Parliamentary Questions as Instruments of Substantive Representation: Visible Minorities in the UK House of Commons, 2005-2010

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Abstract: Little is known about the parliamentary behaviour of immigrant-origin legislators in European democracies. Much of the literature is normative, theoretical and speculative. Where it exists, empirical scholarship tends to be based on qualitative interviews, anecdotal evidence and generalisations based on very few cases. Whether the growing descriptive representation of minority-ethnic legislators has any implications for the quality of substantive representation, remains an open question. Parliamentary questions can be used as a valid and reliable indicator of substantive representation in democratic parliaments. This study is based on a new data set of over 16,000 parliamentary questions tabled by 50 British backbench Members of Parliament (MPs) in the 2005-2010 Parliament. It includes the 16 immigrant-origin MPs with a ‘visible-minority’ background. The most innovative feature of its research design is the use of a matching contrast group of non-minority MPs. Based on a series of multivariate models, it is found that all British MPs sampled for this study – irrespective of their ethnic status – respond to electoral incentives arising from the socio-demographic composition of their constituencies: Minority and non-minority MPs alike ask more questions relating to minority concerns, if they represent constituencies with a high share of non-White residents. Controlling for that general effect, however, MPs with a visible-minority status ask significantly more questions about ethnic diversity and equality issues. In short, therefore, the increased presence of MPs from ethnic-minority and immigrant backgrounds is found to enhance the substantive representation of immigrant and minority concerns.

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Tables and diagrams are available on request from the author. Please do not cite or quote without author’s permission. Comments welcome.
1. Introduction

Despite many differences in their rules of procedure, all democratic parliaments provide their Members with some possibilities to ask questions, which the government of the day has to answer (Wiberg 1995; Russo and Wiberg 2010). Whether ministers’ answers take the form of oral or written replies, whether or not responses are debated on the floor of the chamber, questions and answers will be recorded in the parliamentary minutes and are accessible for public scrutiny. They are noted by the local media and advertised on the personal websites of many Members of Parliament (MPs). Backbenchers of the British House of Commons can ask ‘Prime Minister’s Questions’, although only a few will be answered each week. In addition, they can table questions for oral and for written answer to ministers. ‘Urgent’ and ‘topical’ questions provide additional means of calling the government to account and articulating the concerns of constituents (Blackburn and Kennon 2003; Franklin and Norton 1993). In a fairly typical parliamentary session (2008-2009), the House of Commons spent over 91 hours of floor time on questions for oral answer, just over 4 hours on urgent questions and nearly 22 hours on topical questions. Taken together, questions and oral replies took up approximately 11.2 per cent of the 1049 hours of debates on the floor of the Commons in that session. In addition, the government replied to 56,387 questions in writing (House of Commons 2009).

MPs employ parliamentary questions for a number of reasons: If they belong to an opposition party, they may use them to challenge or press ministers over policy or personal conduct. Government backbenchers, by contrast, may support ‘their’ ministers by asking questions that invite the latter to highlight the government’s policy success or to attack alleged or real inconsistencies in the opposition’s policies. Independent of this government-versus-opposition mode (King 1976), individual MPs may use parliamentary questions to enhance their own reputation and ‘show concern for the interests of constituents’ (Russo and Wiberg 2010: 217-8, verbatim quote p. 218). This individual dimension of parliamentary questioning is of particular importance for this contribution. In recent studies, scholars examined the extent to which Members of some European parliaments use parliamentary questions to cultivate individualised relationships with their constituents, complementing their relationship mediated
by political parties (see particularly Martin 2011; Rasch 2009). These studies focus on the electoral connection of parliamentary behaviour and seek to link behaviour to possible incentives arising from geographic constituencies. Yet, despite the increasing ‘presence’ of immigrant-origin MPs in European parliaments, the electoral connection with social (e.g., ethnic) constituencies, which may be geographically dispersed, remains underresearched, although some British MPs have clearly seen their role as minority representatives beyond the confines of their electoral districts (see Saalfeld and Kyriakopoulou 2011). Using the content parliamentary questions as a behavioural indicator, the present contribution examines whether British Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) MPs in the 2005-2010 Parliament can be found to be particularly responsive to minority-related as well as to district-related concerns. The study goes beyond existing scholarship in the study of the politics of immigration in that it uses parliamentary questions as a quantitative indicator and contrasts the behaviour of immigrant-origin MPs with a stratified random sample of non-minority autochthonous MPs.

2. Institutional Context: Parliamentary Questions in the House of Commons

Parliamentary questions are one tool (amongst several) to articulate sectional or minority concerns and, as we shall see, are used extensively by a number of BAME MPs to articulate minority points of view. MPs often table such questions to take up matters arising from their constituency work. According to one standard work on Parliamentary procedure, questions are an instrument for backbenchers of both sides of the House to scrutinise the executive ‘on behalf of their constituents, or of some pressure or interest group, or simply reflecting their own private interests, experience or beliefs’ (Blackburn and Kennon 2003: 517). In many cases, the questions get reported back to constituents via the local media, the MPs’ personal websites, the internet-based ‘watch-dog’ www.theyworkforyou.com and other media. The tabling of such questions is less constrained by the whips than other forms of parliamentary behaviour such as floor voting and committee membership. There are two main types of parliamentary questions:
Questions for oral answer have become ‘a monthly opportunity for a series of mini-debates on topics of current interest within the remit of the department concerned. A question for oral answer gives a Member the chance to ask a supplementary question in his own way at a prime time for media coverage and the attention of other Members. The tabled question has thus become simply the peg on which to hang the supplementary, and the actual terms of the original question therefore become less important’ (Blackburn and Kennon 2003: 520). However, the time available for questions for oral answer is relatively limited (usually up to one hour per department and month, with Prime Minister’s Questions lasting 30 minutes every week).

By contrast, there is no limit to the number of questions a Member may table for written answer whose purpose tends to be different from questions for oral answer: ‘The great majority of questions for written answer are primarily seeking information, although occasionally they may simply be urging action to which a “yes” or “no” answer could be given’ (Blackburn and Kennon 2003: 527). Nevertheless, they are often very detailed, asking the government to provide information on its performance across the entire range of executive responsibilities. Some Members make very little use of this instrument, others ask the government hundreds of questions in every Parliament. Ministers are expected to answer questions within a working week, and their responses are printed in Hansard. Very occasionally, Ministers deny responsibility or refuse to answer (Blackburn and Kennon 2003: 527-8). Written questions are generally considered to be ‘a parliamentary (and published) alternative to a non-parliamentary (and unpublished) letter to a minister’ (Blackburn and Kennon 2003: 529).

A few examples demonstrate how MPs – irrespective of their ethnic background simultaneously use questions for written answer to seek information on the implementation of policy and signal to an interested audience that they care about the equality of BME groups in society:

‘To ask the Minister for Women and Equality what steps the Government are taking to address inequalities faced by ethnic minority women in the workplace; and if she will make a statement.’ (Diane Abbott MP, HC Deb, 18 June 2007, c1448W)
‘To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what mechanisms are in place to monitor the impact of the effects of the implementation of the Terrorism Acts (a) on the different ethnic groups and (b) on race relations.’ (Dawn Butler MP, HC Deb, 22 November 2005, c1937W)

‘To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what targets are set for police authorities on the recruitment of police officers on the basis of (a) gender and (b) ethnicity.’ (Tom Watson MP, HC Deb, 16 April 2007, c479W)

Whilst the questions quoted above indicate a concern for equal opportunities and justice for ethnic minorities in the country, other questions may highlight issues relating to immigration, border control and even the extradition of foreigners. Examples include:

‘To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many prisoners at HM Prison Bullington have completed their sentences and are awaiting extradition; (2) what the longest period is at HM Prison Bullington for which a prisoner who has completed a sentence has been awaiting extradition.’ (Tony Baldry MP, HC Deb, 11 March 2008, c352W)

‘To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans the Government have to increase the number of UK ports which are manned by immigration staff 24 hours a day.’ (Adam Afriyie MP, HC Deb, 7 December 2005, c1365W)

‘To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions her Department has held with the Home Office on the restrictions on migrant workers from Bulgaria and Romania; and if she will make a statement.’ (Keith Vaz MP, HC Deb, 6 December 2006, c483W)

Not only do these questions serve to extract information about the content and implementation of policy from government departments. Many questions for written answer are used as signals to the voters. The personal website of Virendra Sharma MP (www.virendrasharma.com, accessed 13 February 2011) is typical and may suffice as an example: The navigation bar on this website leads the reader to a link to the page “Virendra at
Westminster” (www.virendrasharma.com/westminster, accessed 13 February 2011), which informs readers about the MP’s activities in the Commons. In the top six paragraphs of the main body of this page, Sharma provides detailed information on his parliamentary speeches, his membership of three Select Committees and the answers he received to parliamentary questions. One paragraph is dedicated to a short non-technical explanation of the purpose of parliamentary questions and provide a link to the House of Commons search engine, allowing readers to download the texts of the questions he tabled by subject and date (http://www.virendrasharma.com/efd82d19-32c8-c364-6d8d-efeb088d2547). The explanation suggests that the information is directed not at a specialised public but at his constituents in general.

Table 1 near here

Table 1 demonstrates that UK MPs make extensive use of questions for written answer. This form of parliamentary questioning is a relatively low-cost device for MPs, although the cost to Departments (that have to compile the information for responses) may be high. The large number of questions suggests that MPs attribute considerable value to them. There is general agreement that the use has increased significantly since the 1950s (see also Blackburn and Kennon 2003: 374-5, 401), although the short period covered in Table 1 (2000-01 to 2009-10) reflects a cyclical rather than a linear pattern. For the purposes of this contribution, questions for written answer are employed as an indicator for the extent to which an MP takes up minority-related issues, and does so publicly. Since the use of parliamentary questions for written answer is relatively unconstrained by the party whips, this indicator should be a suitable instrument to observe the extent to which BAME MPs and their non-BAME colleagues differ in making direct references to immigration or ethnic-minority concerns (Saalfeld and Kyriakopoulou 2011). Further information on the research design can be found below.
3. Theory and Working Hypotheses

Why should an MP’s status as an immigrant or member of a ‘visible minority’\(^1\) matter for their parliamentary behaviour as representatives? After all, many authors have argued that – given certain (e.g., electoral or institutional) incentives – the substance of constituents’ interests in a representative system of government can be advocated and promoted effectively by any good representative irrespective of the latter’s personal characteristics (in terms of gender, race or other attributes), although there may be a certain ‘symbolic’ value to adequate descriptive representation (e.g., Pitkin 1967; Childs 2004; Norton 2005). However, some normative theorists believe that effective substantive representation of certain groups requires a deep understanding of the experiences of the represented, which is best achieved by a representative from the same group. Mansbridge (1999, 2003) argues that ‘contexts of distrust’ where a ‘history of dominance and subordination typically breeds inattention, even arrogance, on the part of the dominant group and distrust on the part of the subordinate group’ cannot be addressed without adequate descriptive representation (Mansbridge 1999: 641). In this case, a higher level of descriptive representation ‘facilitates vertical communication between representatives and constituents (ibid.)’. These normative discussions have been very fruitful, but they do not help us a great deal to generate testable theories about the observable behaviour of MPs.

Empirical theories of democratic representation often describe the relationship between voters and decision makers as a principal-agent relationship where citizens are modelled as ‘principals represented by agents to whom the citizens temporarily delegate the power to make public policies’ (Powell 2004: 274). Such theories seek to factors shaping these relations across time and space. The literature on democratic representation can be divided into two broad traditions. The first body of research could be called ‘procedural’ (Powell 2004: 274) representation and focuses on citizens’ vote for parties in elections in the tradition of Rae (1967). ‘Democratic representation means that votes for parties should correspond to the seats

\(^1\) The terms ‘Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic’ (BAME) and ‘visible minority’ are used synonymously.
those parties win in the legislature’ (Powell 2004: 274). The focus of this body of scholarship is on electoral systems and the geographic distribution of voters. The second body of research deals with ‘substantive’ representation in the tradition of Miller and Stokes (1963) whose focus is on the connection between the preferences of citizens (rather than their votes) and the behavioural responses of legislators. In this perspective, democratic representation ‘means that citizens’ issue preferences should correspond to the positions or behaviour of their representatives’ (Powell 2004: 274).

MPs face a complicated incentive structure in this context. They are agents of their parties on whose reputation their election (and re-election) largely depends. Simultaneously they are agents of their voters. It is customary in empirical and formal models to assume that parties and their leaders (including MPs) are ‘vote seekers’, ‘office seekers’, ‘policy seekers’ or a combination thereof (Strøm 1990; Müller and Strøm 1999). Separating these motivations conceptually and empirically has been notoriously difficult, as the control of office tends to improve a politician’s chances to realise his or her policy goals, and office frequently depends on a sufficient number of votes in elections. Assumptions about the motivations of legislators are a crucial base of any model of the behaviour of immigrant-origin MPs. If political parties and individual MPs are generally modelled to behave predominantly as if they were office seekers or vote seekers, minority politicians could be expected to be influenced by similar motivations. The substantive representation of minority-related concerns would depend on the expected benefits and costs of such a strategy. Alternatively, an independent influence of ethnicity on parliamentary behaviour could be conceptualised as a significant component of policy seeking that cannot be reduced to vote-seeking or office-seeking motives. However, there may also be an ‘electoral connection’ affecting all MPs irrespective of their ethnicity: If parliamentary questions are a method of demonstrating responsiveness to constituents’ concerns and demands, we might expect their content to reflect important socio-demographic constituency characteristics. Yet we know from studies of the behaviour of US legislators that ethnic-minority candidates have a number of choices in presenting themselves and representing their minority constituents: They can
• present themselves as ‘policy advocates’ (Searing 1994) with particular expertise in areas important to minorities, or they could act as advocates of the preferences of a minority community;
• engage in a deliberate ‘deracialization’ of their personal profile (McCormick and Jones 1993); or
• adopt a sophisticated strategy of ‘toggling’ between ‘racialized’ and ‘deracialized’ signals to voters and observers in different arenas and media (Collett 2008).

Further extant studies on political parties and campaigning suggest that there is not necessarily a tension between party objectives and individual behaviour in this context: active and relatively visible minority-candidates may be seen as an electoral asset in some constituencies.

• Political parties are increasingly sophisticated in targeting specific voter groups (Strömbäck 2009), amongst others by offering popular and/or credible candidates;
• candidates (including sitting candidates for re-election) may use race and gender as ‘cues’ in low-information elections (McDermott 1998) and
• campaigns are sometimes claimed to display a growing level of ‘individualisation’ (Zittel and Gschwend 2008), with an increasing focus on the personal characteristics and achievements of candidates. All of these observations may create incentives for parties to tolerate or even encourage a certain emphasis on immigration and minority-related concerns in parliamentary questions.

Thus there are reasons to believe that MPs with a BAME background may have incentives to highlight ethnic issues in parliamentary questions, although the observation of ‘toggling’ strategies suggests that they may be sophisticated political entrepreneurs. The purpose of this contribution is empirical. It seeks to establish whether (a) parliamentary questions can be used as an indicator in this context and (b) there are any links between an MP’s ethnic status and the content of his or her parliamentary questions. Therefore the following work is driven by the following null and alternate hypotheses:
• **H₀**: There is no difference between BAME and non-BAME MPs in the minority-related content of their parliamentary questions.

• **H₁**: There is a significant statistical association between the MP’s ethnic background and the content of their parliamentary questions: MPs from visible-minority backgrounds will ask more questions that are of particular concern to the ethnic groups they are associated with.

Based on these general observations from the empirical literature, Figures 1 and 2 represent two possible variants of the null hypothesis: In Figure 1 the number of parliamentary questions relating to minority concerns tabled by MPs with a ‘visible-minority’ background does not differ significantly from the number of questions tabled by all other MPs. The null hypothesis is termed ‘non-responsive variant’, because the number of relevant parliamentary questions is independent of the share of the visible-minority population in the constituency. MPs from both minority and non-minority backgrounds behave like ‘trustees’ in the terminology of Eulau, Wahlke and their co-authors. Such trustees are free agents following either the dictates of their own conscience or their own judgements based on an independent assessment of the issues involved (Eulau, Wahlke et al 1959: 749). Alternatively they may behave like ‘delegates’ in the familiar typology of Eulau, Wahlke and their collaborators. In this role, MPs ‘should not use their independent judgment or convictions as criteria of decision-making’ but subordinate their independence ‘to what is considered a superior authority’ (ibid., 750). This ‘superior authority’ could be their party or their constituents.

In a second, ‘responsive variant’ of the null hypothesis (illustrated by Figure 2), would predict no difference between minority and non-minority MPs. In contrast to the non-responsive
variant, however, the questioning patterns of both types of MPs should reflect the socio-
demographic compositions of their respective constituencies. In other words, both visible-
minority MPs and non-minority MPs should systematically respond to the policy problems and
electoral pressures in their constituencies. MPs representing constituencies with high
concentrations of residents and voters with visible-minority backgrounds should tend to
emphasize the needs and concerns of such groups more strongly than MPs representing
constituencies with few visible-minority voters. At this stage, the responsive variant of the null
hypothesis does not include any predictions about the particular mathematical function that
best represents the response – it may be a straightforward linear relationship, or it may be a
curvilinear or an exponential function such as the ones suggested in Figure 2, with a stronger
link between constituency composition and MPs’ behaviour in constituencies with a high
percentage of visible-minority citizens and voters.

Figures 3 and 4 near here

Like the null hypothesis, the alternate hypothesis can be phrased in a responsive and a non-
responsive manner. Figure 3 represents the non-responsive version predicting a significant
difference between the parliamentary questioning patterns of MPs with and without visible-
minority backgrounds. The former should emphasise minority-related concerns much more
frequently than the latter, irrespective of the composition of their respective electoral districts.
This may be due to the fact that MPs from visible-minority backgrounds are policy seekers with
a particular concern for minority-related issues. This concern may be rooted in the personal
experiences such MPs have had (see Mansbridge’s thoughts quoted above). Alternatively, it
may be based on a division of labour within the political parties where MPs from visible-
minority backgrounds are encouraged to specialise in this area and enhance the party’s
attractiveness amongst minority voters. In Figure 4, both types of MPs – those from visible-
minority backgrounds and those without such a background – are responsive to their
constituencies’ socio-demographic compositions. Nevertheless, the number of parliamentary questions asked by MPs with visible-minority backgrounds will always be significantly higher than the number asked by MPs without. Thus, in a multi-variate design, both constituency composition and minority background should have a significant positive net effect on the number of parliamentary questions reflecting relevant issues.

*Figures 5, 6 and 7 near here*

The alternate hypothesis may also be specified in various interactive variants. Figures 5, 6 and 7 illustrate the link for three different possible interaction effects between constituency composition and MP’s minority status. In Figure 5, MPs from visible minorities will always ask a relatively high number of parliamentary questions on minority-related issues, whereas non-minority MPs will do so only, if there are personal electoral incentives to do so. In other words, the higher the share of voters from visible minorities in the non-minority MP’s constituency, the higher the number of relevant questions he or she will ask. For the visible-minority MP, by contrast, the socio-demographic composition of his or her constituency would be irrelevant. Figure 6 illustrates the opposite case: Non-minority MPs would generally ask a relatively small number of questions on minority-related issues, and this number is relatively independent of the socio-demographic composition of their constituencies. MPs from visible-minority backgrounds, by contrast, would respond to individual electoral incentives in the constituency: If the share of voters from visible-minority backgrounds in the constituency is low, they will not differ significantly from non-minority MPs. As the share of visible-minority voters increases, the share of minority-related questions should increase for MPs from visible-minority backgrounds. In Figure 7 both visible-minority and non-minority MPs respond to electoral incentives (i.e., the share of visible-minority voters in the constituency). However, the extent of the response (the slope of the stylised regression line) should be stronger in the case of visible-minority MPs.
Differences in relevant parliamentary questioning patterns may not be significant where MPs represent constituencies with low shares of visible-minority voters. However, this variant of an interactive alternate hypothesis would predict that the difference will grow as the population share of visible minorities in the constituency increases.

4. Research Design

To test these hypotheses in their different variants, data were collected providing information about all questions for written answer tabled by the 16 Black, Asian or other minority-ethnic (BAME) MPs in the 2005-2010 UK Parliament. In addition, the questions of nine further MPs of immigrant origin without visible-minority status were coded. This wider category ‘immigrant origin’ extends to MPs who were immigrants themselves (first generation), or the immediate descendants of at least one person born outside the UK as citizen of a different state (second generation) but are not ‘visible’ or ‘non-Western’ minorities (it includes, for example, the immediate descendants of Polish and other Eastern European immigrants during the Second World War). It is frequently assumed that ‘non-visible’ or ‘western’ minorities differ in their political socialisation from most members of BAME groups. Their inclusion in the sample allows for a better test of policy preferences that might be traced back to particular ethnic experiences. Finally, a stratified random sample of 25 autochthonous MPs (without visible-minority or immigration characteristics) was drawn as a control group (see below). Information on the questions they tabled was added to the data set. In total, therefore, 50 MPs were included in the analysis. The sample of autochthonous MPs was stratified in such a way that it matches the party-political orientations of all immigrant-origin MPs (irrespective of their ethnic status) and the ethnic composition of their constituencies (non-White population < 2.5 per cent of the total population according to the 2001 Census; non-White population ≥ 2.5 per cent of the total population).

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2 The total number of MPs with a BAME background in the 2005-2010 House of Commons was 15. The present sample includes data for 16 MPs, because one of the subjects with a BAME background, Piara Khabra, died in 2007. His successor in the constituency Ealing Southall, Virendra Sharma, also had a BAME background.

3 These MPs were identified by reading all MPs’ biographies in various sources including Dod’s Parliamentary Companion and the biographies linked to via www.theyworkforyou.com.
cent and < 10 per cent; ≥ 10 per cent and < 25 per cent; and non-White population ≥ 25 per cent). In other words, the intention is to compare the 16 BAME MPs and nine further immigrant-origin MPs to an equal number of non-BAME MPs with matching party and constituency characteristics.

The MPs included are listed in Table 2. Persons who held ministerial positions throughout the entire window of observation were excluded from the multivariate analyses as they do not ask questions. In total the data set contains information about 16,361 questions tabled by the 50 (backbench) MPs in the sample. Just over 30 per cent these questions were asked by the 16 BAME MPs (49.2%, see the marginal distributions in Table 4), the remainder of questions (just under 70 per cent) was tabled by Members drawn from the two control groups. This ratio is roughly proportional to the distribution of MPs in the sample used (32 per cent minority : 68 per cent non-minority).

For each question (observation), a dummy variable was created registering whether the question explicitly referred to ethnic minorities in, or immigration to, the United Kingdom. This was established by searching the content of the questions for a number of (sometimes truncated) keywords that reflect the two possible dimensions of questioning in the area of immigration and ethnic minorities: (a) questions relating to the costs of immigration, which are often critical of immigration and (b) questions relating to (and explicitly or implicitly promoting) ethnic diversity and equality. These keywords are listed in Table A1 in the Appendix. The questions identified in an automated search were subsequently read in order to ensure they really did relate to immigration to, and minority issues in, the United Kingdom. For most analyses, these data were aggregated for each MP. In other words: the individual MP is the
decisive unit of analysis. The count variables mentioned above constitute the various dependent variables for the multivariate analyses below. Table 4 summarises these data and cross-tabulates them by visible-minority status and content. It shows that 1,014 (of a total of 16,361) questions referred explicitly to immigration to, and ethnic minorities in, the United Kingdom. Of these 681 related to the costs of immigration, 333 referred to ethnic diversity and equality. For the multivariate analyses in the next section, the *adjusted* number of parliamentary questions was used correcting for variations introduced by an MP’s length of service in the Commons resulting from changes in a parliamentary seat.  

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**Table 3 near here**

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The key independent variables in this study (for a list of summary statistics see Table 3) are the MP’s visible-minority background (as a dichotomous ‘dummy’ variable) and the share of non-White residents in his or her constituency. The source for the latter is the 2001 UK Census. Since the share of non-White residents is used for the construction of interaction terms (visible-minority status of MP * share of non-White residents in his or her constituency), the variable was centred at the mean, and the mean was set to the value of zero. The remaining variables serve as control variables: One further dummy variable registers whether the MP is of immigrant-origin without belonging to a visible minority (e.g., immigrants or children of immigrants from Europe). Dummy variables for the party membership allow for the control of party effects (the Labour Party being the omitted category). An MP’s length of service as government minister during the 2005-2010 Parliament is an important control as ministers do not ask questions. The number of previous sessions as MP was introduced to control for the

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4 The number of questions was weighted to create an adjusted number of parliamentary questions for the duration of a 60-month Parliament. This merely affected two MPs, Piara Khabra and Virendra Sharma. Khabra died in 2007 and was succeeded by Sharma. For all other MPs the adjusted number of questions is equal to the actual number.
MP’s experience as a parliamentarian. In addition, controls were introduced for the number of questions an MP asks on issues other than those relating to minorities and immigration. This variable captures any effects caused by ‘industrious’ MPs asking many questions in general. Finally, controls were introduced for the marginality of an MP’s seat to capture electoral incentives other than those arising from the socio-demographic composition of the MP’s constituency.

Table 4 near here

5. Results
A first test of the null hypothesis (‘Ethnic background does not make any difference in the number of minority-related questions tabled by an MP) consists of a simple crosstabulation of a dichotomous independent variable (‘BAME MP – yes/no’) and a dichotomous dependent variable (‘Question is explicitly related to immigration or minority issues – yes/no’). Table 4 reports the results of this test. At first glance, the null hypothesis can be confidently rejected. More than half of all questions relating to immigration and minority issues (53.16 per cent) were tabled by BAME MPs, compared to an expected share of just 30.1 per cent. The chi\(^2\) value is high (273.23) and significant at the one-percent level. If the content of the questions is broken down further, 71.47 per cent of all questions relating to ethnic diversity and equality were tabled by visible-minority MPs (again, compared to an expected value of 30.1 per cent). Again, the chi\(^2\) test suggests that the differences between visible-minority and non-minority MPs are extremely unlikely to be caused by a Type I error. Visible-minority MPs also ask significantly more questions about the costs of immigration, although the difference is not as
stark as for questions relating to ethnic diversity and equality (44.20 per cent of all questions on the costs of immigration, compared to an expected share of 30.1 per cent).

Table 5 near here

A more nuanced picture arises from the multivariate tests reported in Table 5. Since the dependent variable is an overdispersed count variable, a series of negative binomial regression models were fitted, regressing the adjusted number of minority-related questions each MP in the sample asked on a number of independent and control variables (see Table 3 above). Given the observation of differences between the questions aiming at the costs of immigration on the one hand and issues of ethnic diversity and equality on the other, three dependent variables were specified, the adjusted number of all questions relating to immigration and minority issues (encompassing both costs of immigration and ethnic diversity and equality, Models 1a and 1b), the adjusted number of questions relating to the costs of immigration (Models 2a and 2b) and the adjusted number of questions relating to issues of ethnic diversity and equality (Models 3a and 3b).

Model 1a suggests that the adjusted number of all questions relating to immigration and minority issues increases when the dummy variable registering visible-minority status switches from zero to one, although in this specification, the effect is only significant at the ten-percent level (two-tailed test). Immigrant-origin MPs without visible-minority status, by contrast, do not differ from the reference group, autochthonous MPs, at conventional levels of statistical significance. The share of non-Whites in the MP’s constituency has a highly significant effect in the expected direction: The higher the share of non-Whites in an MP’s constituency, the higher his or her number of questions relating to immigration or ethnic minorities (independent of the MP’s minority status). These findings would allow to rule out the null hypothesis in both variants (Figures 1 and 2) and the non-responsive variant of the alternate hypothesis in Figure
3. Of the control variables, the number of months an MP served as government minister in the 2005-2010 Parliament has the expected negative (but trivial) effect, which is highly significant across all models estimated here. Similarly, MPs who ask many questions about minorities and immigration also tend to ask many questions in other policy areas. The association between the adjusted number of questions about immigration and ethnic minorities on the one hand and the adjusted number of questions about other issues on the other is positive and highly significant in all models. Model 1b in Table 6 adds an interactive variable multiplying visible-minority status and the (centred) share of non-White residents in the MP’s constituency. This effect is positive but not significant at conventional levels. In other words, Models 1a and 1b rule out all variants of the null hypothesis and the interactive alternate hypothesis in all its variants. The only hypothesis not eliminated in this specification is the responsive variant of the alternate hypothesis illustrated in Figure 4.

Models 2a and 2b test for the impact of the same independent variables on the adjusted number of questions relating to the costs of immigration. The two control variables found to influence the number of all questions relating to immigration and minorities significantly retain their effect in both models. Holding all other independent variables constant, visible-minority status does not have a significant effect on the number of such questions at conventional levels. The percentage of non-White residents in an MP’s constituency, by contrast, has a positive effect at the ten-percent level of statistical significance (two-tailed). The interacted variable ‘visible-minority status * share of non-Whites in the constituency’, which is added in Model 2b, is not statistically significant per se, but influences the estimates for other independent variables: Controlling for this interaction effect, the positive effect of visible-minority status is significant at the ten-percent level (two-tailed). The effect of the share of non-Whites in an MP’s constituency is now stronger and statistically more robust (significant at the five-percent level). Being a Conservative MP also increases the adjusted number of questions about the costs of immigration significantly. On balance, therefore, the results of Models 2a and 2b would also suggest to rule out the null hypothesis and any interactive variants of the alternate hypothesis. The only hypothesis that cannot be rejected confidently is, again, the responsive variant of the simple (i.e., non-interactive) alternate hypothesis as
illustrated in Figure 4. Model 2b is the only one where party ideology has a significant impact: In
this specification, Conservative MPs are significantly more likely to ask questions about the
costs of immigration than Labour MPs.

In Models 3a and 3b the number of questions relating to ethnic diversity and equality is
regressed on the same set of independent and control variables. Visible-minority status
increases the number of such questions significantly. At the ten-percent level, immigrant-origin
MPs who are not ethnically distinguishable from the majority population also tend to ask more
questions in this area. These effects are independent of the share of non-White residents in an
MP’s constituency. The interaction term added in Model 3b does not change these results. The
only control variable with a significant impact is the adjusted number of questions in areas
unrelated to immigration and ethnic minorities. In the models focusing on the adjusted number
of questions about ethnic diversity and equality, therefore, the non-responsive variant of the
alternate hypothesis (see Figure 3) is the only one that cannot be ruled out.

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*Figure 8 near here*

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Figure 8 uses the data in Model 1a (Table 5) to estimate a smoothed curve of predicted values
for the 16 visible-minority MPs and the 34 other MPs in the sample depending on the share of
non-White residents in the MPs’ constituencies. The values of all other independent variables in
Model 1a are held constant at the mean. The predicted values for the visible-minority MPs
almost follow an exponential function. The diagram underlines that both minority and non-
minority MPs are responsive to the socio-demographic composition of their constituencies, but
that MPs from a BAME background generally ask more questions relating to immigration and
minority concerns. While the differences between minority and non-minority MPs are small in
constituencies with a non-White population of less than 25 per cent of the residents, the gap is growing in constituencies with a non-White population with of more than 40 per cent. This suggests the presence of a threshold below which the null hypothesis cannot be rejected confidently. From that threshold (at around 40 per cent of non-White residents in the constituency), the graph leaves only the responsive variant of the alternate hypothesis in Figure 4 or an interactive pattern such as the one depicted in Figure 7.

6. Conclusions

The substantive representation of minority-related policy issues by immigrant-origin MPs is unterresearched for European democracies. The goal of the present contribution was to contribute to help to close this lacuna. The main question was whether there are significant differences in the way BAME MPs and their non-BAME peers use parliamentary questions for written answer in order to articulate a minority-related agenda. Parliamentary questions for written answer are a valid and reliable indicator of MPs’ policy agendas (see generally Martin 2011), because their use is relatively unconstrained, allowing MPs to reveal their preferences and act on behalf of their constituents without too many institutional and partisan constraints, even under the competitive conditions of the Westminster system. One of the most innovative features of the present contribution is the quantitative analysis of this behavioural indicator using a control group of non-minority MPs. The results of the bivariate and multivariate tests presented here suggest that MPs with a BAME background do ask more questions about the status of immigrants and ethnic minorities in British society. However, it also demonstrates that all MPs in the sample were responsive to the demographic composition of their constituencies, irrespective of the MP’s own ethnic background. Both effects – the personal traits of the MP and the socio-demographic composition of the MP’s constituency – are found to be positive and statistically significant in most of the models fitted. The differences between minority and non-minority MPs are particularly strong in constituencies with relatively high shares of non-White residents.
All of these findings are highly tentative and need further corroboration. Given the small number of visible-minority MPs in the UK and other European democracies, a comparative cross-national approach is the only feasible way of reducing the small-n problem so typical for such studies. The increasing presence of minority MPs in the British House of Commons elected in 2010 (and other European parliaments elected in recent years) suggests that it will be possible to expand the scope of such investigations in the future, allowing researchers to compare across time as well as across space. In this context, parliamentary questions provide a good, usually well-documented source of information on parliamentary activity that exists in most parliamentary democracies, although the rules governing their use vary.
7. References


