



Parliamentary Questions as Control Mechanisms in Coalition Governments

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Monday, **October 22nd 2018**, 5:00 p.m.

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Parties in coalition governments constantly face the danger of agency loss because any policy agreed upon by the coalition at large is drafted and implemented by individual ministers who often have incentives to renege on compromise solutions in favor of their own most favored outputs. Previous research has identified various control mechanisms that parties can employ to keep tabs on their coalition partner such as committee chairs, junior ministers, and legislative review in parliamentary committees. This paper argues that parliamentary questions provide an additional mechanism and analyzes under what conditions governing parties ask written and oral questions to ministers from a coalition partner. Theoretically, monitoring should be more pronounced when the policy preferences of coalition partners diverge more strongly and when the relevant issues are more salient to the partners and the public. We test these expectations with an original dataset containing all parliamentary questions in the German Bundestag between 1980 and 2017. Supporting the notion of parliamentary questions as a control mechanism, descriptive analysis shows that governing parties submit significantly more questions to ministries led by their coalition partner than to ministers from their own party. Multivariate regression models demonstrate that the number of questions used to control the coalition partner increases significantly if the policy field is more salient to the governing party and if the policy distance between coalition partners is high. Furthermore, the temporal distribution over the course of the electoral period refutes the competing claim that government parties use questions to challenge issue ownership of the minister's party for electoral purposes.

Ulrich Sieberer is a Professor of empirical political science at the Otto Friedrich University of Bamberg. His research interests lie in the area of comparative political science with focus on European national states. He is particularly interested in institutional change in parliaments and governments, political parties, legislative studies, coalition research, and judicial politics.
