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Questioning scrutiny

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Questioning Scrutiny: The Effect of Prime Minister's Questions on Citizen Efficacy
and Trust in Government

Abstract: In most democratic regimes, parliamentarians are often disliked and distrusted by the public. This should not surprise: the public likes neither compromise nor conflict, both of which are legislative hallmarks. One of the most famous examples of parliamentary conflict is Prime Minister's Questions (PMQs) in the British House of Commons. It is the most viewed and commented upon part of the parliamentary week, but attracts strong criticism as a noisy charade promoting a poor image of politics. Does PMQs undermine individual levels of political efficacy and trust in Parliament, as some commentators suggest? We use an experimental design to answer this question and find evidence to suggest that, contrary to its poor reputation, PMQs does not adversely affect most citizens' perceptions. Changing parliamentary behaviour may not be the most effective way to increase trust in legislatures.

Prime Minister's Questions (PMQs) is the most visible way in which the British

Prime Minister (PM) is held to account. It is the most watched session of the

parliamentary week, but also the most controversial precisely because it is conflictual.

Defenders point to its unique way of ensuring that the PM masters the detail of policy

across government, while critics argue that the noisy exchanges put voters off

Parliament. PMQs has also been accused of perpetuating gendered power structures

(Crewe, 2015: 156), reproducing power imbalances (Celis and Wauters, 2010: 381),

and upholding masculine institutions excluding women and some men (Lovedunski,

2012: 317). Accordingly, PMQs may further alienate blocs of the public already

disinclined to trust Parliament.

PMQs exists in the context of declining trust in political institutions, particularly,

legislatures (Lowenberg, 1971; Norton, 2013: 1-3). Public trust in democracy and

democratic institutions has been well-studied (Norris, 2013; Dalton, 2004), but the

literature 'does not necessarily address …. the consequences that parliaments may

have on public perceptions of trust' (Leston-Bandiera, 2012: 267). Exposure to PMQs

may exacerbate declining legislative trust. Such a finding would have wider

implications for research on trust in legislatures. If some high-profile scrutiny activities cause more problems than others, then a case could be made for reforming them. We present an initial test here of whether PMQs deserves its poor reputation among some commentators and parliamentarians. Does exposure to this session of Parliament decrease efficacy and trust in Parliament? Are some groups of citizens more prone to an adverse reaction due to their conflict orientation?

Previous research has asked about respondents' views of PMQs (Hansard Society, 2014) and interrogated the number (Shephard and Braby, 2020), style (Murphy, 2014) and topics (Bevan and John, 2016) of questions asked. We use a survey experiment in which some participants were randomly assigned to watch a contentious clip from PMQs. We find that for most respondents, PMQs *positively* affects their confidence in understanding politics while not substantively affecting whether they trust their representatives or Parliament. The only group appearing to be negatively affected by PMQs are those psychologically averse to combative forms of conflict. The overall impact of PMQs on attitudes toward Parliament ranges from neutral to positive. It may therefore be the case that exposure to some aspects of PMQs helps viewers to clarify differences between political parties and leaders.

We make three substantive contributions. First, we provide some initial evidence that the 'standard narrative' about PMQs driving discontent with Parliament may require re-visitation. Many watching may not like it, but for most citizens in our sample this dislike does not translate into wider negative perceptions of the democratic process. Second, when negative reactions to PMQs do occur, they can be explained by pre-existing psychological orientations toward conflict management. Finally, our results

suggest that those who are concerned about trust in legislatures should look beyond PMQs to reconnect voters and legislatures.

WHY SHOULD WE CARE ABOUT PMQS?

The practice of question time is a widely utilised form of executive scrutiny (Martin, 2011). However, Prime Minister's Questions (and its devolved equivalents in Scotland and Wales) are a uniquely British forum for prime ministerial accountability. At noon Wednesdays, the PM takes questions on any matter of government policy. The proceedings are often noisy, with MPs cheering on the PM or the Leader of the Opposition (who is permitted six questions). Unlike other forms of scrutiny, doing well at PMQs need not mean achieving a change in government policy or revealing new information (Institute for Government, 2015). William Hague's main task as Leader of the Opposition was to make Government MPs laugh at their own PM (Hague, 2019). Observers and participants place a premium on the well-executed one-liner that sharply exposes a flaw or a question that ambushes the PM.

As a forum for serious scrutiny of government policy, PMQs suffers from several drawbacks, not least the emphasis on style over substance. Bull and Strawson (2020) find that on average Theresa May only answered 11% of Jeremy Corbyn's questions between July 2016 and April 2017. Moreover, Shephard and Braby (2020) report that the total number of questions asked has halved over time and that 'far from trying to end 'Punch and Judy' politics, Cameron was more likely to ask questions of the opposition, and more likely to blame the opposition than either Blair, Brown, or May' (39-40). PMQs also appears to have become more partisan and raucous recently,

especially after the introduction of cameras in the House of Commons (Franklin and Norton, 1993). The number of interruptions (Bates et al., 2014) and personal attacks (Waddle, Bull and Böhnke, 2019) has increased.[1]

Beyond scrutiny, PMQs may perform other important functions such as allowing MPs to fulminate (Norton, 1993; Shephard and Braby, 2020: 40), highlight constituency service (Parker and Richter, 2018), and engage in party team-building (Rush and Giddings, 2011). PMQs is a form of scrutiny, but its usefulness as such is questionable. So, why study PMQs when there are arguably better examples of parliamentary scrutiny of the PM (Kelso et al., 2016) and when its mixture of theatre, noise, and a packed chamber is quite atypical of Parliament's work?

First, PMQs attracts special attention because, in the former Speaker's own words, it is Parliament's 'shop window' (Bercow, 2010). It is the most-watched part of the parliamentary week. The Hansard Society (2014: 27) found that 54% of people either claimed to have watched the whole of PMQs (38%) or a clip (16%) in the past year. That is a higher percentage of people than those who say they would be willing in 2019 to contact an MP (37%), create or sign an e-petition (34%), or boycott certain products (23%) (Hansard Society, 2019: 23). For most citizens, it is their main image of Parliament's scrutiny work (effective or not), and their primary exposure to the workings of the chamber. PMQs, for many, *may be* Parliament. For that reason, it is

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[1] When the Leader of the Opposition uses crowd-sourced questions, personal attacks appear to be lower (Bull and Waddle, 2019).

worth considering the effect PMQs may have on public perceptions of Parliament separate from the question of its effectiveness as a tool of scrutiny.

Second, some evidence suggests that while the public tunes into PMQs, they do not necessarily like it. The Hansard Society (2014) uses focus groups and a survey to assess citizens' sentiments concerning PMQs. The data from the focus groups conveys a generally poor impression of PMQs, with participants describing it as 'childish' and the authors concluding that the 'overwhelming reaction was one of alienation' (Hansard Society, 2014: 28). From the poll, the authors convey that while the public generally approve of the principle of PMQs (in terms of holding the government to account), 67% of people agreed with the statement that 'there is too much party political point-scoring instead of answering the question.'

Some parliamentarians acknowledge the public's discontentment with this form of scrutiny. Former MP Chuka Umunna tweeted in February 2019 that 'PMQs is just so awful. Everything people hate about UK politics. Abolish the thing and put something different in its place.'[2] Former PM David Cameron, ironically quite adept at the dispatch box throughout his career, himself indicated frustration: 'I'm fed up with the Punch and Judy politics of Westminster, the name-calling, backbiting, point-scoring, finger-pointing' (Hazarika and Hamilton, 2018: 315). Similarly, for Tony Blair, the main purpose is not scrutiny of government: 'the whole thing is a giant joust, a sort of modern, non-physical duel' (Blair, 2010: 109).

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[2] 20 February, 2019. Tweet.

The United Kingdom is neither immune from the decline of public trust across advanced liberal democracies (Norris, 2017), nor from distrust facing legislatures in particular. In the UK and the United States, executives, the courts, the military, civil service, and local governments are held in considerably higher regard by the public than members of the House of Commons, Lords, or Congress (Hansard, 2019; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 1995; Gallup, 2019). Only 17% of British citizens trusted politicians to tell the truth in a recent Ipsos MORI poll, the lowest among the 24 professions surveyed.[3] In the November 2019 Eurobarometer poll, 70% of British respondents indicated they tended not to trust Parliament. Big companies and even the European Union fared better.[4] One possible explanation is that the public dislikes the conflict and compromise essential to the legislative process (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 1995; 2002). The increased transparency of parliaments and legislatures, according to this reasoning, raises awareness of democracy's messier side. Norton (2012) claims that the arrival of broadcasting to the House of Commons may have 'contributed to greater public awareness of Parliament, but did not necessarily help to enhance support for the institution' (411).

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[3] Compared to 38% for bankers, 67% for television news readers, and 85% for professors. See https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/politicians-remain-least-trusted-profession-britain .

[4] See the November 2019 Eurobarometer: https://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/Chart/getChart/chartType/lineChart//themeKy/18/groupKy/97/savFile/187.

Unfiltered democracy may generate increased cynicism, and there may be no better example of this than PMQs as it receives extensive media attention and is 'the epitome of adversarial conflict' (Norton, 2012: 411). It is perhaps the best place to study the effect of legislative conflict on public perceptions of legislatures. Disliking PMQs is distinct from whether it hurts the public's trust in Parliament or undermines their comprehension of politics — important questions which have yet to be answered. If PMQs creates negative externalities among the public while simultaneously not performing effective scrutiny, then perhaps Parliament might consider whether it is worth retaining in its current form.

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF CONFLICT

There have been few attempts to measure the impact of PMQs on public attitudes toward Parliament. Additionally, little effort has been made to assess which factors predict variation in one's reaction to PMQs. An overlooked factor may be psychological orientation toward conflict management. Psychologists have long argued that people fall into distinctive categories concerning their response to conflict (Blake and Mouton, 1964; Chanin and Schneer, 1984; Thomas and Killman, 1974). Although most of this research focuses primarily on the psychology of workplace conflict (Friedman et al., 2000; Montoya-Weiss et al., 2001; Rahim, 2010; Thomas et al., 2008), it is also instructive for explaining public attitudes toward political institutions and combative rituals.

People are socialized into distinctive conflict management styles varying along two dimensions: assertiveness and cooperation (Thomas and Killman, 1974). Along the

first dimension, people with more assertive conflict management styles embrace conflict to secure their interests. Along the second dimension, people with more collaborative styles approach conflict as a give-and-take process in which both parties work together to find a solution. The idea that personality and psychological type influences politics is hardly new. Political psychologists for decades have studied the relationship between various personality traits and public opinion (Hiel and Mervielde, 2002; Immelman, 2003; Johnston et al., 2017; Johnston and Wronski, 2015). Conflict management style, however, has yet to be systematically explored as a psychological determinant of political behaviours (although see Ulbig and Funk, 1999).

We argue that psychological orientation toward conflict could be critical for explaining how PMQs affects political efficacy and trust in Parliament. We also inject fresh psychological perspective into a larger debate about the relationship between political participation, efficacy, and trust. Many argue that political participation — including attention to political events such as PMQs — exists in a positive feedback loop with political efficacy and trust (Finkel, 1985; Rudolph et al., 2000; Valentino et al., 2009). A strong sense of *external efficacy* — the belief that representatives are working on one's behalf — bolsters democratic legitimacy. Similarly, a strong sense of *internal efficacy* — the belief that one can comprehend and influence politics — is reinforced with each participatory act. If so, PMQs should have positive consequences for political efficacy and trust. Others, however, conclude that the connection between participation and efficacy is essentially piecemeal (Clarke and Acock, 1989; Dyck and Lascher, 2009; Vecchione and Caprara, 2009). Moreover, the notion that PMQs bolsters political trust contradicts the widespread negative expectations held by many

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British politicians and commentators, such as Chuka Umunna and Nick Clegg (The Independent, 2018; BBC, 2015). Yet both accounts of PMQs could be simultaneously true, contingent on each viewer's conflict management style.

Thomas and Kilmann's (1974) conflict management model allows us to formulate a set of testable predictions about how people with differing psychological traits should react to PMQs. Their two-dimensional model produces four characteristic approaches to conflict management. At one extreme, *avoidant conflict management* is characterized by both low assertiveness (the first dimension) and cooperation (the second dimension), such that the tendency is to yield passively to the other party. *Accommodating conflict management* reflects an intermediate style featuring low assertiveness, but higher levels of cooperation. This produces deliberative conflict favouring the other party. *Competitive conflict management* is another intermediate style, characterized by high assertiveness but low cooperation, such that one achieves her goals at the other party's expense. At the other extreme, *collaborative conflict management* features both high assertiveness and cooperation to produce mutually agreeable solutions. Using the Thomas-Kilmann model, PMQs themselves can be classed as an act of competitive conflict, with high levels of assertiveness but low levels of collaboration; MPs use PMQs to advance their or their party's interests rather than to arrive at mutually agreeable policy solutions. Figure 1 visually locates PMQs in the Thomas-Kilmann conflict management framework. Although not all PMQ sessions fall into this quadrant, many certainly do.

[FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

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Given that PMQs is characterized primarily by assertiveness, we might expect PMQs affects most deleteriously people *rejecting* assertive conflict approaches. Respondents scoring low on the competitive and collaborative styles — both of which feature high assertiveness — should have the strongest negative reactions. PMQs may cause these people to simply 'check out,' dampening their political efficacy and trust in Parliament. Ulbig and Funk (1999) find that a lower tolerance for conflict is associated with less participation in potentially combative activities such as protesting.

Conversely, those scoring high on competitive and collaborative conflict management styles should be less negatively affected and may even find PMQs empowering. Respondents' orientation toward less assertive conflict management styles — avoidance and accommodation — should have little to no moderating effect because they do not directly tap tolerance for assertive conflict. Acceptance of non-assertive conflict is not the same as rejection of highly assertive conflict. Only the latter should be expected to moderate reactions to PMQs. Similarly, orientation toward cooperativeness is unlikely to have a moderating effect as PMQs is defined primarily by extreme assertiveness. Figure 1 highlights the conflict management styles most likely to moderate reactions to PMQs in grey. The aggregate effect of PMQs may ultimately depend on the proportion of people who eschew competitive and collaborative conflict.

DATA AND METHODS

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Does the sound and fury of PMQs create negative externalities among the public? Does watching PMQs negatively affect levels of efficacy or trust in Parliament — particularly if an individual is averse to assertive conflict? Political behaviourists increasingly agree that experiments are ideal for testing these types of questions. First, they permit stronger causal inference by allowing the researcher to eliminate potential confounds through random assignment to experimental conditions. In our study, the treatment is exposure to PMQs. As randomization ensures that the characteristics of the control and treatment groups are similar, it is possible to isolate the *causal* impact of PMQs on efficacy and trust in Parliament. This is a major advantage over the correlational conclusions derived from observational studies. Second, because random assignment minimizes confounders, analysis of experimental data is straightforward. The causal impact of the intervention — PMQs — can be calculated simply by comparing control and treatment groups. In the context of a regression analysis, the treatment effect can be measured using a dummy variable for whether the respondent was in the control (0) or treatment group (1). To measure variation in how different kinds of people react to the treatment, moderator variables can be interacted with the treatment dummy. Control variables are generally not required.

We conducted our survey experiment in February of 2019, recruiting 2,090 English and Scottish citizens from Qualtrics' online probability panel. The sample is generally representative of England and Scotland.[5] Half were assigned randomly to a control

[5] Appendix A details the sample's demographics. A similar number of English and Scottish citizens were included to test for possible national differences. However, no meaningful differences emerged.

condition with the remainder assigned to watch a three-minute video clip of Prime Minister's Question Time featuring Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn demanding that Conservative PM Theresa May apologize for her 'broken promise to end austerity.[6] Speaking over the cacophony, May responded by citing a list of Government accomplishments. After watching the clip, respondents rated the exchange on a 5-point scale ranging from (1) 'not at all argumentative' to (5) 'extremely argumentative.' Nearly 85% of the respondents watching the clip rated it as either (5) 'extremely' or (4) 'moderately argumentative,' indicating that respondents were exposed to an exchange typifying the adversarial discourse of PMQs as we anticipated.[7]

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[6] The demographic characteristics of those included in the analyses were balanced across experimental conditions, confirming random assignment (appendix B). The entire exchange from which the clip was obtained occurred on 31 October 2018 and available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rqfR9Ihk9vE. We intentionally avoided Brexit given its potential to prime subject's frustrations with Parliament's inability to implement the referendum's results. The austerity exchange represents a classic policy divide between the Conservative and Labour parties.

[7] See appendix C for the survey instrument and appendix D for response distributions. After viewing the clip, respondents were asked about the subject matter of PMQs. Respondents answering incorrectly were removed from the analyses due to inattentiveness. Roughly 78% of respondents in the treatment correctly identified the subject matter. This did not affect demographic balance across conditions.

All respondents answered a series of questions about their internal efficacy, external efficacy, and trust in Parliament. To measure internal efficacy, we asked how strongly respondents agreed or disagreed with the statement: 'It is often difficult for me to understand what is going on in government and politics.' To measure external efficacy, we asked respondents how strongly they agreed or disagreed with the statement: 'Politicians don't care what people like me think.' Finally, to measure trust in Parliament, respondents were asked: 'Do you tend to trust the Westminster Parliament?' All responses were recorded on a 5-point scale. Internal and external efficacy were reverse-coded so that greater response values indicate a more positive attitude.

To assess the moderating impact of conflict management style, respondents completed a condensed version of the Rahim Organizational Conflict Inventory (ROCI) — a standard measure of the Thomas-Killman (1974) conflict management model (Rahim 1983, 2010).[8] Across a range of competing conflict management instruments, the ROCI consistently provides both the strongest validity and greatest reliability for measuring conflict management on a two-dimensional framework (Rahim, 2010; Womack, 1988). We measure orientation toward conflict using the strongest loading item from each of the four conflict management styles. Propensity toward competitive and collaborative styles — both of which feature *high* assertiveness — were measured using 5-point agreement with the statements: 'I use my influence to get my ideas accepted' and 'I try to work together with my peers for a

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[8] Conflict management styles were balanced across the control and treatment, indicating that PMQs did not alter respondents' conflict orientation (appendix B).

proper understanding of the problem,' respectively. Propensity toward avoidant and accommodating styles — both of which feature *low* assertiveness — are assessed using agreement with the statements: 'I try to keep disagreements with my peers to myself in order to avoid hard feelings' and 'I usually accommodate the wishes of my peers,' respectively. These conflict managements styles are not theorized to be mutually exclusive and are thus measured on four separate scales, rather than as a single categorical variable.

To test the effect of PMQs on trust in Parliament, internal efficacy, and external efficacy, we first estimate a set of ordered logistic regressions that include a dummy variable for the treatment condition. In a second set of logistic regressions, we interact the treatment dummy with each of the four conflict management measures. If one or more of these interactions are significant, this indicates that people react differently to legislative conflict based on their conflict orientation. Based on our theoretical framework, we expect the interactions between the treatment dummy, collaborative style, and competitive style to be significant. We visually present predicted probabilities by treatment and conflict management style for each outcome variable to ease interpretation.

RESULTS

The aggregate effect of the PMQs clip on political efficacy and trust are presented in Table 1. Exposure to PMQs *increased* internal efficacy ($= .30, p < .05$): viewing the clip boosted peoples' confidence in their political comprehension. However, the effect of PMQs was negative but insignificant for external efficacy ($= -.09, p = .28$) and

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political trust in Parliament (= -.10, *p* = .22). Figure 1 presents the marginal effect of PMQs on the probability of respondents indicating at least some level of political efficacy or trust, with point estimates bounded by 95% confidence intervals.[9]

[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Figure 2 shows that PMQs boosts internal efficacy by about seven percentage points, a statistically and substantively meaningful increase. The negative effects of PMQs on external efficacy and political trust are negligible, producing a decrease of no more than two percentage points. Overall, these results indicate that the aggregate effect of PMQs on public attitudes may be somewhat positive. While PMQs has little to no impact on external efficacy or political trust, it substantially increases internal efficacy. This may be partly because the drama of PMQs commands attention, prompting viewers to be more fully engaged than they otherwise might be while viewing more civil legislative discourse.

Aggregate analyses, however, may also obscure important variations within the population. One explanation for the null results is that PMQs generally elicit weak reactions related to external efficacy and political trust. Alternatively, different subsets of the population may have strong but opposing reactions cancelling each

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[9] Marginal effects reflect a change in probability that a respondent would select a response above the midpoint of the 5-point scale for each outcome variable. Outcome variables were collapsed to three-point scales to derive marginal probabilities (appendix F).

other out in the aggregate. We now assess conflict management style as a possible

lens through which respondents react to PMQs. Even if PMQs has overall neutral or

positive implications for public attitudes, certain subsets of the population could

nonetheless be quite negatively affected.

[FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE]

The moderating effects of conflict management style on reactions to PMQs are

presented in Table 2. Interactions between the treatment dummy and the four

Thomas-Killman conflict management styles are included in each ordered logistic

regression. As PMQs features highly assertive conflict, we anticipate that people's

reactions are most likely to depend on whether they themselves embrace or reject

assertive conflict styles. We expect the interaction terms for the highly assertive

conflict management styles — competition and collaboration — to be statistically

significant. Conversely, the interaction terms for the less assertive conflict

management styles — avoidance and accommodation — are less likely to be

statistically meaningful. The overall results confirm this. For internal efficacy, the

interaction between exposure to PMQs and collaborative conflict management is

positive and statistically significant ($= .28$, $p < .05$); people with a more collaborative

conflict management style get a larger internal efficacy boost from PMQs. However,

the interaction term for competitive conflict management is not substantively or

statistically significant ($= -.10$, $p = .94$). For external efficacy and political trust in

Westminster, the interaction terms for both competitive and collaborative conflict

management styles are positive and statistically significant. None of the interaction

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terms for the avoidant and accommodating conflict management styles reach

statistical significance for any of the outcome variables.

[TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

Figure 3 presents the marginal effect of PMQs by conflict management style. Point

estimates reflect the change in probability that respondents would indicate at least

some level of political efficacy or trust after viewing PMQs, bounded by 95%

confidence intervals. The light bars show the effect of PMQs on respondents who

score the lowest on a given conflict management style. The dark bars show the effect

of PMQs on respondents who score the highest on that conflict management style.

The top panel presents the results for internal efficacy.

As expected, there are no meaningful differences in how people react to PMQs based

on avoidant or accommodating conflict management styles. The effects for

competitive conflict management partially reflect our expectations. Although the

effect of PMQs is not statistically distinguishable for those with the least versus most

competitive conflict style, the marginal probabilities show a null effect for the former

(= .03) but a statistically significant boost for the latter (= .11, $p < .05$). The results

for the collaborative conflict management style strongly support our expectations.

Those with the least collaborative conflict management style become marginally *less*

internally efficacious (= -.08, $p < .10$) while those with the most collaborative

conflict management style become substantially and significantly *more* internally

efficacious (= .14, $p < .05$). Overall, PMQs has either neutral or somewhat negative

impacts on the internal efficacy of people scoring poorly on assertive conflict styles.

However, they also have sizable positive effects on the internal efficacy of those who score high on these conflict styles.

[FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE]

The middle panel of Figure 3 presents the results for external efficacy. Again, avoidant and accommodating conflict management styles have no meaningful impact on reactions to PMQs. However, PMQs has at least a marginally negative effect on the external efficacy of respondents scoring lowest on competitive (= .04, $p < .10$) and collaborative conflict styles (= -.11, $p < .05$). Alternatively, PMQs has either a neutral or marginally positive impact on the external efficacy of those scoring highest on competitive (= .03) and assertive conflict management (= .03, $p < .10$) styles.

The bottom panel of Figure 3 shows the results for trust in Parliament. Again, avoidant and accommodating conflict styles do not moderate the effect of PMQs on political trust. PMQs significantly decreases political trust among those who score lowest on competition (= -.06, $p < .05$) and collaboration (= -.10, $p < .05$). Yet PMQs has either a neutral or marginally positive effect on those scoring highest on competitive (= .07, $p < .10$) and collaborative (= .02) conflict management. Together these results confirm our central argument: people who reject assertive conflict styles are more likely to exhibit losses in political efficacy and trust from viewing PMQs, while those who embrace these styles are more likely to indicate either a neutral or positive reaction. The results for the collaborative conflict management style are striking: the difference in how PMQs affects those who score lowest versus highest on collaborative conflict style is statistically significant for every outcome variable.

Moreover, the negative impact on those who score lowest on collaboration consistently reach at least marginal significance, while the positive impact on those who score highest reach at least marginal significance for every outcome variable except political trust.

Differing reactions to PMQs might also be explained by several plausible non-psychological explanations. The most notable of these are nationality and partisanship. To address these alternative explanations, we conducted two robustness checks (see appendix E). First, we performed our analyses separately on English and Scottish respondents to see if nationality moderated the impacts of PMQs. It did not: English and Scottish respondents reacted similarly to PMQs. Second, we interacted the treatment dummy with Labour Party affiliation and then with Conservative Party affiliation, setting all other party affiliations as the baseline. This was not an attempt to control for individual partisanship — which is accounted for via random assignment — but to assess its moderating impact. Specifically, we test whether partisan affiliation with MPs featured in the PMQs clip — Corbyn (Labour) or May (Conservative) — affected the reactions that respondents had to PMQs. Again, we find no significant differences. People reacted similarly to PMQs regardless of partisanship. Summarizing, to the extent that people react strongly to PMQs, psychological orientation toward conflict offers a stronger explanation than either nationality or partisanship.

Although PMQs has a net positive effect on internal efficacy and little to no aggregate impact on external efficacy or political trust, there is a great deal of variation based on an individual's conflict orientation. A critical question is what percentage of people

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are significantly negatively affected, significantly positively affected, or unaffected by PMQs? The aggregate results obscure this because they reflect *both* the distribution and magnitude of public reactions to PMQs. Essentially, PMQs could have an overall positive impact on internal efficacy either because PMQs somewhat improves it for the majority or because PMQs vastly improves it for a minority even while slightly undermining it for the majority. The interactive results offer a clue about the magnitude of these effects based on conflict management style. But neither set of analyses offers clarity concerning how *widespread* the negative versus positive effects of PMQs are based on conflict management style. This is essential for making any normative determination about PMQs. For instance, one could argue that Figure 3 confirms the normative desirability of PMQs as it relates to internal efficacy since the positive impact on the most collaborative individuals is larger than the negative impact on the least collaborative. If more people reject rather than embrace collaborative conflict, this would be misleading. Even marginally negative reactions to PMQs could be problematic if widespread. Contrarily, overwhelmingly positive reactions to PMQs matter little if concentrated. Figure 4 presents the distribution of respondents who — based on their orientation toward collaborative conflict management — were likely to be at least marginally negatively affected, unaffected, or at least marginally positively affected by exposure to PMQs.

[FIGURE 4 HERE]

Figure 4 confirms that an overwhelming majority of respondents (71.5%) are likely to gain at least a marginally significant boost in internal efficacy from viewing PMQs. Regarding external efficacy, the percentage of respondents likely to experience either

a marginally significant gain or loss are roughly equal. Moreover, PMQs is unlikely to affect the external efficacy for the majority. The results for trust in Parliament are trickier to parse. Over a quarter of respondents are likely to indicate a marginally significant decline in political trust due to viewing PMQs, while none are likely to indicate an increase. Of the three outcomes under consideration, PMQs seems to be the most problematic for legislative trust. Notwithstanding, the vast majority are unlikely to indicate any shift in parliamentary trust due to viewing PMQs. Collectively, it appears that PMQs has a largely positive impact on internal efficacy, neutral consequences for external efficacy, and a concentrated but minimally negative impact on parliamentary trust. These findings contrast many of the warnings that observers of British politics have issued about PMQs.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Tweeting during PMQs at the end of February 2019, now former MP Chuka Umunna again voiced his disgust. 'This dire #PMQs' he texted, '-like most others- demonstrating why this silly circus should be abolished and replaced with a more meaningful and constructive alternative.'[10] Umunna's concerns are understandable but the silly circus he describes may not have all the negative effects he fears. Our findings suggest that PMQs produces few negative externalities among the British public: at worst, less than a third of the public might experience slightly lower levels of trust in Parliament — and perhaps far fewer. Even this is counterbalanced by a substantial majority who are likely to feel better equipped to understand politics after

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[10] 27 February 2019. Tweet.

watching a duel at the dispatch box. Given the widespread concern from commentators and some politicians about PMQs, this is an important finding — particularly as we exposed respondents to a highly charged exchange representing an intense level of conflict during a particularly difficult period in Parliament's history.

Instead, PMQs may play an important role in civic education. Respondents exposed to PMQs were substantially more likely to experience an increase in internal efficacy, regardless of their individual conflict disposition. Adherents of the responsible government school of American political parties have idealized the British parliamentary system, pointing to party manifestos that present the public with distinctive and clearly defined policy alternatives from which to choose—with the expectation that the victorious party forming a government has a mandate to implement their policies (Schattschneider, 1942). Whatever else one might glean from the Corbyn and May exchange, the differences between the parties are evident—a hallmark of party responsibility. If citizens watching PMQs feel better equipped to understand the political process and party ideological differences, then these exchanges could be beneficial.

There are clear limitations to findings based on one survey experiment. Although it is possible that the public gains useful information from PMQs and feels more internally efficacious, the role of tone is less clear. Our experiment did not vary the exchange's tone, the level of conflict, or the chamber's ambient noise. One might wonder whether less combative, less negative, or less noisy exchanges could yield similar positive effects on internal efficacy without dampening political trust (even if only slightly) among those exhibiting low support for assertive methods of conflict negotiation. We

certainly intend to build upon this one experiment in future work and hope that others do as well. We also cannot say whether people watch PMQs because they find it educational or because they find it entertaining, or perhaps both. One final limitation that should be noted is that PMQs takes place in the context of the UK's wider adversarial political culture; comparative conclusions from our results therefore need to be tentative.

The recent PMQs between PM Boris Johnson and newly-elected Labour Leader Keir Starmer conducted under coronavirus-imposed social distancing constraints provide an opportunity to examine not only the consequence of tone on the trust and efficacy of the public watching PMQs, but also the effect of a greatly muted chamber atmosphere. Perhaps there are better ways for Parliament to perform detailed scrutiny, but we provide some initial evidence here that PMQs does not seem to harm public perception of Parliament. In fact, much like 'Love Island', the public may even enjoy the weekly spectacle — even if they are ashamed to admit it.
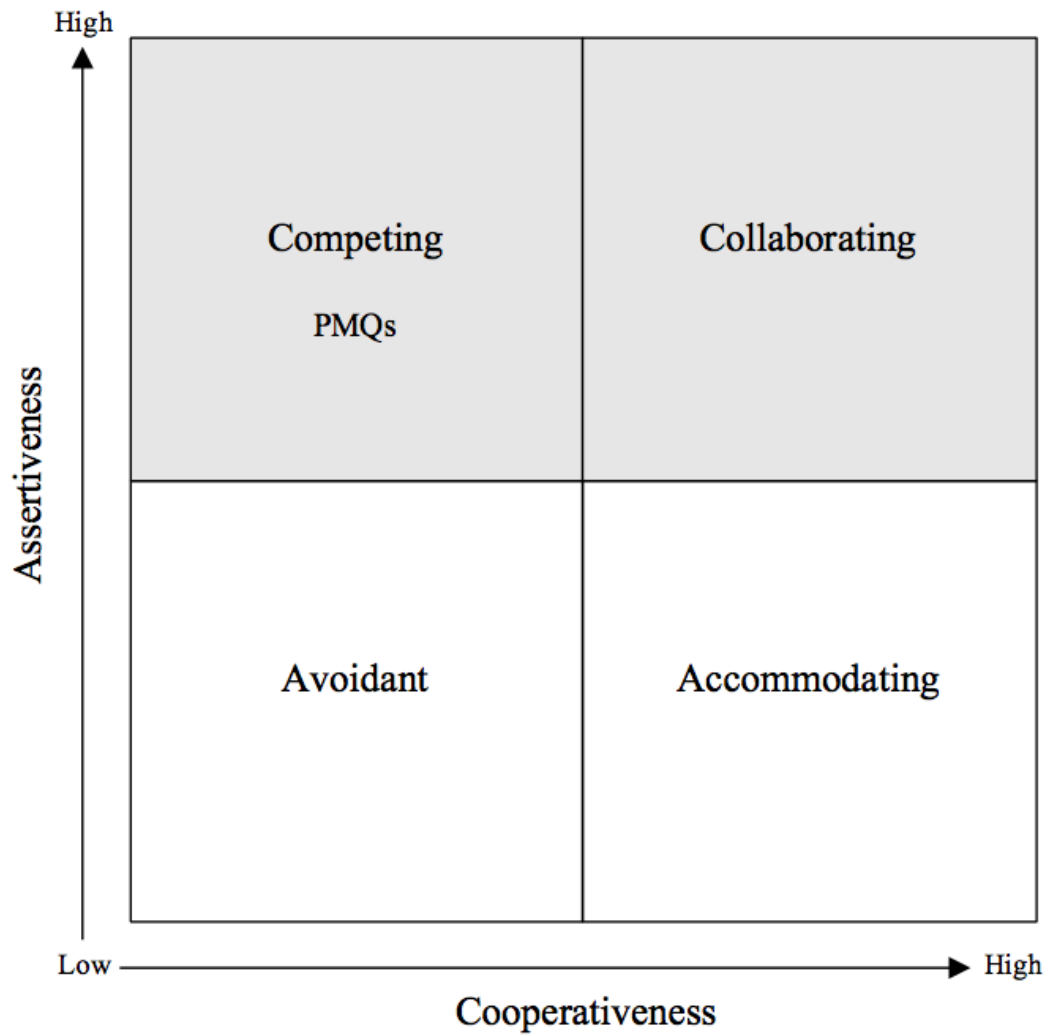
Figure 1. Conflict Management Styles

Table 1. Logistic Regressions for the Effect of PMQs

	Internal Efficacy	External Efficacy	Political Trust

Note: *p < .05. Entries are ordered logistic regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. "Exposure to PMQs" is a dummy indicator.*

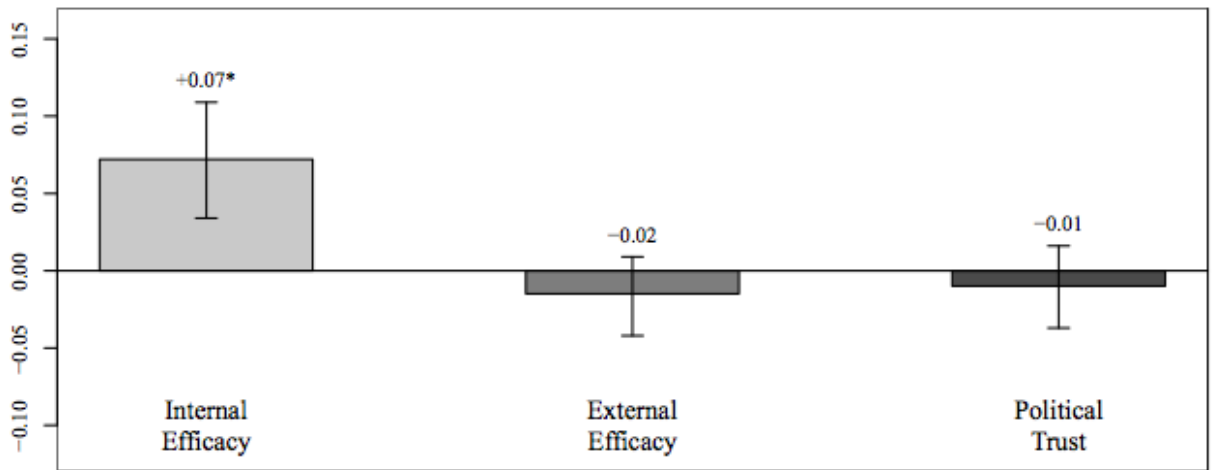**Figure 2. Marginal Effects of PMQs**

Table 2. Logistic Regressions for the Effects of PMQs, by Conflict Style

	Internal Efficacy	External Efficacy	Political Trust

Note: * p < .05. Entries are ordered logistic regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. "Exposure to PMQs" is a dummy variable. The remaining IVs are 5-point measures of conflict management style.

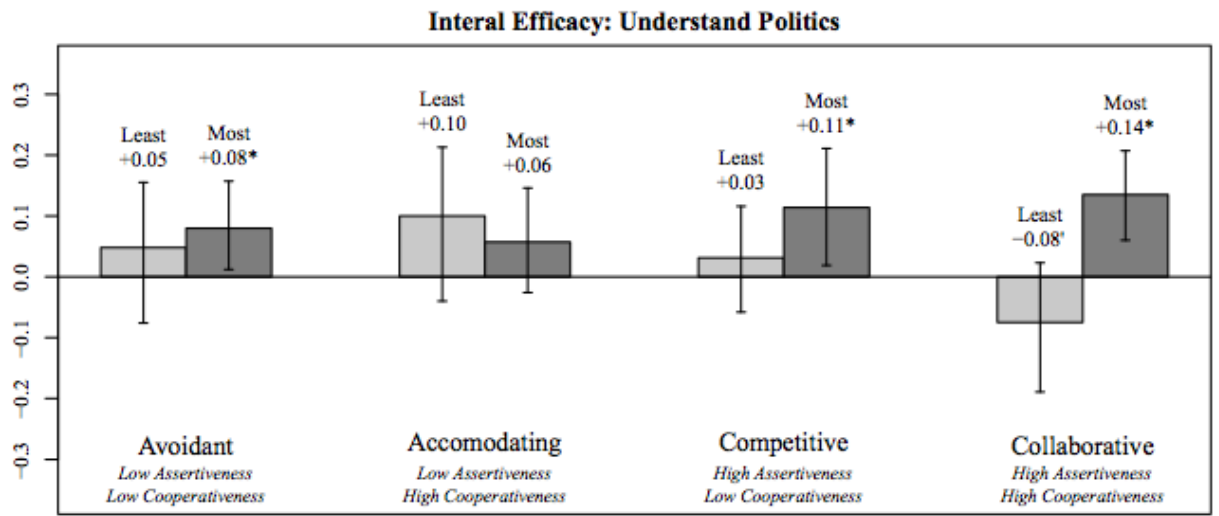**Figure 3. Marginal Effect of PMQs, by Conflict Style**

Internal Efficacy: Understand Politics

Avoidant
Low Assertiveness
Low Cooperativeness

Accomodating
Low Assertiveness
High Cooperativeness

Competitive
High Assertiveness
Low Cooperativeness

Collaborative
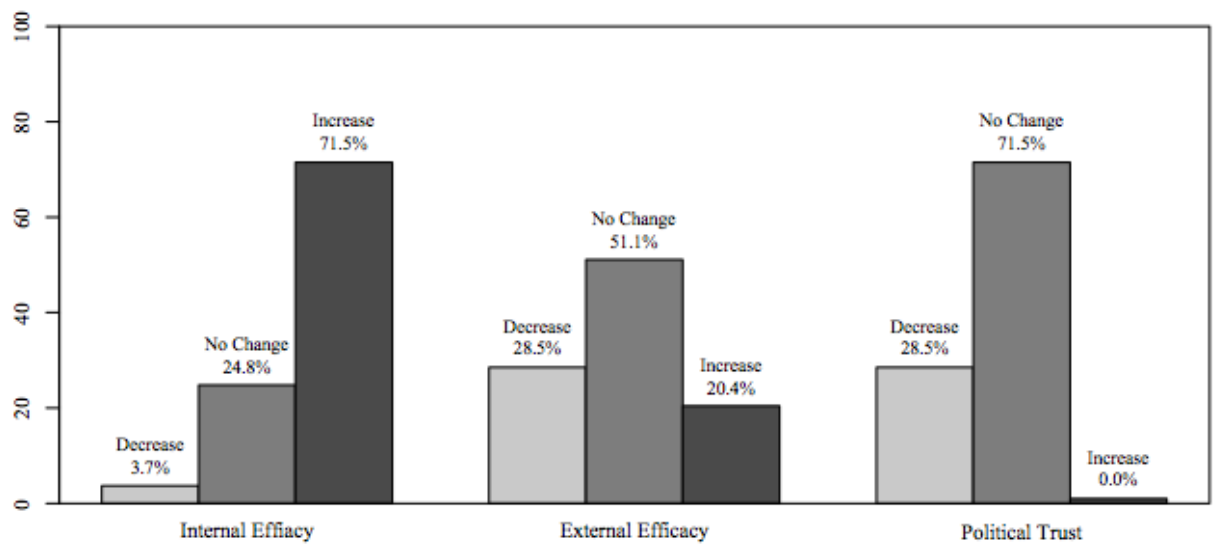*High Assertiveness*
High Cooperativeness

Figure 4. Reactions to PMQs Based on Collaborative Conflict Style

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