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Representing Women, Women Representing: Backbenchers' Questions during Prime Minister's Questions, 1979-2010

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Abstract:

This article investigates linguistic traces of changing trends in the substantive representation of women and broader representational claims related to constituencies, via an analysis of all backbench questions posed during Prime Minister's Questions in the UK House of Commons, 1979-2010. We investigate the impact of sharp increases in female MPs and left-wing female MPs in particular, and the presence of a left-wing government on MPs' talk about women and about constituencies. We find no evidence of curvilinear trends in talk about women related to changes in government and female parliamentary presence. We also find that female MPs can be considered critical actors with regard to constituency talk.

The question of "Who speaks for women?" is one that is often posed by those who are interested, particularly within a parliamentary setting, in the substantive representation of women. We report evidence that sheds light on this and related questions, on parliamentary speech, and on the (gendered) foci of parliamentary questions, by analysing all backbench questions posed during Prime Minister's Questions in the UK House of Commons between 1979 and 2010. Through hypotheses concerned with the impact of a sharp increase in the proportion of female (left-wing) MPs to more than 15% in 1997 and the presence of a left-wing government, we explore the nature and extent of changes in the representative priorities and language of (different groups of) backbench MPs. Specifically, we focus on three linguistic traces of broad trends concerning representation in terms of both the substantive representation of women and more widely; these are: the word *women*[i], the semantic domain 'PEOPLE: FEMALE', and variants of the word *constituency*.

Scholarship concerning the substantive representation of women often advocates close reading of texts to identify and analyse representative claims (Celis *et al.* 2014; see also Squires 2008). While recognising the importance of such approaches, we take here a different but complementary route, using corpus linguistic techniques to identify and analyse patterns in the use of language during Prime Minister's Questions across parliamentary groupings, and specifically in the occurrence of significant topics. Corpus linguistics is a method for analysing large quantities of digitally-stored, authentic language, using specialised software. In place of *a priori* decisions about what the analyst expects to find, the corpus linguistic approach reveals statistically significant linguistic items, which are then available for further classification and interpretation. This approach not only provides an excellent basis for choosing small(er) amounts of text which can subsequently be closely read, but is also an important end in itself. That is, it allows for the identification and analysis of patterns and trends in language use relating to the substantive representation of women and (gendered) representational claims over an extended period (thirty years) in a large corpus (approximately 28,000 questions).

Our research, thus, provides insights into the gendered nature of policy agendas and parliamentary questions and changes in and between these agendas and questions over time. We find evidence that the presence of female MPs is associated with increases in the predisposition of all backbenchers to talk about constituency matters, especially post-1997 when there was a sharp increase in left-wing female MPs and a near doubling of the proportion of female representatives in total. Female MPs became even more likely to raise these issues post-1997 and male MPs behaved more like their female counterparts in this regard over time. However, there is little evidence to suggest that changes in the proportion of female MPs both overall and within parties, or changes in government, had any impact on the willingness of backbench MPs taken as a whole, and female backbenchers in particular, to talk about women. Talk about women by female MPs increases after 1997 but only proportionately, rather than curvilinearly, and there is mixed evidence for any change in male MPs' talk. These findings, then, raise questions about which sets of conditions are key in enabling (advancements in) the substantive representation of women in this and similar parliamentary institutions.

The article contains six sections. We begin by providing an overview of Prime Minister's Questions and changes to the number of female MPs over time, before contextualising our study in the literature on women's representation from which the hypotheses are derived. We then discuss the corpus linguistic methods used, outline and discuss our findings, and conclude by identifying the implications of the study.

Prime Minister's Questions and Women in the UK Parliament

Since its inception in 1961, Prime Minister's Questions has offered all backbenchers, the Leader of the Opposition and the leader of the third largest party (if not in government) a regular opportunity to pose (topical) questions on aspects of government policy and responsibility to the Prime Minister. Before 1997, Prime Minister's Questions was a twice-weekly event lasting 15 minutes; since 1997, it has been a

once-weekly event lasting 30 minutes. The Leader of the Opposition and the leader of the third party are always entitled to pose up to six and two questions respectively and these questions can be on any topics they wish. Backbench MPs can pose questions in two ways: they can table questions beforehand with questioners being selected by ballot, or they can catch the eye of the Speaker during Prime Minister's Questions and be called to ask a question.

The first questioner for each session usually asks the Prime Minister to list their engagements for the day and then, after receiving a response, poses a supplementary question that relates to any aspect of the Prime Minister's responsibilities and nearly any aspect of the actions and policies of the government as a whole. This kind of question is known as an 'open' and 'non-transferable' question, as it cannot be transferred to another Minister or Department. Since 1997, subsequent backbench questioners usually only pose the supplementary question, as the tabled question regarding engagements has already been answered[ii]. The other kind of question sometimes posed is a 'closed' question. These are on specific topics tabled beforehand, and allow the Prime Minister to read out ready-prepared answers. The supplementary question must then relate to the specific topic under consideration, although it is not known by the Prime Minister beforehand[iii].

Beyond changes to the length and frequency, Prime Minister's Questions has been a relatively stable parliamentary institution in terms of both purpose and format, particularly since Margaret Thatcher's election in 1979 when the posing and answering of open, non-transferable questions became the norm (Bates *et al.* 2014, 258). Moreover, since the advent of sound broadcasting in 1978, it has been the highest profile parliamentary event bar none (Riddell 1998).

Prime Minister's Questions is often criticised for 'providing scrutiny by screech' (Bercow 2010) with its worthwhileness questioned (for an overview of criticism, see Bates et al. 2014: 253-4). Bates *et al.* (2014) found that a sizable minority of questions posed during Prime Minister's Questions were either *unanswerable* – designed deliberately to provoke discomfort and/or evasion – or *helpful* – posed

to prompt the Prime Minister to set out the government's position and/or attack the opposition. These criticisms, findings and practices call into question the value of analysing questions posed during Prime Minister's Questions.

While recognising these issues, we argue that Prime Minister's Questions remains a useful access point to studying the priorities and concerns of parliamentarians, especially with regard to the substantive representation of women. According to Lovenduski, it is a political ritual which supports a traditional masculine gender regime within Parliament and has a "crucial political representation dimension" (2012, 315). It is prominent both within Parliament and among the public; the frequent references to constituents (Bevan & John 2016) means that it is a parliamentary institution where the public have the most 'presence'; and it covers a broader range of issues in comparison to the narrower concerns of other parliamentary institutions, such as departmental question time (Bevan & John 2016, 61; Bates *et al.* 2018). It must also be noted that, in Bates *et al.*'s (2014) sample, between approximately 60% and 80% of questions posed to each Prime Minister were standard (i.e. straightforward) questions. Even non-straightforward questions must still have a particular issue as the hook with which to criticise, or praise, the government. It is in this context that a number of scholars have found Prime Minister's Questions, and parliamentary questions more broadly, illuminating as a vehicle to study the (changing) agendas, values, behaviour and language of parliamentarians (e.g. Bevan and John (2016); Martin (2012); Saalfeld (2011); Soroka *et al.* (2009); Vliegenthart & Walgrave (2011); and Vliegenthart *et al.* (2016)). We follow along such a pathway by focusing on all backbench questions posed during Prime Minister's Questions between the 1979 and 2010 UK general elections.

We focus on backbench questions because, as Norris and Lovenduski argue (2003, 99), choice of parliamentary questions is a legislative activity, especially within systems with strong party control, where backbenchers have more autonomy. Moreover, in their analysis of Prime Minister's Questions, Bevan and John (2016) find that both the government and opposition backbenches drive the agendas of

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the frontbenches and change the attention of the government. Prime Minister's Questions is important politically because it provides an opportunity for backbenchers not merely to air their own concerns and interests but also, potentially, to "shape the policy agenda in different ways, adding meaning to parliamentary debates" (Bevan & John, 2016, 80). It is thus, potentially, an important site of the substantive representation of women, one where critical actors can channel demands from a variety of sources into parliament and government.

We focus on the period 1979-2010, not only because Prime Minister's Questions has been a relatively stable institution since 1979, but also because it covers a period during which there was a relatively large shift in the proportion of female MPs in the House of Commons (*Figures 1-2*). The period covers seven Parliaments, 31 parliamentary sessions and two administrations: the Conservative Governments of 1979-97 under Prime Ministers Margaret Thatcher (1979-90) and John Major (1990-97); and the Labour Governments of 1997-2010 under Tony Blair (1997-2007) and Gordon Brown (2007-2010). During this period, the proportion of female MPs rose from 3.0% (the second lowest proportion of female MPs post-World War II) to 19.8%; the key time being 1997, which saw the number of female MPs double (Kelly & Everett 2017). 1997 also saw a change in balance between female MPs from the two main parties in the House of Commons. Until 1997 and excepting 1945, both the Conservative and Labour parties provided at least a quarter of female MPs. While Labour normally provided the majority, this was not always the case and often the majority was relatively small. However, between the 1997 and 2010 general elections, female Labour MPs provided at least three quarters of female MPs (and approximately 15% of all MPs), while Conservative female MPs provided less than a seventh.
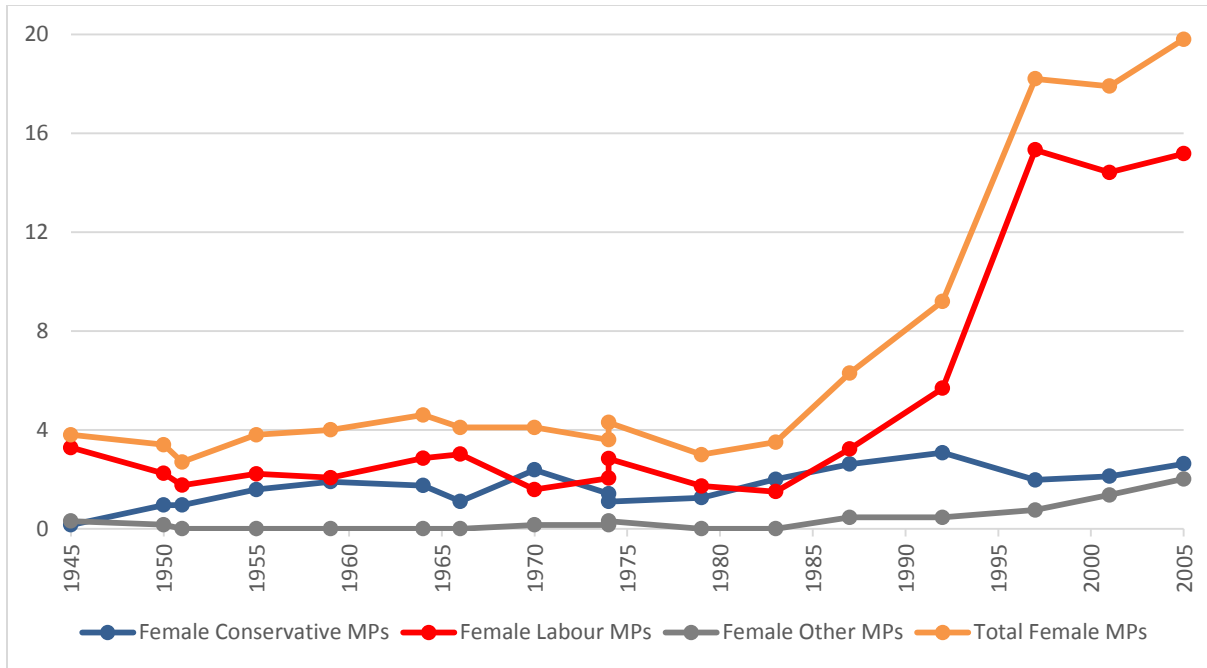
Figure 1: Percentage of Female MPs as Proportion of House of Commons after General Election, 1945-2005
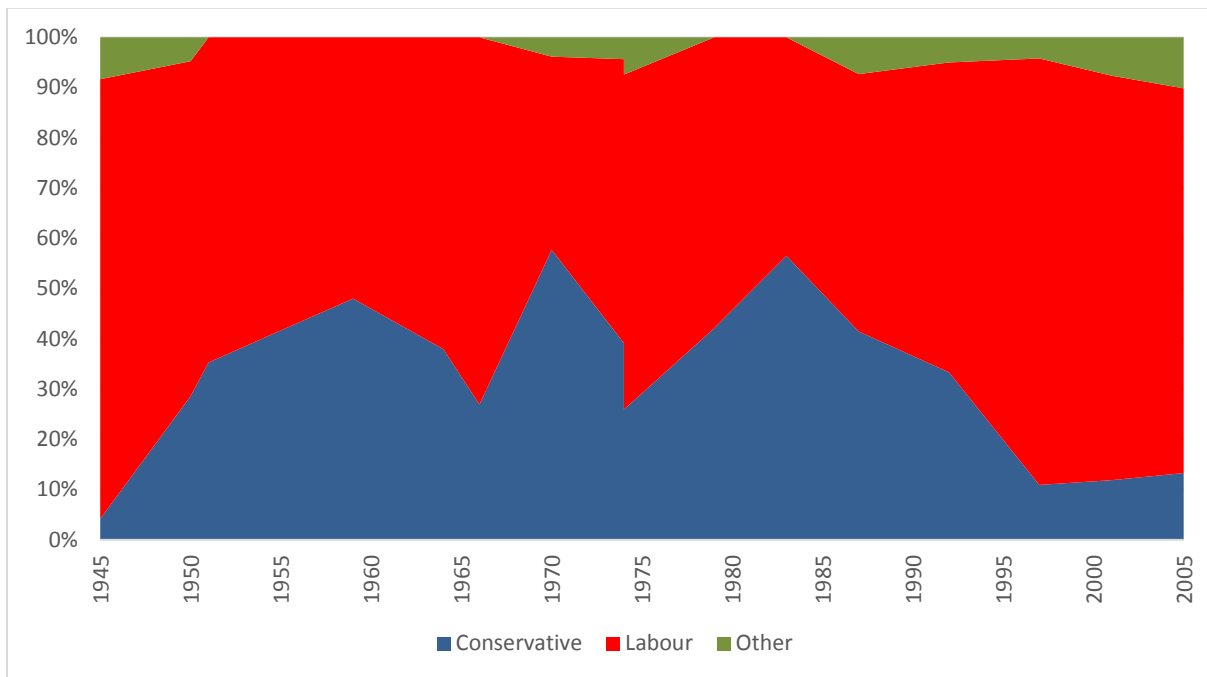

Figure 2: Percentage of Female MPs from Conservative, Labour & Other Parties at General Election, 1945-2005

As such, backbench questions posed during this parliamentary institution during this period provide an excellent vehicle for a longitudinal study of the changing nature of the substantive representation of women, as well as the changing nature of broader representational claims.

The Representation of Women within Parliament

In the wake of Pitkin's work on the concept of representation (1967) and Phillips' work on the politics of presence (1995), most literature on female representation concentrates on the relationship, if any, between the descriptive representation of women – the extent to which female presence within institutions reflects their presence within society – and their substantive representation – the extent to which representatives act for women and promote women's interests (see Wängnerud (2009) for an overview). As Childs (2006) argues, increasing the number of female representatives does not necessarily deliver, in a straightforward way, the substantive representation of women (see also Cowell-Meyers & Langbein 2009), as any relationship between the two is probabilistic rather than deterministic (Mackay 2008). This has led many away from critical mass theory towards alternative approaches to studying the substantive representation of women and away from questions such as 'When do women representatives make a difference?' towards those such as 'When and under which conditions does the substantive representation of women occur?' (Celis 2012, 525; Beckwith & Cowell-Meyers 2007, 561). Celis *et al.* (2008) rethink the substantive representation of women in order to shift research away from: critical mass towards critical actors (Childs & Krook 2006, 2009); a sole focus on female representatives towards a recognition of important differences among women and the possibility of men acting on behalf of women as a group; and a focus on policy change and MPs towards other political sites, actors and modes of political representation as well. They posit a research agenda organised around four questions concerning the who, where, why and how of the substantive representation of women in order to open up the definition of the substantive representation of women and avoid *a priori* decisions

about the actors, sites, motivation and outcomes of the substantive representation of women (see also Mackay 2008).

Beckwith & Cowell-Meyers (2007) are similarly critical of critical mass theory. They argue that no threshold number has been established to mark the boundary between female representatives being effective or otherwise, and that the mechanisms by which increases in the descriptive representation of women turn into advances in the substantive representation of women are unspecified (2007, 553). To overcome these issues, they theorise the interactions between sheer numbers of women and conducive policy-making contexts to identify conditions within democratic political systems under which the substantive representation of women can be achieved. In order to develop more powerful and subtle hypotheses, they identify three sets of factors that "provide the greatest analytical and explanatory leverage" concerning the substantive representation of women: sheer numbers of women; conducive parliamentary contexts (namely, the (secure) presence of a left-wing party/coalition in government); and conducive civil society contexts (such as the vitality of feminist movements and any counter-movements, and favourable public opinion) (2007, 556). With regard to sheer numbers, Beckwith & Cowell-Meyers talk of a 'critical representational threshold' of 15%, stating:

> There appears to be general agreement that a critical range of between 15 and 30 per cent of women in a national or regional body, from parties across the political spectrum, is necessary for women to influence the *agenda* or *style of business* within that body or its *policy outputs* (2007, 556, emphasis added; see also Beckwith 2007; Wängnerud 2009).

In terms of influencing the policy outputs, agenda or style of business, most attention has been placed on policy outputs and, specifically, legislative activity in the form of initiating, accompanying, voting on and implementing legislation in favour of women (Celis 2006, 86; Celis 2008, 113). As Piscopo argues, "despite claims that female legislators may transform politics in ways beyond changing statutes, few studies address changes not measured by counting representatives and categorising policies" (2011,

449). Among the few – and, perhaps, eight years later, now longer not so few – studies which take a different approach are those which concentrate on the language used in the representation of women and, usually, on speeches within parliamentary and legislative debates[iv]. The attractions of such a focus on parliamentary speech are obvious: as Catalano argues, "[T]he floor of the parliament is perhaps the best forum for women literally to make their voices heard" (2009, 51).

Drawing on these research agendas concerning the substantive representation of women and predominantly on the approach advocated by Beckwith and Cowell-Meyers, the present article contributes to this strand of research concerning parliamentary speech by exploring the substantive representation of women and the representational foci of all backbenchers, whether female or male, as expressed through the language used in questions posed during Prime Minister's Questions.

In relation to the substantive representation of women, our first two hypotheses are informed by Beckwith and Cowell-Meyers' claims that:

> It is likely that the higher the percentage of women elected to a national legislature, the more conducive the conditions [for the substantive representation of women]. In addition, because most empirical research has found a strong relationship between women's representation within left-wing parliamentary groups or caucuses, we expect that high numbers of left-wing women elected to national legislatures will similarly effect women-friendly public policy (2007, 557).

Moreover, increases in the number of female politicians have been found to have positive, curvilinear effects on the substantive representation of women (Beckwith 2007, 38; Bratton & Ray 2002), rather than simply proportionate ones. This, it is argued, is not only because female politicians are emboldened by increases in their numbers (Kanter 1977a, 1977b), but also because these increases in numbers will have an accelerating effect on the willingness of male politicians to speak on subjects associated with the substantive representation of women (Studlar & McAllister 2002). So, our first hypothesis is:

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H1: After 1997, when the percentage of women elected to the House of Commons rose above 15 percent for the first time, women's substantive representation during Prime Minister's Questions will be greater than before, and curvilinear.

Our second hypothesis focuses on party differences and the impact of left-wing female MPs and governments. In their analysis of Prime Minister's Questions, Bevan and John (2016) find that Government and Opposition MPs approach Prime Minister's Questions differently, as reflected in the topics of questions they pose, with Opposition questions being driven by political saliency and a desire to challenge and discomfort the Government. In their focus on 'sheer numbers', Beckwith and Cowell-Meyers expect "that high numbers of left-wing women elected to national legislators will… effect women-friendly public policy" (2007, 557). In their focus on parliamentary context, they suggest that a left-wing party securely in government similarly provides the most conducive legislative environment for the substantive representation of women. These conditions prevailed in the UK between 1997 and 2010. In 1997 and 2001, the centre-left Labour Party entered and remained in government with the largest and second largest majorities in the post-war period respectively; the 2005-10 Labour Government had the 7th largest majority out of the 20 post-war governments. At the same time, in 1997, the percentage of Labour female MPs in the party and in the House of Commons rose from 13.7% and 5.7% respectively to 24.2% and 15.3% respectively, proportions that were to remain broadly similar until 2010[v]. As such, our second hypothesis is:

H2: Female Labour MPs will talk most about women and women's issues during Prime Minister's Questions and, after 1997, when the Labour Party was in Government with large majorities and the percentage of female Labour MPs was approximately 15% of the total number of MPs, women's substantive representation will be greater than before, and curvilinear.

Our third hypothesis focuses on constituency talk, broadening out our focus from the substantive representation of women to wider representational claims and the (gendered) priorities and

foci of MPs as expressed through parliamentary questions. It allows us to explore Lovenduski and Norris'

concern (2003, 89 & 97) with whether the influx of female MPs in 1997 affected, in this instance, one

important aspect of the political discourse and content of Prime Minister's Questions. In their analysis of

Prime Minister's Questions, Bevan and John conclude that backbenchers think discussion of

constituency interests is important (2016, 80) and that "Prime Minister's Questions is one of the most

public ways that MPs can express their concern and represent the views of their constituents, as the

frequent references to them in their questions indicate" (2016, 69). In general, women have been found

to focus politically more on the local level: Coffé (2013) finds that women have a greater interest in local

politics than men and that women are more interested in local politics than national and or international

politics; Norris and Lovenduski (1995, 213-24) find that women give a higher priority to constituency

work within legislatures than men. If female MPs are similar in these regards to women in general, then

we would expect them to have a greater interest in constituency matters. Therefore, also taking into

account Beckwith and Cowell-Meyers' claims, our third hypothesis is:

> *H3: Female MPs will talk about constituency issues more than their male counterparts and such*
>
> *talk will increase curvilinearly after 1997 and the increase in the proportion of female MPs to*
>
> *above 15%.*

Data and Methods

The corpus containing every utterance during all sessions of Prime Minister's Questions

between the general elections in 1979 and 2010 comprises 4,470,576 words and 31,656 different word

types. It was constructed by downloading transcripts for all sessions of Prime Minister's Questions from

1979 to 2010 from Hansard, the edited verbatim official report of proceedings of Parliament[vi], creating

transcripts of Prime Minister's Questions under the premierships of Margaret Thatcher, John Major,

Tony Blair and Gordon Brown. Each transcript was processed so as to be analysable with specialist linguistic software, with every turn tagged to indicate the speaker uttering it[vii].

The sub-corpus under consideration here comprises the speaking turns of all backbenchers during this period. During the 994.5 sessions of Prime Minister's Questions, 28,313 turns[viii] were taken by up to[ix] 1,425 backbenchers, which provides us with a corpus for analysis of 1,485,977 words and 25,257 different word types. This sub-corpus was constructed by using the software XTractor (Heuboeck & Thompson 2009) to extract the turns of all backbenchers for each parliamentary session between 1979 and 2010 and, subsequently, various groupings by particular periods (e.g. all backbench MPs between 1979-97, or female Labour MPs 2005-10). In terms of party, we focus only on MPs from the Conservative and Labour parties. Between 1979 and 2010, these parties were either in government or were the official opposition and comprised at least 85% of all MPs. Moreover, all other parties at some points during this period had no female representatives, making comparisons impossible. All outputs were then analysed using corpus-analysis software, Wmatrix (Rayson 2009).

Wmatrix allows for comparisons of words and semantic domains[x] across different corpora and, in turn, the identification of key words and key semantic domains - that is, words and semantic domains "whose frequency is unusually high in comparison with some norm" (Smith 2015, 228). The order of key words or key semantic domains is produced by using both an effect-size metric and a statistical significance threshold. Effect size "indicates the magnitude of an observed finding" (Rosenfeld & Penrod 2011, 342, cited in Gabrielatos & Marchi 2012). We use the effect-size metric, *%DIFF*, which indicates the proportion of the difference between the normalised frequencies of a word, or semantic domain, in two (sub-)corpora (Gabrielatos & Marchi 2012). The measure of statistical significance used is *Log-likelihood* which shows the level of statistical significance of the differences observed in the comparison of (sub-)corpora. All our findings use a threshold of at least *p*<.05 before listing the remaining key words or semantic domains by %DIFF.

In order to investigate changes in the substantive representation of women, we focus on the single word 'women' and the semantic domain 'PEOPLE: FEMALE', which captures not only the use of words such as *woman/women,* but also *girl(s), Mrs, suffragette(s), etc.* In order to investigate constituency talk, we focus on the word stem 'constituen-' (i.e. the stem of the words *constituent(s)*, *constituency* and *constituency*). It is important to make clear that our method does not rely only on frequencies and statistically significant contrasts, but also facilitates the identification of patterns in the use of single words and words in combination. For example, concordances of the word 'women' in context illustrate both where it occurs in semi-fixed phrases such as 'service men and women', and where the question is more directly focused on women specifically, as in 'employment prospects for women'. We recognise, therefore, that not all uses of these linguistic traces relate straightforwardly to raising women's interests[xi]. However, they do all relate to representational claims of some kind about women. Our focus on these linguistic traces, therefore, offers a valid and fruitful approach to exploring patterns in the use of language related (directly) to the substantive representation of women over a considerable period of time and by a significant number of representatives.

Results

The substantive representation of women during Prime Minister's Questions

There is good evidence that the transition between a Conservative and Labour administration in 1997 is associated with a rise in the substantive representation of women during Prime Minister's Questions. Both PEOPLE: FEMALE and *women* are much more prevalent in the utterances of backbenchers during 1997-2010 than during 1979-1997 (Table 1)[xii]. Furthermore, when comparing parliaments to preceding and succeeding ones, 1997-2001 appears to indicate a step-change in the substantive representation of women. PEOPLE: FEMALE is ranked highly when comparing the 1997-2001 parliament to its predecessor and does not appear as key in any other comparisons between parliaments and their

predecessors/successors, suggesting an otherwise level trajectory both before and after this parliament. The word *women* is similarly ranked highly when comparing keywords between 1997-2001 and 1992-97.

There is overwhelming evidence from the data that it is female MPs who speak most about women (Table 2). When comparing female backbenchers to their male counterparts, PEOPLE: FEMALE is the most key domain both overall, and by each administration by a wide margin, with *women* being ranked highly across all these periods too. When comparing by Parliament, again, female backbenchers consistently tend to speak about women more than their male counterparts, whatever the proportion of female MPs in the House of Commons (Table 3).

However, once we move beyond these comparisons, more nuanced and, perhaps, less expected pictures emerge. When we focus solely on female backbench MPs – either altogether or by party – and compare their utterances both by administration and with respect to preceding and succeeding parliaments, we find that there is little, if any, evidence of a curvilinear interest in women.

We compared all utterances by female backbenchers by administration, and found no indication of any step-changes in the amount women and women's interests are spoken of. The semantic domain PEOPLE: FEMALE and the word *women* (or any synonym) do not appear at any robust level of significance when comparing 1979-1997 to 1997-2010 or *vice versa*. When looking across parliaments, it is only 1987-92 in comparison with 1992-97 that shows key semantic domains and key words associated with the substantive representation of women [xiii], suggesting an end-of-Thatcher effect.

Similar results are found when comparing female Labour backbenchers across both administrations and parliaments. Again, there is no indication of any significant changes in the substantive representation of women when comparing administrations and, when comparing parliaments, it is only 1979-83 in comparison with 1983-87 which stands out. There is evidence here which suggests that female Labour MPs who spoke in Prime Minister's Questions during this parliament showed a heightened regard for the substantive representation of women in comparison to their

immediate successors[xiv]. When focusing on Conservative female backbench MPs, there is some evidence, albeit not strong, that they were more concerned with the substantive representation of women pre-1997[xv]. In a comparison of parliaments, similarly to the findings for all female backbenchers, it is 1987-92 in comparison to its successor that contains a heightened focus on the substantive representation of women among Conservative female backbenchers[xvi].

In support of aspects of the findings above, comparisons of female backbenchers from the two main parties show that there is some evidence, albeit not particularly strong, that female Conservative backbenchers spoke less about women than their female Labour counterparts post-1997[xvii] with 1997 again appearing to be the turning point[xviii] (Table 4).

When attention is turned to male backbenchers, a different pattern emerges. There is some evidence that male backbench MPs were more concerned with the substantive representation of women post-1997[xix], especially male Conservative MPs. Before 1997, male Labour MPs were more likely to speak about women than their male Conservative counterparts[xx] but there is no difference post-1997. Furthermore, male Conservative MPs talk more about women under the Labour administration post-1997 in comparison to under the Conservative administration pre-1997[xxi], whereas there is no discernible difference in the proportion of utterances concerned with women's issues among male Labour MPs across the two periods.

Constituency Talk

From 1992 until 2005, there is clear evidence that backbench MPs spoke increasingly more about constituents and constituencies. This trend began during the 1992-97 parliament but really accelerated during 1997-2001, before slowing down during 2001-05 and declining during 2005-10 (Table 5). This development is perhaps shown more starkly when the two administrations are compared (Table 6); all forms of *constituen-* are much more likely to appear post-1997.

Similar patterns are found when analysing sub-groups. Both female and male backbenchers were more likely – sometimes much more likely – to talk about constituents and constituencies after 1997 (see Table 7). For male backbenchers, the pattern in relation to individual parliaments mirrors the pattern for all backbenchers with the trend beginning during 1992-97, before reaching its apotheosis during 2001-05 and then reversing during 2005-10 (Table 8). With regard to sub-sub-groups, both female and male Conservative backbenchers and female and male Labour backbenchers – and especially male Conservative and Labour MPs – were more likely to talk about constituents and constituencies after 1997 (Table 9). There is also evidence that it was female MPs who led this development. When comparing female backbenchers to their male counterparts over the whole time period between 1979 and 2010, over the Conservative administration (1979-97), and over the Labour administration (1997-2010), they consistently produced more constituency talk (Table 10).

This gendered pattern is repeated when focusing on individual parliaments (Table 10), although only to a certain extent and intermittently (during the 1979-83, 1997-2001, and 2005-10 parliaments). For the 1979-83 and 1997-2001 parliaments, the findings suggest that there were spikes in constituency talk among female MPs and then a period during which their male counterparts caught up in terms of usage. For 2005-10, the findings show that female MPs continued to talk about constituents and constituencies to the same degree, while constituency talk among male MPs fell back. At no point, either over an entire administration or during individual Parliaments, do male backbenchers refer to *constituen-* more often than female backbenchers, either as a whole group, or when comparing Labour or Conservative male backbenchers with their female party counterparts. However, Labour female backbenchers were much more likely to speak about constituents and constituencies than their male counterparts: (i) over the whole period between 1979 and 2010; (ii) over the Conservative administration between 1979 and 1997; (iii) over the Labour administration between 1997 and 2010; and (iv) during the 1992-97, 1997-2001 and 2005-10 parliaments (Table 11). Moreover, Conservative

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female backbenchers were more likely than their male counterparts to speak about such matters both over the whole period (1979-2010) and while the Conservatives were in power before 1997 (Table 12).

These findings suggest that the 1997-2001 period was significant, a view strengthened by the fact that, when focusing on female backbenchers overall and by party, it was the only Parliament compared to its predecessors for which a variant of *constituen-* was a key word (Table 13)[xxii]. This suggests a step-change by female backbenchers in the frequency of referring to constituents and constituencies at the time when the number of female MPs doubled, which was not seen at other times. Furthermore, this step-change occurred for female backbenchers from both parties. Although there is some evidence that female Labour backbenchers were more likely to talk about constituents and constituencies over the whole period[xxiii]; the only Parliament during which a similar trend occurs is 1992-97[xxiv]. This suggests that female Conservative MPs had caught up with their Labour counterparts during the 1997-2001 Parliament and then female MPs from both parties increased their constituency talk at the same rate.

Discussion

With regard to the first two hypotheses, the increase in female MPs to above 15% in 1997 does correspond with an increase in talk about women. The 1997-2001 Parliament shows a step-change and the establishment of a new normal and higher level of talk about women during Prime Minister's Questions, which is then consistently maintained until 2010. However, this increase is proportionate, rather than curvilinear, and related to the increase of female Labour MPs as a proportion of the total number of MPs. The only group of MPs which talks about women more often post-1997 is, from a comparatively low base, male Conservative MPs, but this does not have a curvilinear effect on total talk about women, as female and male Labour MPs talk about women in the same proportions as they did previously, and female Conservative MPs talk about them less.

The increase in talk about women post-1997 is, therefore, not because of any increase in the likelihood of backbenchers to talk about women and women's issues. Female MPs in general and female Labour MPs in particular continue to talk about women with the same propensity; there are simply more female Labour MPs so talk about women is scaled up. Thus, there is little evidence that sheer numbers of female representatives and left-wing female representatives in particular, nor the (secure) presence of a left-wing government, make any difference to the propensity of backbenchers overall to talk about women during Prime Minister's Questions. Moreover, these findings cannot be explained due to the 'newness' or inexperience of female representatives (Beckwith 2007). There was little turnover of MPs at the 2001 general election after the large influx of new Labour MPs in 1997, and therefore issues concerning inexperience among a large, new cohort of MPs would have dissipated. Yet female Labour MPs do not talk about women proportionately more during the 2001-05 parliament as compared with during 1997-2001 (nor during 2005-10 as compared to 2001-05).

With regard to Conservative MPs, the comparative reduction in talking about women by Conservative female MPs and the comparative increase among Conservative male MPs occurs at the time, post-1997, when the balance among female representatives between Conservative and Labour MPs tilts sharply in favour of Labour and when Labour enter Government with a historically large majority. These findings suggest opposing processes in play. In connection with Conservative female MPs, Bevan and John (2016) find that opposition backbenchers use questions to discomfort the Government. Given what had happened in terms of female presence and parliamentary arithmetic, it is plausible to suggest that female Conservative MPs decided that success in terms of causing governmental discomfort would be found more successfully elsewhere than in relation to the substantive representation of women. In connection with Conservative male MPs, previous research has shown that contributions to debates on 'women's issues' by male centre-right politicians tends to be in an anti-feminist direction (Evans 2012). Whether that was so during Prime Minister's Questions with

male Conservative MPs acting as 'norm reactionaries' (Mackay 2008, 131) remains to be seen (and is the focus of on-going research). Whatever the case, the upturn in talk about women among right-wing men suggests the politicisation of women's issues among this group of representatives, whether in the form of political contestation over particular concerns traditionally associated with women, and women's presence and visibility within the political sphere or, more positively, appeals to (particular parts of) the electorate and the widening of political agendas among different groups of politicians.

Our third hypothesis concerned the greater interest in local politics identified generally among women than men (Coffé 2013). We found that female backbenchers were more likely than male backbenchers to talk about constituents and constituencies over the period. Rather than this tendency being persistent across all or most parliaments, it appears to be caused by spikes during the 1979-83 and 1997-2001 parliaments, when female MPs as a whole increased talk about such matters, after which male MPs then increased their talk until parity was once again achieved. The comparative decrease in constituency talk among male MPs during 2005-10 does raise questions about whether a gender difference in attitudes towards constituency matters is re-appearing – without data for 2010 onwards it is impossible to say – but, whatever the case, constituency talk among male MPs during 2005-10 was of a similar level to during 1997-2001 and much more prevalent than during 1992-97. This suggests that, if a gender difference re-appears, it will do so from a higher base point than previously.

Moreover, although the broad trend of an increase in constituency talk began during the 1992-97 parliament, the 1997-2001 parliament appears to be key, in that it was the only one where constituency talk was much more prevalent in comparison to the preceding parliament. This holds among female backbenchers as a whole and among both Conservative and Labour female backbenchers. The sharp increase in female MPs post-1997 corresponds with a step change in their proclivity to talk about constituents and constituencies that was not repeated elsewhere, and that preceded changes in constituency talk among male MPs. These findings suggest that, in this instance,

increases in female MPs to above the critical representational threshold of 15% are associated with curvilinear changes in representational claims about constituents and constituencies and with institutionalising a concern with constituency matters among all backbenchers.

Conclusion

Prime Minister's Questions matters, and not simply because it provides an opportunity for MPs to demonstrate their values and priorities in the questions they pose, or less charitably, participate in parliamentary theatrics and partisan manoeuvring. It also provides,, as Bevan and John show, an opportunity for backbenchers to change the attention of government, shape the policy agenda and add meaning to parliamentary debates (2016, 80). Moreover, Prime Minister's Questions provides prominent opportunities, albeit not unproblematic ones, for forms of 'horizontal' accountability that, according to Mackay, are an important plank of substantive representation (2008, 134).

MPs do talk about women during Prime Minister's Questions. However, given that female MPs talk about women with a higher propensity than their male colleagues, the extremely low proportion of female MPs over much of the period under consideration, the still relatively low minority status of female MPs over the rest, and the lack of significant curvilinear trends, our findings suggest that women's issues are not included proportionately. The substantive representation of women does take place within Prime Minister's Questions but under suboptimal, constraining conditions. This suggests that changes in sheer numbers or government have little impact on the propensity of backbenchers to speak about women, and has ramifications for the substantive representation of women not only in this forum but also throughout Parliament and government.

Beckwith and Cowell-Meyers (2007) identify three major sets of factors that offer the greatest analytical and explanatory leverage concerning the substantive representation of women. Our research does not (and, because of its design, cannot) analyse the third set of factors concerning the impact of

civil society contexts. However, our findings do indicate that the favourable conditions identified by Beckwith and Cowell-Meyers relating to sheer numbers (increases in female MPs and left-wing female MPs above the critical representational threshold of 15%), and conducive parliamentary contexts (a left-wing party (securely) in government) do not appear to have a curvilinear impact on the substantive representation of women during Prime Minister's Questions. Any increases represent a scaling up in relation to increases in female Labour MPs, with little evidence of critical actors emboldening others – or, indeed, themselves – to promote the substantive representation of women. Furthermore, other variables concerning incumbency and newness, often posited as having analytical leverage, also appear to be unimportant in this context. These findings, which go against expectations, point towards the *where*, rather than the *when* or *who*, of the substantive representation of women. They also highlight the importance of gendered institutional design, in this instance concerning the traditionally masculine, ritualistic aspects of Prime Minister's Questions (Lovenduski 2012), in explaining the absence of (significant) change in the patterns found in the substantive representation of women among different groups of backbenchers.

A different picture emerges when we turn away from the substantive representation of women and towards broader (gendered) representational concerns and agendas voiced during Prime Minister's Questions and (gendered) styles of business relating to the framing of parliamentary questions. We focused on language concerning constituents and constituencies and our findings suggest that the critical actors of representative claims in this regard are female MPs, and that increases in female representation above 15% coincided with a curvilinear increase in such talk among all backbenchers. Such findings perhaps point towards retaining, alongside those questions concerned with the who, where, why and how of the substantive representation of women, unfashionable questions concerned with when female representatives make a difference. Abandoning such questions completely may mean we diminish our ability to uncover and illuminate otherwise potentially ignored (gendered) practices and

agendas beyond the substantive representation of women that are of democratic import and which

speak to the concerns of representatives and citizens alike.

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[i] We distinguish between words and semantic domains by using *italics* for the former and SMALL CAPS for the latter.

[ii] Before this point, all MPs would have to call out the number of the question on the Order Paper and receive a formulaic response from the Prime Minister before posing the supplementary question.

[iii] For more in-depth overviews of Prime Minister's Questions, see Bates *et al.* (2014); Bates *et al.* (2018); Bevan & John (2016, 61-4); and Coe & Kelly (2009).

[iv] See, for example, Blaxill & Beelen 2016; Catalano 2009; Childs, Evan & Webb 2013; Cramer Walsh 2002; Evans 2012; Piscopo 2011; Sainsbury 2004; Tremblay 1998; Trimble 1998; Xydias 2013.

[v] Some scholars posit that the newness of female MPs, a necessary complement to large increases in female parliamentary presence, undermines their ability to promote the substantive representation of women (Beckwith 2007; see also Childs 2004). This may be the case and can be considered using our research design. Our hypothesis, though, concentrates on those variables deemed by Beckwith and Cowell-Meyers to have the strongest analytical leverage concerning the substantive representation of women (2007, 560).

[vi] Scholars (Slembrouck 1992; Mollin 2007) have noted that, due to the editing process, Hansard is not necessarily suitable for close linguistic analysis but, as our analysis is primarily concerned with the content of the utterances, rather than their expression, Hansard is entirely suitable for our purposes.

[vii] Details of the cleaning and tagging process are included in Holden Bates & Sealey (2019a), which can be found at https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.7498202.

[viii] The number of turns is greater than the number of questions posed because an interrupted question is counted as two turns by the software.

[ix] This is due to MPs who switched parties being given more than one unique identifier.

[x] Semantic domains are groups of "word senses that are related by virtue of their being connected at some level of generality with the same mental concept" (Archer *et al.* 2002). In Wmatrix, the semantic tagset has a multi-tier structure with twenty-one major discourse fields, each of which has a number of sub-divisions (http://ucrel.lancs.ac.uk/usas/USASSemanticTagset.pdf).

[xi] On-going research, following on from our focus here, addresses this issue by classifying talk about women during PMQs in terms of concordances, collocations, policy agendas and (anti-)feminist claims and in relation to those who pose the question.

[xii] Due to issues of space, the ranking tables are not included here but in Holden Bates & Sealey (2019b) which can be found at https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.7498166.

[xiii] When comparing the utterances of all female backbenchers during the 1987-92 Parliament in comparison with 1992-97, 178 key semantic domains were identified overall. Applying a *p*-value threshold of .01 results in 9 semantic domains being listed. Of these 9 semantic domains, the sub-domain, PEOPLE: FEMALE is ranked 6th (such calculations henceforth expressed in the following format: 6/9 (*p*<.01; 178 overall)). *Women* is ranked 7/7 (*p*<.001; 1631 overall).

[xiv] PEOPLE: FEMALE is ranked 2/2 (*p*<.001; 162 overall); *women* is ranked 11/13 (*p*<.01; 1001 overall).

[xv] When comparing administrations, although the semantic domain comparison does not reveal anything significant, *women* is ranked 22/32 (*p*<.01; 2804 overall) among key words when comparing the 1979-97 period to 1997-2010.

[xvi] PEOPLE: FEMALE is ranked 3/5 (*p*<.01; 171 overall); *women* is ranked 5/5 (*p*<.001; 1739 overall).

[xvii] While PEOPLE: FEMALE and *women* appear in keyness lists – i.e. their frequency is unusually high – when comparing Labour female backbenchers to Conservative female backbenchers during 1997-2010, there are no key semantic domains or words associated with women that are statistically significant at the .05 threshold when comparing female MPs from the two parties during 1979-97.

[xviii] PEOPLE: FEMALE and *women* are relatively prominent in semantic domain and word comparisons respectively between female Labour backbenchers and their female Conservative counterparts during 1997-2001 but not appearing in comparisons during subsequent parliaments.

[xix] When comparing utterances made during the different administrations, PEOPLE: FEMALE is ranked 87/129 (*p*<.01; 297 overall), and *women* is ranked 769/870 (*p*<.001; 19226 overall) for 1997-2010.

[xx] PEOPLE: FEMALE is ranked 2/23 (*p*<.001; 159 overall); *women* is ranked 74/141 (*p*<.001; 3033 overall).

[xxi] PEOPLE: FEMALE is ranked 16/68 (*p*<.001; 233 overall) and *women* is ranked 359/491 (*p*<.001; 9096 overall) for

1997-2010 in comparison to 1979-1997

[xxii] *Constituen-* was not a key word for female backbenchers during any parliament compared to its successor.

[xxiii] *Constituency* is ranked 91/99 (*p*<.01; 7549 overall) for 1979-2010.

[xxiv] *Constituents* is ranked 20/41 (*p*<.01; 1550 overall).