

The Nature of Legislative Representation in Canada, Part 1 *

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Abstract: Oral questions are a central feature of the Canadian Parliamentary system. Here, we consider parties' behaviour in Question Period, with a particular interest in Opposition parties' representation of the public's (and publics') issue priorities. We do so using a content analytic database of questions covering three Parliaments from 1988-1999. This is the first analysis of these data, so we begin with some descriptive analyses of the distribution of oral questions across issues and parties. We then consider the nature of policy change, through an examination of Downs' issue attention cycle and Baumgartner and Jones' punctuated equilibrium model. Finally, we begin to explore what drives parties' attention to issues. Combining the oral questions database with public opinion data, we examine the relationship between parties issue priorities and the issue priorities of their partisans.

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Question Period is the most visible part of the Canadian Parliamentary process. Indeed, for most Canadians, Question Period *is* Parliament. It provides a summary indication of those issues most salient to Canadian elected officials; it is a primary venue for ‘position taking’ on the part of Government and Opposition members alike; it is a central means by which the executive is kept in check by Parliament; and, last but certainly not least, it plays a starring role in nightly newscasts.

In spite of its promotional and institutional centrality to parliamentary federal politics, political scientists know relatively little about oral questions, in the Canadian House of Commons or elsewhere. Statements about the significance of the proceedings are not hard to find. Empirical support for those statements, in contrast, is relatively scarce. Where Question Period is concerned, current hypotheses are based on a combination of substance and supposition.

Consider some fundamental – and largely unanswered – questions: Who tends to ask questions, and what do these questions tend to be about? Do most issues find their way into Question Period, or does it tend to be biased towards particular problems and controversies? How has Question Period content changed since the proceedings became televised? Is Question Period a valuable venue for “position taking” (Mayhew 1974) by Members of Parliament? Are oral questions an effective means by which Parliament oversees the executive? Is a free-wheeling Question Period, not requiring early submission of questions, a valuable feature in a parliamentary democracy? And these are just the institutional questions; consider a second set of more general questions about policy dynamics and the general functioning of the policy process: How has attentiveness to different policy issues, and the ways in which these issues are defined, changed over time? To what extent is Question Period content – and subsequent policymaking – driven by actors outside the policy process, such as the media, interest groups, or public opinion? Is Question Period content systematically linked to subsequent policymaking decisions?

We can’t address all of this here, of course, but we do what we can. We describe the rich (and evolving) data on which our analyses are based, and use simple descriptives – means and alphas – to explore the course of Canadian parliamentary politics from 1988 to 2000. We illustrate some of the shifts in policymakers’ issue attentiveness from the 34th through 36th Parliaments, and then turn our attention towards describing and explaining those shifts. We examine the nature of changes in attentiveness, and ask, Do they demonstrate the combination of incrementalism and large punctuations that Baumgartner and Jones’ (1993) ‘punctuated equilibrium’ model proposes? Do they show large upward changes in attentiveness, but only small downward changes, as Down’s (1972) ‘issue attention cycle’ implies? Both

theories are evidenced here. That changes exist in the form we might expect is just a beginning, however. Subsequent sections thus begin an analysis of what exactly generates these changes in attentiveness. We begin with an expository comparison of public and Question Period attentiveness to macroeconomics. We then consider the representation of partisan constituencies in Question Period. Question Period is not just about holding the Government accountable, we suggest – it also provides one of the very few venues in which Opposition parties may have a representational role. We find some preliminary evidence of this representation below. First, however, we introduce Question Period.

Question Period

The evolution of Question Period in the House is certainly not suggestive of the role these 40 minutes would come to play in the Canadian political process, as the public face of Parliament if not also an important part of the policy process. The practice of asking oral questions developed only haphazardly, amidst some effort to curb it, and was not officially codified until 1964 (*Journals*, April 20, 1964, p. 225). At Confederation, only written questions were recognized, and – as in the British Parliament – there was a required 2-day notice for any question to appear on the Order Paper (under ‘Questions put by Members’; Dawson 1962: 147). On November 29th 1867, only three weeks after the House first met, a Member asked a question to the Chair of the printing Committee before the Orders of the Day were called (*Debates*, November 29 1867, p.157). Question Period continues at the same point in the House’s daily schedule to this day.¹

That said, the rise of Question Period met with no small degree of acrimony from parliamentarians, particularly Speakers of the House, who have the unfortunate responsibility of managing House business. Speakers have repeatedly expressed concern about the free-for-all dynamic that oral questions often exemplify, and there have been many efforts to limit what can be asked, and to clarify that in fact questions need not be answered (see, e.g. comments by Speaker Anglin, *Debates*, March 20 1878, p.1269; by Speaker Glen, *Journals*, March 3 1944, p.151; by Speaker MacDonald, *Journals*, May 29 1951, p.427; by Speaker Michener, *Journals*, February 26 1959, p.172). Even so, Question Period has evolved into a remarkably unfettered environment in which Opposition parties can ask Government members almost anything, and answers are almost always provided, or at least attempted.² Indeed, though modeled after

¹ Question Period currently runs for 40 minutes, extended to this length in 1968 (*Journals*, December 20th, 1968, p. 568). The length of time, and the number of days on which oral questions could be asked, had been extended gradually over the post-war era. See, e.g., *Journals*, January 21, 1966, p. 34; *Journals*, 11 June, 1965, 226).

² There are of course some limitations on what Ministers can be asked. For a more thorough account of Question Period rules, see Marleau and Montpetit (2000: Ch.11).

oral questions in the British House of Commons, Canadian Question Period has evolved into a relatively unique parliamentary phenomenon.³ Canada is one of the very few advanced democracies in which Ministers can be asked almost anything, without warning, every day.⁴

All of this may be true – whether it is a good thing is another matter entirely. Oral questions in the Canadian House of Commons can catch governments off-guard, elicit often unprepared – and perhaps more truthful or more damaging – responses, or be driven by morning media headlines.⁵ This may lead to better accountability, and better governance; it may just as easily waste 40 minutes of every day pandering to news outlets and short-term hot-button politics. Before we even start to measure Question Period content, we should consider whether what happens in Question Period actually matters.

Existing work suggests potentially important institutional functions, at least. Franks' (1987) work is certainly the most prominent study of Canadian parliamentary institutions to date; Docherty's (1997) groundbreaking research sheds light on the individuals that operate within those institutions. Both authors point towards the importance of Question Period as (1) a means of ensuring that the Government is held accountable to Parliament, (2) an opportunity for the Opposition to both criticize Government policies and suggest alternatives, and (3) a chance for backbench MPs to gain both experience and publicity.⁶

³ On the difference between Canadian and British rules, see comments by Speaker Beaudoin (*Journals*, March 16 1956, 302-4). Previous to the codification of Question Period rules in 1964, he notes that often the questions that are asked should be out of order according to Canadian rules, and that they are “sanctioned solely by custom and usage and probably would be disallowed if attempted in Westminster.” Indeed, “in the United Kingdom there is no such thing as a question without notice.”

⁴ To our knowledge, Australia and Sweden have spontaneous question periods, though in Sweden it is only on Thursdays and receives little in terms of media attention (Miles 1997). In most other parliaments, oral questions – either in their entirety or at least the topic – are written and submitted in advance to either the Government or the Speaker (Wiberg 1995). A typical continental European Question Period is nothing like its Canadian counterpart – it is dominated by pre-written, purely informational and un-contentious questions, coming from both Government and other representatives. Note that we are considering only central governments here – we cannot comment on the rules in sub-national governments.

⁵ Initially, oral questions were not allowed to address media reports, but this changed over the past few decades. Consider a particularly striking example of a media-driven question, asked by MP Jim Fulton on March 10 1992: “Mr. Speaker, my question is for the Secretary of State for External Affairs. KRBD-FM radio station from Ketchikan has publicly broadcast a notice to mariners during the past hour that a Los Angeles nuclear attack submarine is about to enter Alaskan waters from Dixon Entrance, sovereign internal Canadian waters. Would the minister explain why Canadian officials have known about the presence of the nuclear American submarine inside Canada since Sunday and have made no effort whatsoever to notify Canadian mariners?” (*Debates*).

⁶ Outside of Canada, Chester and Bowring (1962) offer a particularly valuable qualitative description of oral questions in the UK. See also Franklin and Norton (1993).

Empirical work on oral questions in the Canadian parliamentary system further suggests the substantive significance of these questions. In Canada, Crimmins and Nesbitt-Larking (1996) examine the Prime Minister's involvement in Question Period, while Tremblay (1998) studies female representatives' participation. Both suggest the importance of Question Period as a political arena. In addition, Howlett (1997,1998) and Soroka (2002a,2002b) examine trends in the salience of issues in Question Period, and find that Question Period content is often systematically related to media content and public opinion. These relationships suggest that, though they often seem chaotic and discordant, arbitrary and impetuous, even attention-seeking and ridiculous, oral questions contain relevant information about representatives' political and legislative priorities.

So it does look as though oral questions are important, practically speaking; a fact buttressed by our own analyses below. Several caveats and clarifications are in order, however. First, oral questions are not actual policy. They do not reliably indicate the direction of policy (i.e., more or less); indeed, they aren't even a measure of the Government's legislative priorities. The vast majority of oral questions are asked by Opposition parties, so the extent to which these questions reflect Government priorities is a function of whether Opposition parties decide to ask questions on those issues. In many cases, they do – we believe that often the general Parliamentary agenda is quite reasonably captured by Question Period content. It need not be, however, and we should keep in mind that what we are exploring here are Opposition parties' issue priorities, and only indirectly the priorities of the Government itself. (The Government's policy priorities are better captured by policy measures – legislation, or government spending, for instance. For a discussion of government spending as a policy measure, see Wlezien and Soroka 2003; for examinations of policy measures in Canada, see , e.g., Petry 1999; Petry and Mendelsohn 2004; Petry and Belanger N.d.; Soroka 2002a, 2002b; Soroka and Wlezien 2005).

Indeed, oral questions are not just one but two steps removed from public policy. While policy outcomes such as spending have relatively clear and substantive implications, oral questions have only an indirect and perhaps tenuous link with policy. That is, oral questions likely reflect an agenda that is more symbol than substance.⁷ This need not be regarded as a disadvantage – much of politics is symbolic politics (see, e.g., Edelman 1964, 1985), and oral questions may provide quite a valuable indication of this aspect of the policymaking process. And of course, there is also no reason to believe that symbolic politics will not be associated with more substantive policymaking.

⁷ For a discussion of symbolic versus substantive agendas, see Pritchard and Berkowitz (1993:86). Cobb and Elder (1972:14) also distinguish between “systemic” and “institutional” agendas.

These caveats are important background to our discussion of ‘legislative representation’ in Parliament. Note that when we speak of representation here, we are talking about the representation of issue priorities rather than directional policy preferences. The appropriate allocation of attentiveness across issues is a critical component of representation, however. A growing body of work on policy agenda-setting certainly emphasizes the significance of attentiveness, or issue salience, to the policy process (see, e.g., Cobb and Elder 1972; Kingdon 1995; Baumgartner and Jones 1993, 2002; Jones 1994). Moreover, in the Canadian system where only the (typically majority) Government can introduce legislation in which money is spent (‘money bills’), the allocation of attentiveness across issues may be the only way in which Opposition parties can serve any representational role whatsoever.

In sum, our focus here is on attentiveness to issues in Question Period, first as indication of representatives’ – particularly Opposition representatives’ – issue priorities. We are interested in what these issue priorities are, whether they change over time, and the nature of that change over time. And finally, we are interested in what drives that change: Are oral questions systematically related to public issue priorities? Do oral questions reflect any kind of representation on the part of MPs? We address each of these in turn below.

The Data: Dataset Design, and General Trends

We explore these questions below using a content analytic database of *all* oral questions asked in the House of Commons from December 1988 (the opening of the second Mulroney Government) to December 1999 (the middle of the second Chretien government). The database is currently being extended back to the 1970s; in the meantime, we rely on this 11-year period alone. Still, this database includes about 19,000 oral questions, spanning three Parliaments.

Questions were coded over two years by a team of seven coders. Issue codes were drawn from the US *Policy Agendas* project, though several codes were adjusted to reflect Canadian rather than US policies (e.g., Canada Pension Plan), and several others had to be added to accommodate quite different Canadian political issues (e.g., National Unity). To each question was attributed one of 25 major topic codes, and one of about 90 minor topic codes. For instance, the following question,

Mr. Speaker, my question is for the Deputy Prime Minister. It concerns the attempt by the Liberal government to push through a package of cuts to the Canada pension plan benefits, including cuts to people with disabilities, by early October. Will the Deputy Prime Minister listen to New Democrats, including the governments of British Columbia and Saskatchewan, who are calling on Liberals to back off, take the time to consult seriously, study more

carefully the impact of their regressive proposals and look at progressive changes to the CPP instead of hitting the most vulnerable beneficiaries of the system?⁸

was coded major topic 5 for Employment and Immigration, and subtopic 507 for Canada Pension Plan. Of course, not all questions are this straightforward, but coder training and regular meetings mean inter-coder reliability is above 95% for major topics, and above 90% for subtopics. A list of major topic codes is included in Table 1; US subtopic codes are available via the Policy Agendas Project website at the University of Washington.⁹

Questions (and answers) differ in length a great deal, and our goal was to capture the amount of time dedicated to each issue. Accordingly, every question was measured in column centimeters; each month, we know the number of column centimeters dedicated to a given issue. The House sits a different number of days each month, however, so in order to create a measure unaffected by the differing number of Question Periods total column centimeters are divided by the number of days sat each month. The measure, then, is the average number of column cms dedicated to each issue, each month. Our work here is based on proportional measures, however – the number of columns cms on a given topic each month, as a proportion of all column cms each month, either for the entire Parliament, or for individual parties.

[Table 1 about here]

Table 1 shows some basic descriptive statistics from the Question Period (QP) database. Note that both the question and answer are attributed to the party that asked the question – the measure consequently reflects the proportion of monthly Question Periods that a party ‘steered’ toward a given issue.

The table shows mean monthly values for each major issue, along with standard deviations and maximums, for each party and for all parties combined. The values are proportions – proportions of the total agenda, that is – so that .137 in the first cell indicates that the average monthly percentage of QP discussion (for all parties combined) dedicated to macroeconomic issues was 13.7%. The macroeconomic major topic code includes subtopics debt and taxes; these are listed separately below along with the remaining ‘other’ category, made up largely of material on unemployment and inflation.

The first column indicates the mean salience of issues for Parliament over the time period, with the top five topics in bold. Government Operations is the most attended-to issue – this category includes questions on government accountability, which accounts for its salience in an Opposition-driven Question

⁸ Svend Robinson, *Debates*, Ottawa: Supply and Service, 23 September 1996.

⁹ The Policy Agendas Project (www.policagendas.org), Center for American Politics and Public Policy, University of Washington. Bryan Jones, John Wilkerson and Frank Baumgartner, Directors.

Period. Labour, Employment and Immigration is the second most attended-to issue, driven mainly by Employment Insurance (EI) complaints, but also by immigration issues. That Defence makes the top five is a function of a very few, very high values, during the first Gulf War and then interventions in Kosovo and Somalia; the high variance over the time period is of course reflected in the high standard deviation. Constitutional Issues and Taxes are the other two big issues over the period, given the significance of the 1987-90 Meech Lake and 1992 Charlottetown Accords, the 1995 Quebec Referendum, and the new Goods and Services Tax (GST) in the late 1980s.

[Figure 1 about here]

Trends in the last three issues are illustrated in Figure 1. The figure provides a better sense for what the data look like, though we clearly cannot show graphs for every issue. Each graph includes the unadjusted monthly series (dotted line), along with a lowess-smoothed trend line (bandwidth=.3). Healthcare is also included here, just to provide an illustration of trends in another issue. This is one of the most salient issues currently, and its rise on the parliamentary agenda can already be seen in the mid- to late-1990s.

These are some general trends in the Parliamentary agenda, but the data in Table 1 also point to differences in issue attentiveness across parties. Mean values confirm some well-known trends: the NDP is particularly attentive to healthcare, and the Reform Party is particularly attentive to Law and Crime, for instance. Alphas (or Cronbach's α) in the final column indicate the extent to which party agendas move together over time.¹⁰ Two alphas are shown – one for the 1988-1993 period, based on the Liberal and NDP agendas, and the other for the post-1993 period, based on all parties except the Liberals. Reform and the BQ aren't included before the first election in which they participated, then, and the party in Government is never included.

A combination of alphas and means can actually be quite telling. Take Law and Crime, for example: Reform clearly spends more time on this issue than other parties, but the high alpha suggests that the party agendas do nevertheless move together. That is, the salience of Law and Crime issues for all parties is roughly parallel over time, though Reform attentiveness is consistently higher than other parties. The same is true of the BQ on National Unity issues. Mean values shows the BQ to be more attentive to this

¹⁰ Alpha measures the internal consistency of several variables. Essentially, it is a summary measure of the bivariate correlations amongst each pair of variables (in this case, each parties' attentiveness to a given issue: $\alpha = \frac{N(\bar{r})}{1 + (N-1)(\bar{r})}$, where N is the number of variables and \bar{r} is average correlation coefficient. For more information, see Cronbach (1961).

issue than other parties; at the same time, a high alpha – at least pre-1993 – shows that party agendas did rise and fall together over time.

[Figure 2 about here]

Figure 2 shows lowess-smoothed trends in parties' attentiveness to National Unity and Health. Again, these issues are just examples, showing an NDP focus on Health and BQ focus on National Unity. The other parties' agendas seem to rise and fall at roughly the same times, however – foreshadowing results in our final section on representation.

Note that oral questions are allocated to parties based on the number of members a party has in Parliament. This means that there are several parties during this period with a much more finite agenda, and therefore much larger jumps in attentiveness to any one issue. The PCs are reduced to only 2 seats in the 1993 election, for instance, which is why PC attentiveness to healthcare (and many other issues) is completely flat during this period. This party can only manage attentiveness to a few issues at a time; or at least, the extent to which their attentiveness to multiple issues can be reflected in oral questions is quite limited. The same is true for the single-member Reform Party in the years preceding the 1993 election, though for reasons we cannot readily explain the Reform MP Deborah Grey seems to have been remarkably efficient at allocating her questions across issues – certainly, she allocated questions in a much more issue-diverse way than did the two-member PC party in the subsequent Parliament.

This is a general outline of the data upon which subsequent analyses are based. Thus far, however, we have done nothing more than flag some general trends – a preliminary check on the data, and an illustration of some the shifts underlying forthcoming analyses. Now, we use these data to test theories of policy change.

The Nature of Shifts in Attentiveness

Work on issue attentiveness in public policymaking has generated two particularly prominent theories of the nature of agenda change. First, Downs argues that attentiveness to most issues rises and falls over time in a particular way: changes in issue salience are typically characterized by (1) rapid increases in attention, and then (2) gradually declining interest. The striking rapid-ness of increases in attention is buttressed by subsequent work on sensational or “focusing” events (e.g., Birkland 2002; Kingdon 1995). A single prominent event can lead to a very sudden shift in attentiveness; this attentiveness then slowly dissipates over time. The Downsian *issue attention cycle* is illustrated in Figure 4.

[Figure 4 about here]

Large shifts in attentiveness play a similarly central role in Baumgartner and Jones' (1993) *punctuated equilibrium* model of policy change. Policy will tend to move incrementally most of the time, due to a combination of institutional constraints and the bounded rationality of individual decision-making. (For more complete discussions of the incrementalist model of policymaking, see Lindblom 1975; Wildavsky 1984; Jones and Baumgartner 1997.) These factors result in an institutional friction that maintains policy stasis. Punctuations in policy will occur, however, when an issue becomes particularly salient, for instance, or when the issue is re-framed and/or the policy community changes. This altered environment causes a frictional “break” where the response can be rapid and policy change considerable. Once the punctuation is exhausted, institutional friction stabilizes the policy environment, which now is maintained at a new equilibrium. The model thus accommodates the observation of both incrementalism and change in public policy. Policy should be characterized by a great number of small changes and a few very large changes – long periods of equilibrium, and brief but considerable punctuations. Figure 5 presents a caricature of the punctuated equilibrium model.

[Figure 5 about here]

Both the Downs and Baumgartner-Jones models suggest particular distributions of changes in attentiveness – that is, they suggest particular trends in a simple histogram of month-to-month changes in attentiveness to any number of issues. Downs' model suggests that there should be greater upward shifts in attentiveness, and smaller downward shifts. In his model, upward shifts are large, and downward shifts are gradual: changes in attentiveness should consequently exhibit a positive right-hand skew. The existence of punctuated equilibria, on the other hand, may be evidenced by a leptokurtotic distribution (Jones et al. 2003; John and Margetts 2003) – that is, a non-normal distribution with a particularly high central peak, weak shoulders, and long tails. The high central peak indicates typically incremental changes in attentiveness, while heavy tails denote rare but extreme attention shifts. Moderate changes should be conspicuously absent – there are only very small shifts (in prolonged periods of low attentiveness), or very large shifts (in brief periods of high attentiveness).

[Figure 6 about here]

Figure 6 shows a histogram of changes in total issue attentiveness from 1988 to 2000. Here, we combine all monthly changes in the Parliamentary agenda (all parties combined), for each of the 25 major topics. That is, monthly changes for every issue are combined into a single distribution; hence, an N of 2300. A normal curve is plotted over the distribution, and does show the distribution to have an abnormally high

central peak, relatively long tails, and an apparently small number of medium-sized changes. Indeed, the kurtosis measure (k) indicates strong leptokurtosis¹¹ – evidence that shifts in Parliamentary issue attentiveness do exhibit the kind of punctuated equilibria that Baumgartner and Jones predict. Monthly changes in issue attentiveness tend to be incremental, but are also marked with extreme shifts between issues.

Evidence of Downs’ hypothesis is not as clear. The distribution looks relatively symmetric; the test statistic for skewness is positive, however, confirming a mild right-hand skew.¹² So there is weak evidence here that upward shifts are greater than downward shifts, or at least that there are more upward shifts than downward shifts. Either provides some evidence that the shape of attentiveness over time is roughly as Downs describes. That said, the asymmetry is not overwhelming. Downs’ theory is directed toward public opinion about policy issues, and the public arena is likely different in several ways from the Question Period agenda. In particular, Question Period may be a more limited and consequently fickle arena, so decreases in interest tend to be less gradual than we might expect.

We do, however, have strong evidence that Question Period content reflects the same punctuated equilibria in attentiveness that has been identified in other policymaking systems. What exactly drives these changes is another matter, however. Representation of public issue priorities, along with real-world trends, is one likely source. We investigate this below.

Representation in Question Period

To what extent is issue attentiveness in Question Period driven by current public interests? Figure 7 offers an expository illustration: it shows the salience of macroeconomic issues (not including debt and taxes) in Question Period, alongside the unemployment rate and the salience of macroeconomic issue for the public. Public attentiveness is measured using the proportion of respondents citing macroeconomic issues in response to the question, “What do you think is the most important problem facing Canada today?” Survey data are quarterly, drawn from Environics surveys available at the Canadian Opinion

¹¹ The kurtosis test statistic is as follows: $\frac{\sum(Y_i - \bar{Y})^4}{(N - 1)s^4}$, where s is the standard deviation. A normal

distribution has a k -value of 3. Values over 3 indicate leptokurtosis; values below 3 indicate platykurtosis (many medium-sized shifts). For details on kurtosis and the k statistic, see Anscombe and Glynn (1983).

¹² The test statistic for skewness reflects a relatively simple comparison of positive versus negative values in the distribution: $\frac{\sum(Y_i - \bar{Y})^3}{(N - 1)s^3}$, where s is the standard deviation.

Research Archive at Queen's University. Since these data are available only quarterly, the figure shows quarterly means for the monthly unemployment and QP series.

[Figure 7 about here]

There are clearly relationships between the three series, and these are subjected to more formal analyses in Tables 2 and 3. Table 2 regresses current (time t) QP attentiveness to macroeconomic issues on the previous month's ($t-1$) attentiveness, changes in the unemployment rate, and the rate of inflation. Last month's change in the unemployment rate has a sizable and significant effect on current QP content: a 1-point increase in unemployment leads to an average 3.4-point increase in the percentage of questions dedicated to macroeconomics.

[Tables 2 and 3 about here]

Table 3 adds public opinion to the model. As opinion is only available quarterly, this is a quarterly model using the data in Figure 7. Using economic variables from the previous period is problematic in this case, however. In a monthly model, including unemployment at $t-1$ implies that last month's unemployment is affecting current discussion of macroeconomics; in a quarterly model, including unemployment at $t-1$ would imply that the average from January to March, for instance, is affecting discussion from April through June. This is too long a lag, so in this quarterly model we include independent variables concurrently, at t . We cannot really say that one thing is driving the other, then – we lose temporal precedence as our indication of causality. We can see if the series move concurrently, however, and for our purposes here that will suffice.

Indeed, the series do move concurrently. In the model without opinion the relationship between unemployment, inflation and attentiveness is difficult to identify. Quarterly series are not ideal in this case – much of the effect is manifest in month-to-month changes. The relationship between public attentiveness and QP attentiveness is clear in the second model, however. A 1-point increase in the percentage of respondents citing macroeconomics is associated with a 7-point increase in QP attentiveness to macroeconomic issues.

What exactly the interaction between these three series is – what is driving what – is difficult to ascertain with quarterly data. That legislative attention moves alongside unemployment and opinion is a valuable indication that questions are not entirely random, however. It is clear that real world indicators and public opinion are closely related to what legislators are choosing to discuss, at least where macroeconomic issues are concerned. These are some of the most salient issues, admittedly, and it is worth considering

whether the same strong link between public and legislative salience could be found for other, less salient issues. For the meantime, we are content to have found a strong link for just a single issue, however. Table 3 suggests that Question Period is not simply about embarrassing the government or mudslinging – it looks as though it can play a substantive, issue-driven representational role in the Canadian Parliamentary system.

Partisan Representation in Question Period

For some issues at least, issue attentiveness in the Canadian House of Commons moves alongside public issue attentiveness. This is one of the things we expect of representative government – we would like our representatives to address the issues we see as most important. So this is good news. This is only the very tip of the representational iceberg, however. The Canadian Parliament should adequately represent some kind of mean (or modal) national priority. But within that, parties and individual MPs should be representing their constituencies (defined by either partisanship or geography). If all MPs agreed on everything, and perfectly represented mean attentiveness across all issues, we would have remarkably good representation of the ‘mean’ Canadian voter. Indeed, if all Canadians agreed on everything, and this is what MPs represented, we would have perfect representation. But if Canadians have different issue priorities, and those Canadians are electing individual MPs to represent their priorities, then we should see some systematic differences in MPs’ issue priorities. That is, MPs should be representing the issue priorities of their partisan or geographic constituency.

Whether this happens at all in the Canadian House of Commons is another matter. The link between individual representatives and their geographic or partisan constituencies has received considerable attention in work on roll call voting in the US Congress, but voting is much freer in the US Congress than in the Canadian Parliament. There is extraordinarily strong party discipline in the Canadian House of Commons, and it is rare that any MP votes against their party, regardless of the interests of their constituency. Legislative voting is thus driven almost exclusively by party. And party voting is driven almost exclusively by that party’s role in Parliament. Governing party MPs will vote alongside the Government; Opposition MPs will tend to vote against the Government, often regardless of whether they might in principle support the legislation at hand. This is the nature of single-party-majority parliamentary systems.

While legislative voting is seriously constrained, it is not clear that the same degree of party discipline and institutional role-playing applies in Question Period. This is not to say that party plays no role: oral questions are allocated to parties (based on their position in the House), and these questions are allotted to

individuals by senior party members, particularly the party leader. MPs are intermittently given opportunities to ask questions related to their constituency's particular interests, but the majority of questions on any given day appear to deal with the same salient issues. It is thus likely that much of what drives questioning are the interests of parties rather than individual MPs. But the potential for either to be evident in Opposition MPs' behaviour at all seems to be much greater in oral questions than in legislative voting.

This is one of the reasons we believe Question Period content is worthy of study: it is the most likely if not the only venue in which Opposition MPs' representation of geographic or partisan constituencies is possible. To distinguish this representation, of course, we need a comparison of MPs oral questions and the issues priorities of their geographic or partisan constituency. Our data are not yet prepared to speak to geographic constituency interests, but we can quite reasonably deal with partisan constituencies.

Rather than examine attentiveness for parties and partisans issue-by-issue, our exploratory analysis makes use of a simple summary measure of the trade-off between preferences for fiscal restraint and preferences for government spending. The measure is drawn from recent work by Fournier et al. (2005), and is the relative salience of health or education minus the relative salience of taxes or debt/deficit issues. While in principle all our QP or MIP data capture is salience (and not direction), the four issues this measure relies on are essentially uni-directional: attention to health or education almost always means *increasing* spending in those domains, while attention to taxes or debt/deficit almost always means *decreasing* taxes or spending. The measure thus likely captures the relative priority attached to increasing versus limiting spending/policy.

For our current purposes, we are interested in this issue dimension across voters and parties. For voters, we disaggregate our MIP data by intended vote to find partisans' issue priorities. Note that using intended vote presents some difficulties: we cannot adequately discern whether parties are representing the changing priorities of the same partisans over time, or whether partisans are changing their vote based on parties' changing priorities. It is likely that both are happening, and while we suspect that much of the movement is voter- rather than party-driven, we cannot adequately demonstrate this here. In any case, the lack of a party identification variable in our opinion data leaves us with no other option.

[Figure 8 about here]

The resulting issue dimension, by intended vote, is plotted in Figure 8. The figure shows that there is not as wide a range of preferences between groups of partisans as we might have expected. Indeed, the major difference is between Reform voters and all other voters. Still, differences between other parties are

discernable, and the ordering of parties (from spending to restraint) is roughly similar across the time period.

Over that time, there is a 15- to 30-point difference between intended voters for the furthest left (NDP) and furthest right (Reform) parties. This seems to be a rather small divide given the optics brought on by the adversarial nature of Canadian parliamentary politics. Indeed, the closeness of preferences in terms of both distance and in trend over the period indicate that similar forces are affecting most voters – the average position of all voters seems to lean toward fiscal-restraint in the middle period and toward spending later in the period. But across the time period the inter-party differences are what we should expect: if one is more likely to prioritize debt or taxes, they are also more likely to favour the Reform Party, and the opposite is true for the NDP. Figure 8 thus lends some support to the salience-derived spending-versus-taxes measure. Moreover, it sets out expectations for our measures of parties' issue attentiveness in Question Period.

[Figure 9 about here]

Figure 9 shows the same measure for parties, based on issue attentiveness in Question Period. One finding is clear: the relative ordering of parties in Figure 9 is similar to that of partisans in Figure 8. Again, this is evidence that QP content is not just fluff. It is also evidence of representation of partisan constituencies' issue priorities.

Again, the Reform Party is the most clearly differentiated, about 10 points from balancing restraint and spending in its QP agenda in the 1993-97 period, and after 1993 consistently about 15-points to the right of the NDP. Apart from the big swings early in the period by the Liberals and NDP – attributed to focusing heavily on the GST – the NDP remains on the spending side of the centre for virtually the entire period while the Liberals hold relatively close to the zero-point. The PCs, who swing heavily from issue to issue in the 35th Parliament, maintain a center-right position in the 36th once that they have a critical mass of MPs. (The large swings of the PCs during the 1994-1997 period reflect the proportionality of the very few questions they were permitted to ask with only 2 members. Little should be taken from the agenda trends of the PCs over this period, as two or three questions on a single issue vastly affect the total proportion of questions. It is for this reason that the PC agenda is greyed-out in Figure 9).

The ordering of parties on the spending-restraint dimension is very similar to the ordering of partisans, then, though the trend over time in Figure 9 seems much less pronounced than that in Figure 8. Public opinion moves towards spending relatively dramatically since the mid-1990s; the same trend is only barely evident in QP content. Indeed, public opinion begins and ends much further from the zero line

(reflecting an equal weighting of spending and taxes issues) than do parties' QP agendas. Whether this reflects a lack of representation is not clear. The public and can simply ignore issues they are not interested in, while legislators (hopefully) have to pay at least some attention to many things at any given time. We should perhaps not expect the same swings in QP content, then. In short, it is difficult to gauge whether a 20-point shift in public attentiveness and a 4-point shift in QP attentiveness are equal.

These figures nevertheless suggest a certain degree of partisan representation in Question Period. This is a significant finding: it demonstrates that Opposition parties do more than simply fulfill their institutional role as the arbiters of accountability; the policy disposition of parties in Question Period is quite clearly connected to the policy priorities of partisans, cross-sectionally if not also over time.

Conclusions

This work has at least partly answered some of the key questions regarding Question Period, and provided a starting point for more in-depth research on the representational behaviour and issue attentiveness of MPs. First and foremost, we have found sensible differences in QP content over time and across parties. We have additionally found strong evidence of punctuated equilibria in QP content, along with rather mild evidence of Dowsian issue attention cycles. And most importantly, we have – albeit in a rather preliminary way – found evidence of partisan representation in Question Period.

It is this last finding that we find particularly motivating. The significance of Question Period lies not just in holding the government accountable, but also in facilitating a certain degree of representational activity by Opposition MPs. This realization underlines the significance of oral questions in parliamentary systems, as well as their importance to studies of policymaking and representation. Question Period content, we suspect, has much to tell us about the extent and nature of representation in the Canadian House of Commons.

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Table 1. Descriptives – Oral Questions Data

	Total	Liberal	PC	NDP	Reform	BQ	Alpha *
1. Macroeconomics	.137 (.084)	.194 (.111)	.158 (.322)	.114 (.114)	.140 (.102)	.070 (.060)	.813
	.419	.455	1.000	.531	.440	.217	.229
Debt	.026 (.043)	.028 (.061)	.060 (.268)	.017 (.053)	.049 (.068)	.017 (.026)	.982
	.245	.268	1.000	.278	.285	.103	.164
Taxes	.060 (.062)	.060 (.088)	.074 (.315)	.040 (.072)	.076 (.078)	.035 (.047)	.227
	.403	.414	1.000	.451	.340	.159	.174
Other	.039 (.048)	.039 (.064)	.001 (.007)	.009 (.026)	.036 (.064)	.008 (.024)	.099
	.189	.230	.041	.131	.269	.114	.055
2. Civil Rights, Minority Issues, Multiculturalism	.028 (.024)	.036 (.035)	.002 (.007)	.025 (.040)	.015 (.019)	.035 (.030)	.694
	.112	.133	.033	.186	.080	.127	.201
3. Health	.038 (.036)	.021 (.024)	.028 (.074)	.080 (.095)	.053 (.051)	.041 (.046)	.302
	.207	.099	.372	.410	.199	.226	.481
4. Agriculture & Forestry	.042 (.032)	.044 (.038)	.024 (.048)	.071 (.093)	.042 (.037)	.017 (.024)	.639
	.162	.159	.245	.563	.148	.108	.246
5. Labour, Employment, and Immigration	.093 (.053)	.078 (.058)	.108 (.218)	.082 (.075)	.087 (.050)	.135 (.081)	.756
	.305	.265	1.000	.351	.207	.363	.172
6. Education	.008 (.008)	.009 (.011)	.042 (.177)	.014 (.038)	.001 (.005)	.014 (.023)	.106
	.041	.056	1.000	.208	.025	.110	.196
7. Environment	.033 (.034)	.035 (.041)	.016 (.029)	.049 (.056)	.024 (.052)	.017 (.019)	.861
	.165	.174	.101	.204	.233	.087	.658
8. Energy	.009 (.010)	.006 (.008)	.003 (.014)	.016 (.039)	.004 (.008)	.010 (.017)	.574
	.039	.027	.083	.209	.032	.068	.111
9. Fisheries	.035 (.033)	.052 (.049)	.052 (.095)	.029 (.058)	.027 (.030)	.020 (.032)	.471
	.187	.191	.438	.416	.117	.190	.367
10. Transportation	.055 (.045)	.070 (.071)	.128 (.261)	.062 (.092)	.031 (.033)	.057 (.050)	.773
	.273	.306	1.000	.486	.144	.242	.333
12. Law, Crime, and Family Issues	.056 (.051)	.021 (.017)	.040 (.060)	.029 (.050)	.119 (.092)	.048 (.046)	.532
	.295	.079	.220	.305	.499	.218	.624
13. Social Welfare	.021 (.022)	.029 (.031)	.016 (.062)	.038 (.062)	.005 (.021)	.023 (.030)	.407
	.130	.124	.366	.341	.128	.141	.368
14. Community Dev & Housing Issues	.010 (.011)	.018 (.017)	.004 (.013)	.008 (.019)	.001 (.002)	.008 (.012)	.134
	.047	.058	.068	.097	.011	.056	.239
15. Banking, Finance, Domestic Commerce	.016 (.013)	.012 (.014)	.010 (.022)	.023 (.041)	.008 (.012)	.010 (.013)	.634
	.074	.077	.093	.237	.042	.045	.074
16. Defence	.068 (.098)	.049 (.129)	.106 (.181)	.046 (.074)	.088 (.111)	.081 (.100)	.848
	.716	.768	1.000	.434	.550	.567	.196
17. Space, Science, Tech & Communications	.023 (.027)	.014 (.027)	.005 (.022)	.036 (.119)	.017 (.031)	.043 (.047)	.294
	.162	.141	.112	1.000	.143	.237	.222
18. Foreign Trade	.056 (.065)	.096 (.097)	.010 (.022)	.073 (.091)	.022 (.033)	.021 (.026)	.768
	.355	.437	.084	.460	.179	.150	.277
19. International Affairs and Foreign Aid	.052 (.043)	.061 (.056)	.077 (.247)	.055 (.089)	.029 (.031)	.049 (.041)	.681
	.243	.271	1.000	.566	.125	.172	.218
20. Government Operations	.100 (.085)	.070 (.074)	.123 (.212)	.065 (.079)	.175 (.154)	.076 (.046)	.801
	.501	.356	1.000	.525	.711	.221	.590
21. Public Lands and Water Management	.004 (.005)	.003 (.005)	.001 (.004)	.006 (.021)	.003 (.005)	.002 (.005)	.354
	.021	.019	.023	.185	.016	.026	.125
23. Culture and Entertainment	.004 (.009)	.001 (.005)	.002 (.008)	.002 (.010)	.004 (.012)	.012 (.041)	.144
	.066	.031	.047	.061	.059	.274	.098
24. Provincial and Local Government Admin	.001 (.002)	.001 (.002)	.001 (.005)	.000 (.002)	.000 (.002)	.002 (.006)	.109
	.012	.012	.030	.013	.010	.041	.020
25. Intergovernmental Relations & Trade	.024 (.024)	.012 (.012)	.014 (.048)	.028 (.061)	.012 (.018)	.057 (.055)	.420
	.110	.040	.260	.319	.085	.210	.296
26. Constitutional and National Unity Issues	.059 (.074)	.048 (.066)	.027 (.123)	.018 (.037)	.042 (.062)	.134 (.154)	.816
	.346	.219	.740	.174	.257	.598	.296
27. Native Affairs	.028 (.031)	.022 (.045)	.003 (.009)	.028 (.048)	.051 (.054)	.018 (.030)	.752
	.219	.261	.040	.324	.230	.138	.079
Date	1988.12-1999.12	1988.12-1993.10	1993.11-1999.12	1988.12-1999.12	1993.11-1999.12	1993.11-1999.12	
N	93	35	37	87	40	52	

Cells contain means (as a proportion of agenda), with standard deviations in parentheses and the maximum monthly value below.

* Alpha: Top row: or 1988-1993, include Liberals and NDP; Bottom row: for 1993-1999, include PC, NDP, Reform, and BQ.

Top 5 issues for each party (Macroeconomics not included) are in **bold**.

Table 2. Legislative Attention to Macroeconomics, Monthly

Independent Variables	Dependent Variable: Att ^{Macro (other)} _t
Att ^{Macro (other)} _{t-1}	.146 (.118)
Changes in Unemployment _{t-1}	.034*** (.011)
Rate of Inflation _{t-1}	.001 (.003)
Constant	.034*** (.010)
R ²	.18
N	67 (monthly)

* p < .10; ** p < .05; *** p < .01

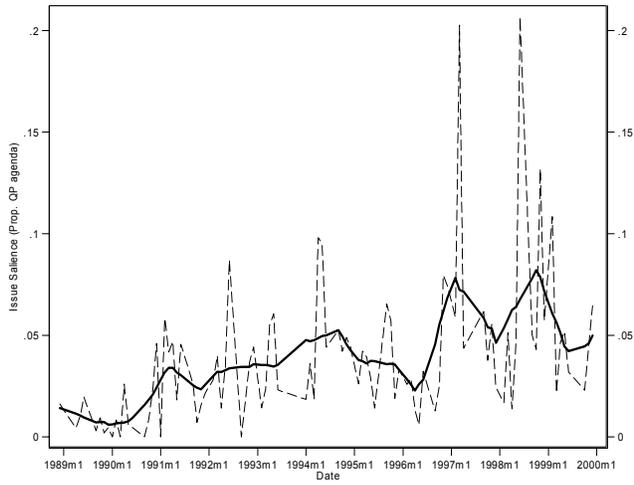
Table 3. Legislative Attention to Macroeconomics, Quarterly

Independent Variables	Dependent Variable: Att ^{Macro (other)} _t	
Att ^{Macro (other)} _{t-1}	.064 (.173)	-.094 (.163)
Public Att ^{Macro (other)} _t	—	7.29*** (.228)
Changes in Unemployment _t	3.604 (2.569)	2.713 (2.417)
Rate of Inflation _t	.506 (1.242)	3.384** (1.538)
Constant	10.801** (4.271)	-28.989** (13.188)
R ²	.08	.31
N	37	36

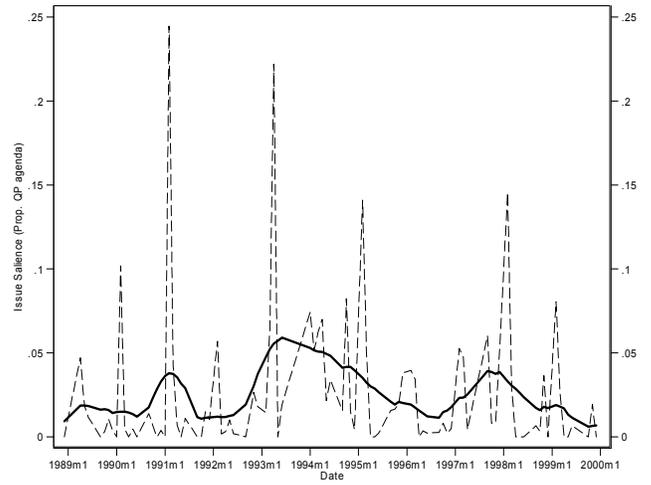
* p < .10; ** p < .05; *** p < .01

Figure 1. Trends in Issue Attentiveness

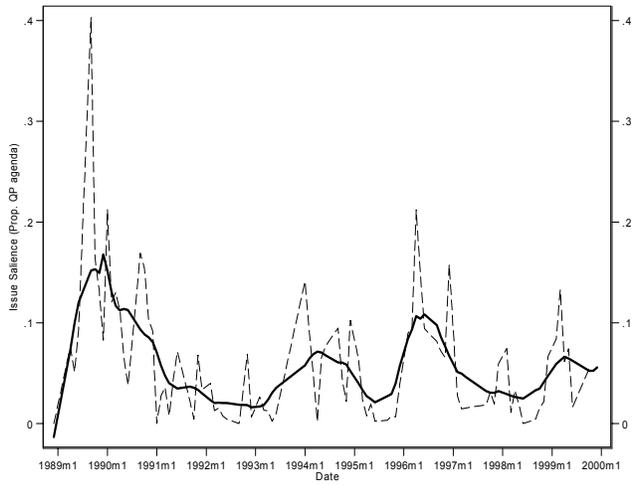
1A. Healthcare



1B. Debt



1C. Taxes



1D. Defence

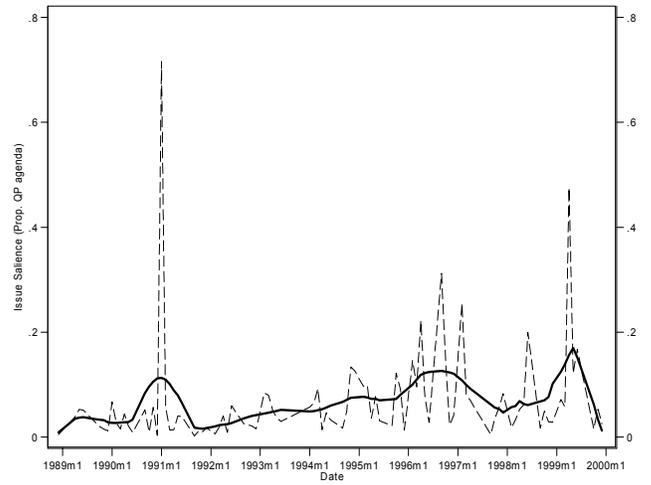
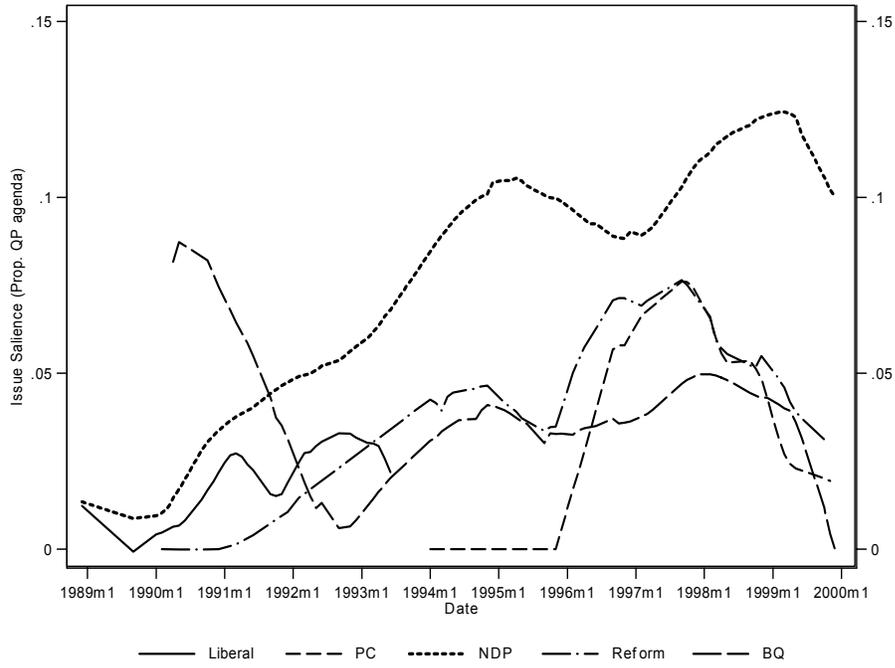


Figure 2. Trends in Issue Attentiveness, by Party

2A. Healthcare



2B. National Unity

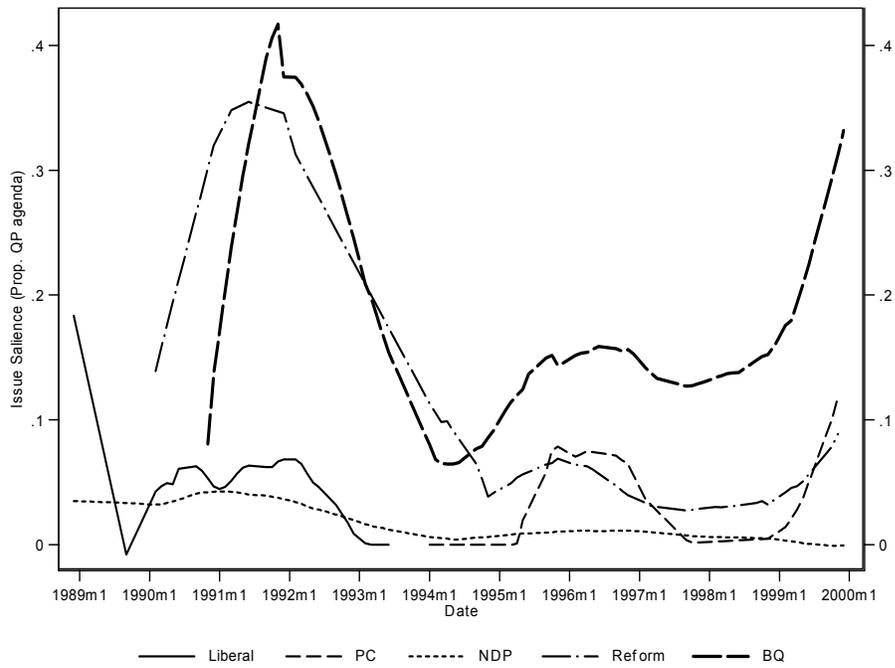
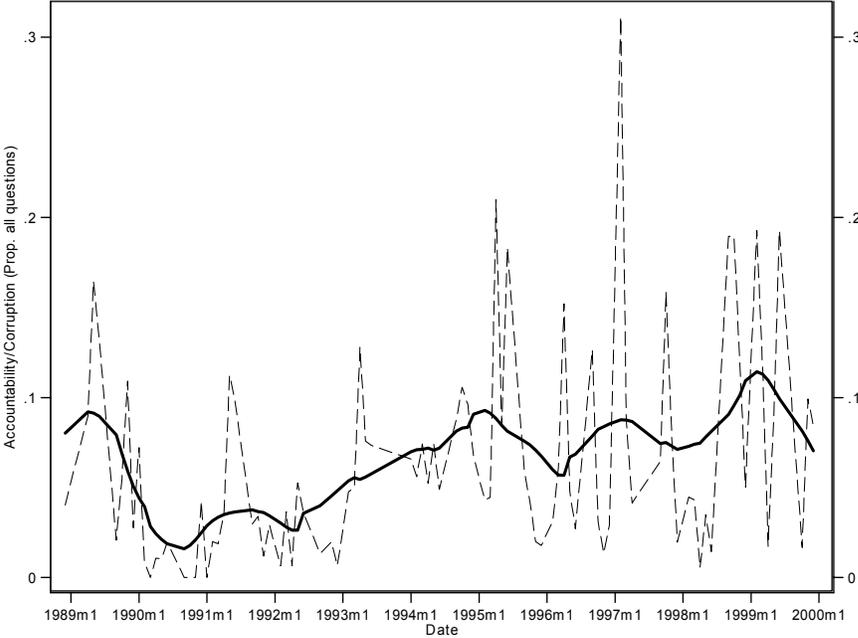


Figure 3. Accountability and Corruption



Party	Average (monthly) Accountability and Corruption Questions		
	1988-1993	1993-1997	1997-1999
Liberal	5.951	.548	.095
PC	.000	.194	4.095
NDP	1.976	.226	2.571
Reform	.000	9.355	13.000
BQ	.049	5.806	4.619

Figure 4. Downsian Issue Attention Cycle

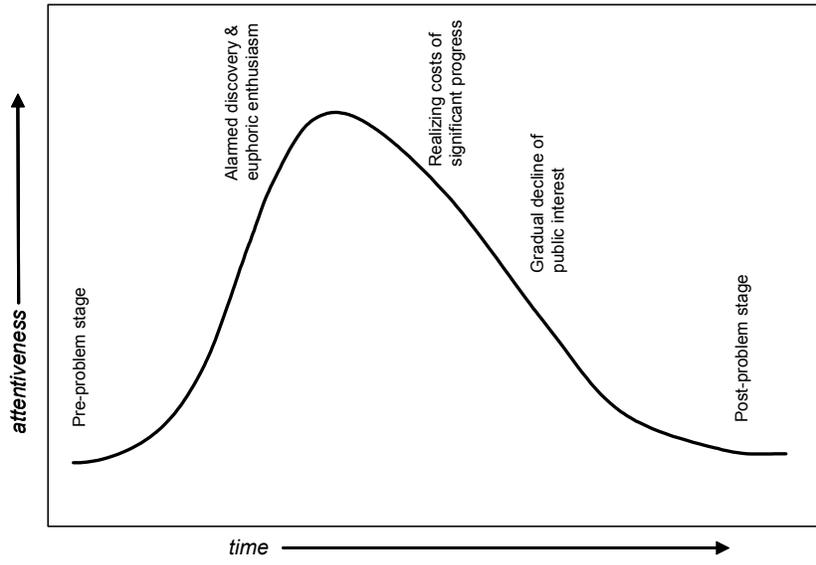


Figure 5. Baumgartner-Jones Punctuated Equilibrium

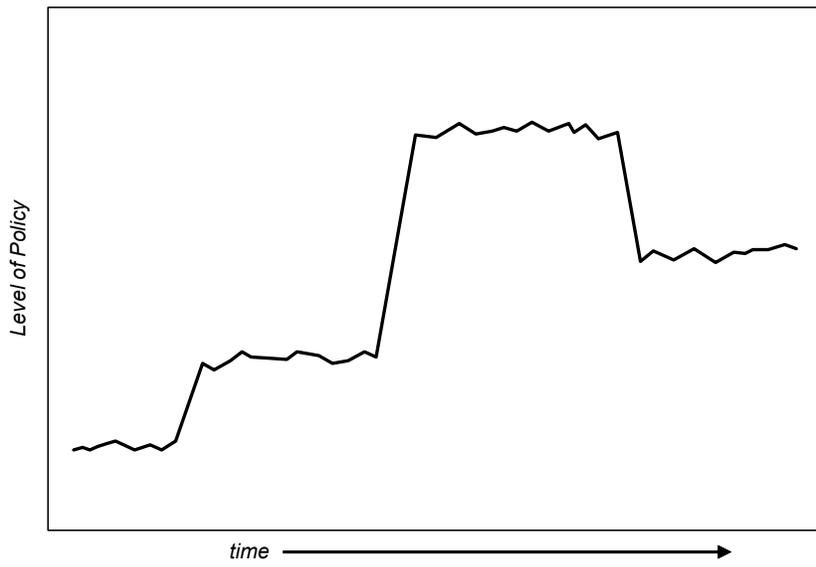
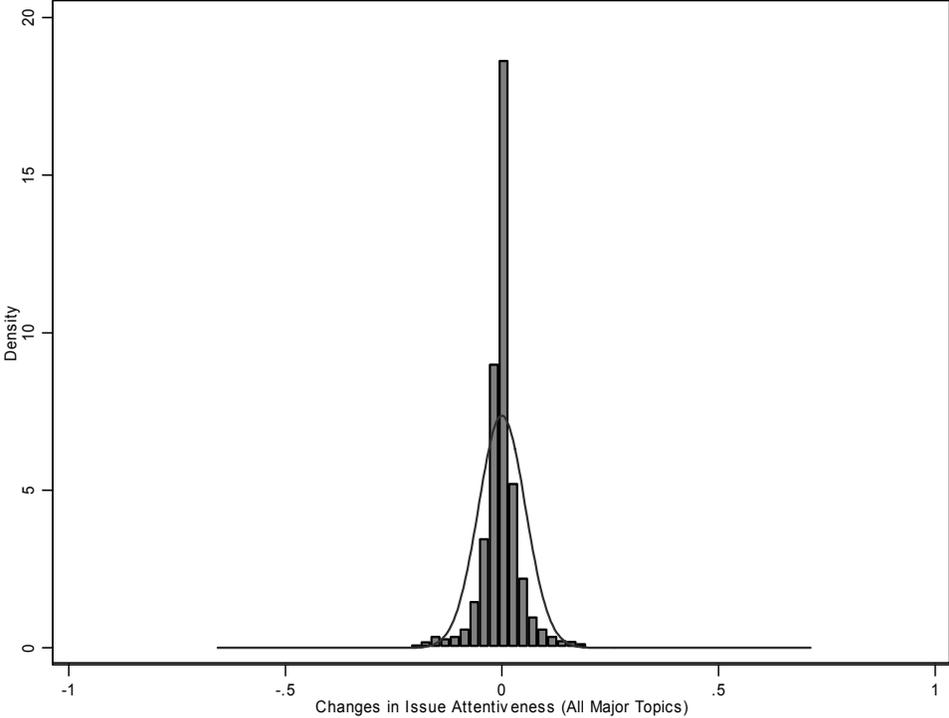


Figure 6. Distribution of Changes in Attentiveness



<i>N</i>	2300
Mean	.000
Variance	.003
Skewness	.519***
Kurtosis	33.741***

Figure 7. Attentiveness to Macroeconomics

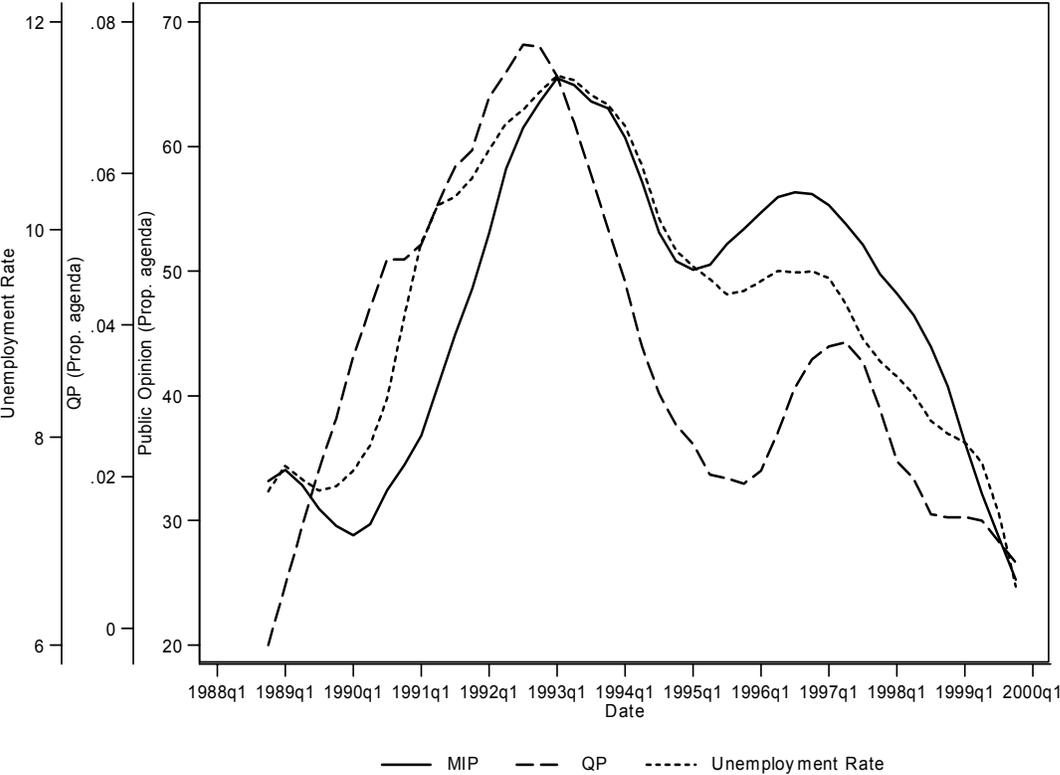


Figure 8. Trends in Partisans' Issue Priorities

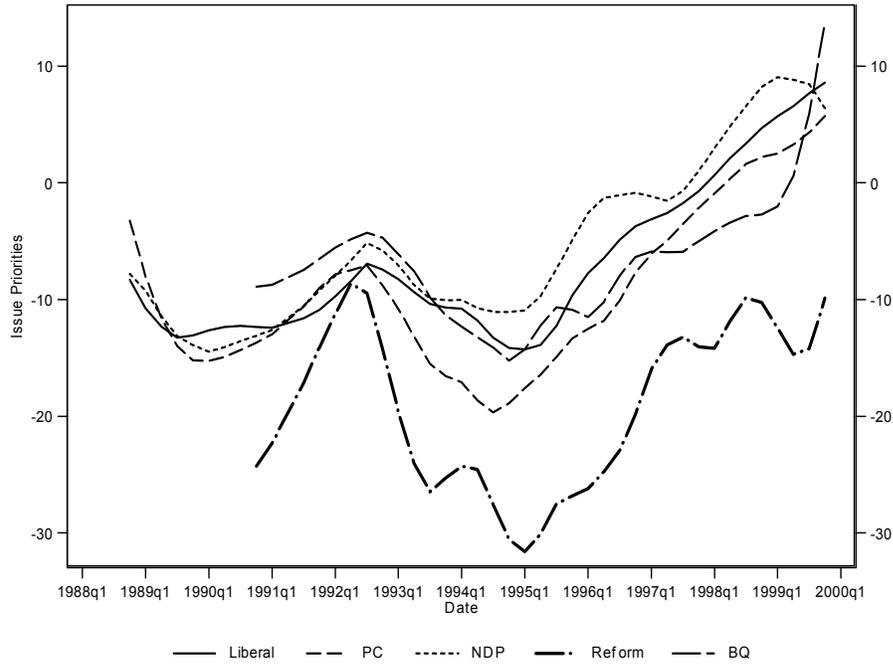


Figure 9. Trends in Parties' Issue Priorities

