a. o. Evans-Pritchard, A., « Belgium offers olive branch on Brexit, calls for North Sea Union », in *The Telegraph*, 23/08/2016; RTBF, "Brexit: le ministre-président flamand Geert Bourgeois en appelle à une Union de la Mer du Nord", 22/08/16; De Morgen, "Minister-president Geert Bourgeois pleit voor Unie van de Noordzee", 22/8/16; De Standaard, "N-VA goes international (en Bourgeois ook)", 24/08/16.
7. All parliamentary questions dealing with Brexit were considered.
8. Our research project covers a 5 year period, from the speech of Cameron in January 2013 to the Florence speech of May at the end of September 2017 and the fourth round of negotiations.
9. At federal level, the analysis focused on the Chamber of Representatives as they were only two parliamentary questions on Brexit in the Senate during the period under study.
10. Additionally, in the annexes, graphical representation of questions such as "Who asks how?" And "When do they ask?" have been included in the annexes. For the "How-question": a difference was made between oral questions and written questions as these instruments reveal a different degree of visibility and politicization.

For the "when-question": the period under study was divided in three main periods: Period 1. Background:

From David Cameron's Bloomberg speech (23 January 2013) to the UK referendum on the UK's EU membership (23 June 2016); Period 2: Preparations: From the UK's EU referendum (23 June 2016) until the UK's triggering of Article 50 (29 March 2017); Period 3: Negotiations: From the UK's triggering of Article 50 (29 March 2017) until October 2017.

11. At federal level, 25 categories were identified (GeneralBrexit, FutureEU, ExternalTrade, EconomicConsequences, Employment, Negotiations, Fishery, FreeMovement, FiscalConsequences, Agriculture, HighLevelGroup, Airport, Banks&Insurances, Ukinternal, PublicSafety, EuropeanPatent, Business, ForeignPolicy, DefencePolicy, DataProtection, SME, SpaceResearch, Transport, Naturalization, CouncilPresidency), at Flemish level, 27 categories were identified (Citizens Protection, Defence, EconomicConsequences, Businesses, Employment, SeatShare, Trade, Finance, Port, EuropeanAgency, Fishery, Tourism, FreeMovement, InternalNegotiation, Helpdesk, CooperationProject, Agriculture, FoodIndustry, Flemish Negotiation, Parliamentary Cooperation, Diplomacy, UKRegionalIssue, Future of Europe, Orchestra, Investment, GeneralBrexit, Migration) and at Walloon level, 18 categories were identified (Impact_Wallonia, Economic_Impact_Wallonia, Impact_R&D, Agriculture, Brexit_Opportunities, EuropeanFunds, Negotiations, Businesses, BritishParliament, TradeRelations, Airport, TAFTA, Food, Federated_Entities_FederalState, Employment, CrisisGroup, FinancialMarket, EuropeanCouncilAgreement).
12. In this section, we have considered both oral and written questions.
13. For comparative purposes, the Fruchtermann Reingold Algorithm was applied to each network.
14. In previous analyses, we had also used the gender variable as a control variable of the homophily measure.
15. In Flanders, 35% of the questions asked to N-VA ministers came from N-VA MPs and 16% of the questions asked to CD&V ministers were asked by CD&V MPs. At the federal level, these proportions were a little bit lower, 23% of the questions asked to MR Ministers were coming from MR MPs and 16% of the questions asked to CD&V ministers were asked by CD&V MPs. In Wallonia, PS MPs have been active asking questions to PS Ministers (around 40% of the questions asked to PS Ministers) but CDH MPs have not asked any question to CDH Ministers. Actually, CDH MPs (as MPs from the opposition) targeted all their questions towards PS Ministers.

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