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Gender, Intraparty Competition, and the Substantive Focus of Parliamentary Questions in South Africa

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Abstract

Extant research suggests that women ask more parliamentary questions (PQs) on soft policy domains while their male peers focus on hard domains, which are arguably more relevant. This study contributes to this body of research by examining how electoral incentives shape intraparty politics, and specifically the substantive focus of PQs. It argues that women's focus on soft policy domains is not constant, with variations found in situations where intraparty competition is high. Female MPs will have fewer incentives to focus on soft policy domains if they are electorally vulnerable and as elections draw closer. The mechanism is clear: Women face strong bias in parliament, which means they need to work harder to stand on an equal footing with their male counterparts. As a result, rather than shying away from competition, they will try to maximize their career prospects by shifting their attention to (hard) policy domains that are considered more important to both parties and voters. These claims are tested in the case of South Africa, drawing upon a novel dataset of PQs from 2006 to 2023. South Africa is an interesting case study as it is one of the most feminized parliaments in Africa and has strong electoral incentives for intraparty competition. The findings confirm most theoretical expectations and clarify the electoral and gender-related predispositions that drive the substantive focus of questions.

Keywords

election proximity; gender; parliamentary questions; South Africa; vulnerability

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1. Introduction

Parliamentary questions (PQs) are important tools for MPs as they allow them to examine the actions of the executive and communicate policy positions. PQs can also be exploited by MPs for electoral purposes, be it to win nomination (e.g., by making themselves more visible to the party) or to maximize votes (e.g., by focusing on key policy issues of relevance to voters). Indeed, they are so highly coveted by the majority of MPs that there is considerable intraparty competition for question time. The gender of the MP also intervenes in this complex process and is likely to play a role in the substantive focus of PQs.

Past research has shown that women deliver fewer speeches (Bäck & Debus, 2019; Frantzeskakis et al., 2021; Sanches & Dias, 2021), and the questions they raise tend to focus more on soft rather than hard policy domains (Bird, 2005; De Vet & Devroe, 2023b). This study contributes to this debate by examining how electoral incentives shape intraparty politics, and specifically the substantive focus of PQs. We argue that female MPs' focus on soft policy domains varies in situations where intraparty competition is high. Specifically, female MPs will have fewer incentives to focus on soft issues if they are electorally vulnerable and as elections draw closer. The mechanism is clear: Women face strong bias in parliament, which means they need to work harder to be considered on an equal footing with their male counterparts (Bauer, 2020). As a result, rather than shying away from competition, they will try to maximize their career prospects by shifting their attention to (hard) policy domains that are considered more important to both parties and voters.

These claims are tested in the case of South Africa, drawing upon a novel dataset of PQs from 2006 to 2023. South Africa is an interesting case study as it is a dominant party system and one of the most feminized parliaments in Africa with strong electoral incentives for intraparty competition. The country uses a closed-list proportional representation system (CLPR) in national elections and parties control nominations tightly by assigning the top positions in the list to the best-performing and most loyal MPs (Barkan, 2009; Lieberman et al., 2021). This system encourages links with parties rather than with constituents and fosters intraparty competition for the positions in the list that are most likely to ensure election. This affects legislative behavior, i.e., the substantive focus on policy domains, as female MPs will have stronger incentives to go beyond traditional "women-specific issues" and show expertise on other issues to advance their careers.

The findings confirm our expectations and clarify the electoral predispositions that drive the substantive focus of questions in the Parliament of South Africa. The mechanism we hypothesized works well in the case of electoral vulnerability: Female MPs, who occupied an unsafe seat on the candidate list when elected, prioritize hard over soft policy domains. However, the effects of the electoral cycle are not straightforward. While women tend to ask fewer questions on soft policy domains as elections approach, they do not seem to submit more questions on hard policy domains, which remain a male stronghold. The study makes a significant contribution to the literature on legislative behavior by highlighting the electoral conditions under which MPs are more likely to switch the focus of their attention and it contributes to the feminist institutionalism literature by providing further evidence of clear gendered outcomes within parliaments. It also adds nuance to research on South Africa, which charts the decay of the substantive representation of women's issues in parliament due to deteriorating debate conditions, increased party discipline, and professionalization in parliament (Albertyn, 2003; Britton, 2005; Walsh, 2011).

The remainder of the article is organized as follows. We start by introducing the theory and hypotheses before presenting the case of South Africa in Section 3. The following section outlines the methodology implemented. The empirical section discusses the results of the statistical analysis, and the conclusion sets out the implications of the study's key findings.

2. Theory and Hypotheses

2.1. The Strategic Use of PQs

MPs are instrumental in pursuing the various benefits provided by legislative institutions to advance electoral, office, and policy goals (Strøm, 1997). While these goals often overlap, electoral goals are usually seen as more important given that securing re-selection and re-election is the starting point for any further ambition (Strøm, 1997). Although MPs' capacity to address competing goals is likely to affect their legislative behavior (Louwerse & Otjes, 2016), the institutional context creates further constraints (Strøm, 1997). The institutional setting of interest to us here, namely CLPR systems, is characterized by centralized nomination procedures and strong party control over candidate selection; as a result, MPs feel a greater need to toe the party line to win a safe seat on the list that would secure their re-election (Strøm, 1997). This makes intraparty competition crucial; MPs need to outperform their co-partisans and please their selectors in order to achieve other goals.

PQs are one of the tools at MPs' disposal. These are typically utilized to scrutinize the government, gather information from the executive, and represent electoral interests (Bailer, 2011). They also help advance important individual goals, providing MPs with an opportunity to highlight their priorities, preferences, and expertise. Indeed, PQs "say a lot about individual behavior since they are less controlled (institutionally and politically) than most other forms of activity within the legislature" (Rozenberg & Martin, 2011, p. 398), such as roll-call votes, though this may vary depending on specific institutional settings. PQs also have the potential to enhance an MP's reputation and signal strategic electoral intentions to party selectors, often serving career-oriented purposes (Bailer, 2011, p. 312). Lastly, MPs' perceptions of their party leader's influence in the re-nomination process impact the content of the questions they table in parliament (Ciftci & Yildirim, 2019).

2.2. The Substantive Focus of PQs: The Role of Gender

Gender bias molds the political careers of female politicians in diverse ways, including their work within the parliament (Erikson & Verge, 2022, p. 4). Political institutions are not gender-neutral. In fact, the institutional "rules of the game" were established exclusively by men due to the historical male dominance within politics (Lovenduski, 2005, p. 27). Therefore, it is not only national parliaments but also political parties that are marked by conventional, and often implicit, gender norms that tend to disadvantage women (Kenny & Verge, 2016, p. 356) and produce gendered outcomes. In addition to formal norms, gendered workplaces such as parliaments are significantly shaped by informal rules, including practices related to behavior within the chamber, norms dictating political leadership roles, and standards associated with political competence (Erikson & Josefsson, 2022, p. 21). And even seemingly neutral rules can have "gendered effects" (Lowndes, 2020).

One of these gendered effects is that women in many parliaments around the world tend to participate less frequently in debates and deliver shorter speeches than their male counterparts (Bäck & Debus, 2019; De Vet

& Devroe, 2023b); this is the case in African parliaments (Frantzeskakis et al., 2021; Sanches & Dias, 2021). It has also been shown that female and male MPs tend to center on different topics. While female MPs focus more on the so-called "soft" policy domains—such as social affairs, health, and education—male MPs focus more on "hard" policy domains, such as economics and defense, both in European democracies (Bäck & Debus, 2019; De Vet & Devroe, 2023b) and Africa (Wahman et al., 2021).

With regards to PQs, the few existing studies have corroborated the tendency for female and male MPs to focus on different topics. De Vet and Devroe (2023a) show that Belgian female MPs are more likely to focus on issues that are salient to their party than on conflictual matters between coalition partners. In the British context, Bird (2005) finds that female MPs were more likely than their male peers to refer to "women" and "gender" in PQs, whereas male MPs were more inclined to refer to "men." More directly related to the topic of our article, De Vet and Devroe (2023b), again with reference to Belgium, demonstrate that gendered patterns in the substantive focus of PQs are more pronounced when party control is stronger. Whereas male MPs are generally more active than women on hard policy domains, female MPs only address soft policy domains more than men in their PQs during more party-controlled plenary sessions (De Vet & Devroe, 2023b, p. 266).

Studies about South Africa indicate that the increased presence of women in parliament was instrumental in advancing women's rights and gender equality laws (Albertyn, 2003; Britton, 2005; Walsh, 2011). Female MPs "owned women issues" particularly in the first legislatures, but with time they faced harsher party control and had fewer opportunities to advance this agenda (Albertyn, 2003; Britton, 2005; Walsh, 2011). While there is no evidence of how this affected question asking, there is evidence of gender bias in issue specialization. Hence, our baseline hypothesis:

> H1 (*baseline* hypothesis): There is a gender bias in the policy domains of PQs in which women tend to pose more PQs on soft policy domains and fewer PQs on hard policy domains compared to male MPs.

2.3. Intraparty Competition: The Effects of Vulnerability and Electoral Proximity

MPs adapt their parliamentary activities to specific contexts and institutions. In situations where intraparty competition is higher, such as under CLPR, MPs will strive even harder to secure their (re)selection for a safe place in the list. While there is a general belief that women tend to "shy away from competition and men embrace it" (Niederle & Vesterlund, 2016, p. 1067), this has not been confirmed by existing studies on PQs (De Vet & Devroe, 2023b), rendering the debate inconclusive. Women's competitive behavior may come as a response to prevailing gender norms. As in most other countries, women in the US often possess higher qualifications but must exert greater effort to achieve equal standing to that of their male peers (Bauer, 2020). In fact, patterns of gender segregation can be observed in various forms within every parliament. This is particularly evident if we consider the MPs' areas of specialization. The norms of masculinity entrenched within political institutions often devalue anything perceived as feminine while valorizing what is seen as masculine (Erikson & Josefsson, 2022, p. 28). Consequently, topics considered "soft" or associated with "women's issues" are typically regarded as less relevant than "hard" issues.

We therefore expect that women in competitive contexts will strive to distance themselves from policy domains perceived as more feminine and less relevant. They will likely have stronger incentives to demonstrate their commitment to harder, and thus more prestigious, policy domains. This is an attempt to

raise their profile to the party leadership, who also act as gatekeepers in the candidate selection process. The following hypotheses focus on two specific situations where intraparty competition is likely to be high, thereby prompting strategic behavior among MPs: electoral vulnerability and proximity to elections.

When MPs did not hold a safe seat in the candidate list for the previous election and hence perceive themselves as electorally vulnerable, they are especially inclined to demonstrate activity and allocate a greater proportion of resources to the goal of securing re-election (André et al., 2015; Strøm, 1997). Studies have shown that electoral vulnerability shapes legislative behavior in diverse electoral systems. Firstly, it increases the amount of work done by MPs (Bowler, 2010; De Vet & Devroe, 2023b). Secondly, it shapes their representational focus. For instance, more vulnerable MPs tend to adopt a more constituency-focused behavior (André et al., 2015; Kartalis, 2023); and this applies to several African countries, including South Africa (Sanches & Kartalis, 2024; Wegmann & Evequoz, 2019). Women are often found in vulnerable positions due to disadvantaging gender norms; however, existing research neglects how this may affect their legislative behavior and specifically question asking. One exception is the work of Höhmann (2020), which demonstrates that German female MPs act more strongly on behalf of women-specific interests if their re-election is secured, suggesting that they only prioritize this kind of issues if they do not compromise their individual re-election prospects. Building on these studies, we posit that vulnerable female MPs ask fewer "soft" PQs. Therefore, the second hypothesis is that:

> H2 (*vulnerability* hypothesis): Occupying a vulnerable position decreases the probability of women asking PQs on a soft policy domain and increases the probability of women asking PQs on a hard policy domain.

Recent studies show clear evidence that MPs' priorities and behavior in parliament change during the electoral cycle (Berz & Kroeber, 2023; Fernandes et al., 2018; Poljak & Walter, 2023). Such variation is expected as MPs face a multitude of demands throughout the electoral cycle and they need to prioritize different aspects of their work to attain their goals (Berz & Kroeber, 2023). During the legislative term, MPs transition from the honeymoon phase to the work and campaign phases, each of which sets a different challenge (Berz & Kroeber, 2023). A study on Germany shows that "right after elections, MPs act as policy-seeking actors, most notably by promoting issues emphasized by their parties. As elections approach, MPs aim to attract votes by turning to portfolios prominent in the working of their main competing parties" (Berz & Kroeber, 2023, p. 2). A study on Portugal also captures changing strategies over the electoral cycle: Legislators tend to focus more on raising the party profile in parliament as elections draw closer by using the floor—and the questioning tool—to gather as much information as possible on the relevant issues of the campaign (Fernandes et al., 2018). Despite slightly different results, both studies suggest that MPs will be more concerned about public opinion as elections approach and will emphasize issues of greater relevance to their voters (Berz & Kroeber, 2023).

In terms of gender, there is a prevailing association between masculinity and political leadership, making it incongruent for female MPs to adopt leadership roles (Eagly & Karau, 2002). To get around this, female candidates strive to strike a delicate balance by emphasizing masculine qualities (considered essential for political leadership) while also exhibiting some feminine qualities (to avoid criticism for appearing incongruent with their gender; Bauer & Santia, 2022, p. 694); this phenomenon is known as the "double-bind" dilemma. As elections approach, and particularly during electoral campaigns, masculine qualities appear to gain greater significance for women, suggesting that they are aware that this brings them

advantages (Bauer, 2020). Focusing on three elections in the US, Bauer and Santia (2022, p. 701) discovered that female candidates on the campaign trail often adopted more masculine than feminine traits. Similarly, Poljak (2022) notes that whereas male MPs typically display more agentic behavior in parliament than their female counterparts, this distinction tends to diminish during electoral campaigns. Although the electoral cycle also affects male politicians, it seems to have a less marked impact on men as their agentic behavior and masculine traits tend to be consistent throughout the electoral process (Poljak, 2022).

Drawing parallels with policy domains, we expect that women will try to focus more on "hard" issues in the final part of the legislative term than they did earlier in the cycle in the hope that it will be seen positively by both voters (Holman et al., 2019) and selectors. Therefore, we hypothesize that:

> H3 (*election proximity* hypothesis): Proximity to the elections decreases the likelihood of women asking PQs on a soft policy domain and increases the likelihood of women asking PQs on a hard policy domain.

3. The South African Context

South Africa is a parliamentary democracy, and it has held regular free and fair elections every five years since 1994. The National Assembly is elected through a CLPR system in two tiers: 200 MPs are elected from national lists, and 200 are elected in nine multimember provinces. Parties may opt to construct only national or provincial lists or run in all of the 10 electoral races (one national and nine provinces). The president, usually the leader of the largest party, is elected by the members of the National Assembly.

The African National Congress (ANC) is the country's largest party and the only one with governing experience; this is despite rising levels of protest and the emergence of strong opposition parties since the 2000s—the Democratic Alliance and the Economic Freedom Fighters (Kotze & Bohler-Muller, 2019; Paret, 2018). As the dominant party, the ANC is also a major contributor to the feminization of parliament; following the sustained militant work of the ANC Women's League, it implemented voluntary party quotas in 1991 (Walsh, 2011). The party's successful electoral results since 1994 (winning at least 55% of potential seats) have led to a significant feminization of the parliament: up from 25% in the 1994 elections to almost parity (46%) in 2019 (IPU Parline, n.d.). Women have also occupied important positions in parliament (e.g., seven out of eight speakers since 1994 have been women) and within cabinets; indeed, the current cabinet has almost achieved gender parity (Media Hack Collective, 2019).

The entry of more women in parliament helped advance women's rights, resulting from the strong ties linking ANC's female MPs to civil society (Albertyn, 2003; Britton, 2005; Walsh, 2011). However, since 1999, the growing tensions between the state and women in civil society have led to "women's issues" being less represented (Albertyn, 2003; Britton, 2005; Walsh, 2011). On the other hand, the increasing professionalization of parliament from 1999 was accompanied by the entry of a new generation of better-prepared female MPs in parliament (Britton, 2005). This new generation needed "research support to actualize their professional goals and to excel in debates and committees" and "funding to help constituents meet their goals and to prove to the voters they were doing their jobs" (Britton, 2005, p. 150). Alongside this generational change, more restrictions were imposed in debates because although governing elites favored "privileged, professional women with career ambitions," "they disciplined independent and outspoken MPs,

undermining the openness of debate conditions" (Walsh, 2011, p. 211). These contextual features make South Africa an interesting case for understanding intraparty competition for PQs along gender lines.

According to the Rules of the National Assembly (Parliament of the Republic of South Africa, 2016), PQs can only be addressed to members of the cabinet, the deputy president, and the president, and must relate to matters for which the respective cabinet member is officially responsible. The speaker reserves the right to amend a question or return it to the member who submitted it if it is not consistent with the rules (Parliament of the Republic of South Africa, 2016, Chapter 10, Part 1). MPs may table three types of questions—Questions for Written Reply, Questions for Oral Reply, and Urgent Questions; however, there is a fair amount of party control as explained below.

As in other CLPR systems, intraparty competition is crucial in South Africa: MPs need to outperform their co-partisans to win the safest positions in the list and secure re-election. This is particularly important as candidate selection in all South African parties is highly centralized among national elites (Barkan, 2009; Lieberman et al., 2021). Studies have shown that parties, particularly the ANC, hand-pick female MPs that toe the party line to strengthen executive dominance in parliament (Walsh, 2011). There is also evidence that South African MPs behave differently depending on how safe their seat is (Sanches & Kartalis, 2024; Sanches et al., in press). The question is whether intraparty competition shapes how male and female MPs use the questioning tool.

CLPR systems are also known for encouraging greater party control over who gets access to the floor and the content of speeches because parties want to make sure that interventions and policy decisions follow the party line (Slapin & Proksch, 2021). This control is further enhanced in South Africa due to its hybrid parliamentary regime (most ministers are also MPs); cabinet survival requires party discipline and unity. Interviews conducted during fieldwork confirm that party leaders care about what is being communicated on the floor. Within the ANC, questions are clustered in themes and screened by chairpersons and whips to make sure they are congruent with the party line (ANC National Assembly deputy chief whip, interview, September 2023). The same happens within the Democratic Alliance where MPs' attendance is also monitored, whether they are asking questions or issuing a statement (Democratic Alliance deputy chief whip, interview, September 2023). In smaller parties, there is more coordination as there are fewer representatives to allocate to different tasks (e.g., Freedom Front Plus party leader, interview, September 2023). In this context of party control, our goal is to understand MPs' substantive focus on issues, and the conditions under which they change.

4. Methods and Data

4.1. Data

To test the hypotheses, this study makes use of an original dataset of PQs tabled in South Africa's National Assembly between 2006 and 2023. The PQs were extracted from the website of the South African parliament, where they are available in the form of official question paper documents (Parliament of the Republic of South Africa, n.d.). Our dataset covers 16 years and four legislative terms of PQs, namely the 3rd (2006–2009), the 4th (2009–2014), the 5th (2014–2019), and the 6th (2019–ongoing at the time of writing this article) democratic parliaments. Data for the 6th democratic parliament are included up to 27/10/2023. At the time

of writing, data on the 1st and 2nd legislatures were not available. Overall, 35,016 questions were extracted from the question paper documents available after cleaning and removing duplicates.

4.2. Dependent Variable

To operationalize the policy focus of each question in the dataset, the article makes use of an automated classification pipeline. Leveraging OpenAI's API and its offering of Large Language Models (see more details on this in the Supplementary File, Note 1), each question is first automatically classified into the 21 Comparative Agendas Project (CAP) policy areas. Each policy area is then classified further into a policy domain ("hard PQs," "soft PQs," and "neutral PQs"), following the De Vet and Devroe (2023b) coding scheme (Supplementary File, Table A.1). We examined the accuracy of the initial-stage classification into policy areas vis-a-vis manual classification, which yielded an overall 95% accuracy (see more details on this in the Supplementary File, Note 2).

Additionally, to avoid single-issue coding, the selected Large Language Model is allowed to classify questions into multiple policy areas. A question fitting more than one policy area is further disaggregated to the equivalent number of policy areas, augmenting the final dataset to 42,995 questions. The unit of analysis is each unique combination of question and CAP policy area. For example, if a question has been assigned two CAP policy areas, then it is disaggregated into two data points in our dataset: one for each policy area assigned. As an example, the question "What are the full details of the reasons for the delay by the Health Professions Council of South Africa in publishing the list of foreign universities that are accredited and recognized by the Republic as tertiary institutions for professional medical training?" has been assigned two CAP policy areas: "Education" and "Health." In our dataset, there are two data points deriving from this single question, one for each assigned CAP policy area. See the Supplementary File, Table A.2, for more example sentences. Table 1 shows descriptive counts of the policy domain variable per legislature.

Table 1. Policy domain of PQs per legislature in South Africa.

Label	Variable	Policy Domain			Total
		Neutral	Soft	Hard	
	3rd Democratic Parliament	916 (51%)	323 (18%)	574 (32%)	1,813 (4%)
	4th Democratic Parliament	5,269 (45%)	2,195 (19%)	4,140 (36%)	11,604 (27%)
Legislature	5th Democratic Parliament	6,844 (45%)	2,641 (17%)	5,812 (38%)	15,297 (36%)
	6th Democratic Parliament	5,472 (38%)	3,538 (25%)	5,271 (37%)	14,281 (33%)
	Total	18,501 (43%)	8,697 (20%)	15,797 (37%)	42,995 (100%)

4.3. Independent Variables

The main independent variable is *gender* (1 = female; 0 = male) which is interacted with *electoral vulnerability* and *election proximity* to test H2 and H3, respectively. *Vulnerability* is measured by looking at the MPs' positions on the electoral list as a fraction of the total seats their party won in the previous election (following André et al., 2015). It ranges from 0.04 (zero) to 45; the higher the value, the more vulnerable the legislator is. *Election proximity* is measured as the number of days between the day the question was asked and the next election. The variable is coded so that a higher value means the question was asked closer to the upcoming election.

As for the control variables, the article includes: *minister* (1 = if the question is tabled by a member of the cabinet, and 0 = if not); *party seat share*, measured as the share of seats that the party of the MP asking the question holds in parliament; *government*, which distinguishes between government (1) and opposition parliamentary groups (0); *mandate* captures the duration of the MP's tenure in the current legislature at the time of asking the question measured in days; *seniority* is measured as the number of terms a legislator has served at the time of asking the question; *parliamentary party group leader* controls for whether the MP asking the question is a member of the parliamentary party group leadership; *female party group leader*, which is a dichotomous variable that takes the value of 1 if the chief whip of the parliamentary group is female and 0 if not. Finally, the article includes a measure of *gender equality* at the party level by utilizing the V-dem "v2pagender" variable that looks at the share of women in national-level leadership positions. Table A.3 of the Supplementary File presents basic descriptive statistics for all the variables used in the analyses.

The main empirical analysis employs a multinomial logit regression, contrasting two categories of the dependent variable—namely, hard and soft PQs—against the reference category of neutral PQs. The variables were rescaled and centered before running the models.

5. Results

In line with previous studies, our baseline hypothesis (H1) predicts a gender bias whereby women are more likely to ask PQs on soft policy domains than on hard domains compared to male MPs. Unsurprisingly, our descriptive data provides initial support to this hypothesis. Over the entire period under analysis (2006–2023), female MPs ask an average of 1.52 PQs on hard policy domains, whereas male MPs ask an average of 2.41 (see Figure 1). Conversely, female MPs ask an average of 4.08 soft PQs, compared to the 2.64 asked by their male peers. Male parliamentarians also ask more neutral PQs. Figure A.1 in the Supplementary File displays the average number of PQs per gender and policy domain.
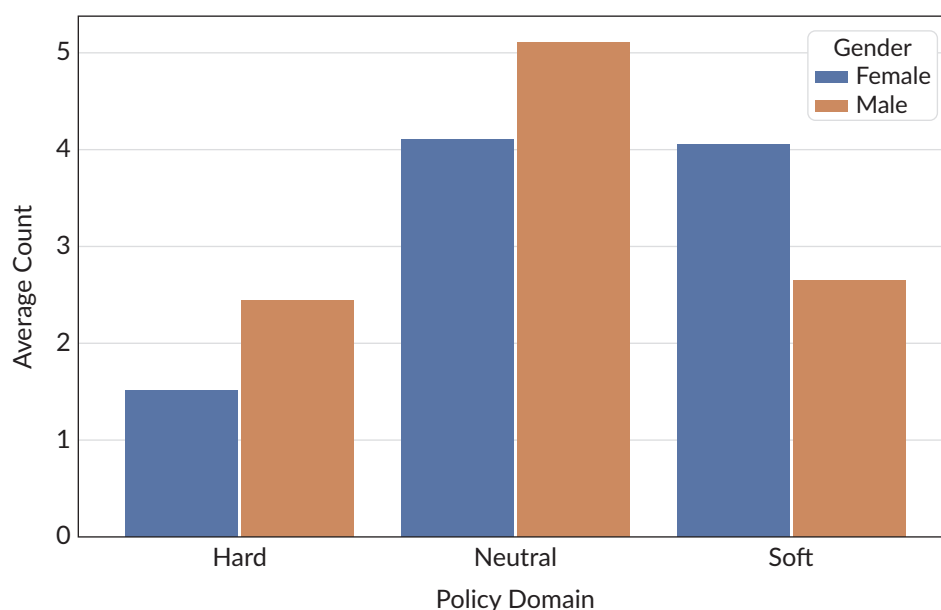

Figure 1. Average count of PQs per policy domain for female and male MPs.

Table 2 presents the results of the multinomial logit regression testing each hypothesis. Starting with the Baseline Model in which the control variables are constant, we find that South African female MPs have a significantly higher probability than men of asking soft PQs compared to neutral PQs—the reference category ($p = 0.724$); however, they have a significantly lower probability of asking hard PQs ($p = -0.288$). This outcome aligns South Africa with most research in the field (Bäck & Debus, 2019; De Vet & Devroe, 2023b; Wahman et al., 2021), and justifies exploring the next two hypotheses to understand whether the degree of gender bias varies depending on the MPs' electoral vulnerability and electoral proximity.

Table 2. Multinomial logit regression for the baseline, vulnerability, and election proximity hypotheses.

	Results					
	(1) Baseline Model		(2) Vulnerability Model		(3) Election Proximity Model	
	Soft	Hard	Soft	Hard	Soft	Hard
Gender: l=Female	0.724*** (0.029)	−0.288*** (0.025)	0.628*** (0.038)	−0.209*** (0.033)	0.724*** (0.029)	−0.288*** (0.025)
Vulnerability	−0.359*** (0.078)	−0.059 (0.063)	−0.359*** (0.079)	0.058 (0.069)	−0.373*** (0.078)	−0.070 (0.063)
Female parl group leader	−0.280* (0.116)	−0.229* (0.102)	−0.306** (0.116)	−0.205* (0.103)	−0.292* (0.116)	−0.241* (0.103)
Election proximity	−0.010 (0.015)	0.044*** (0.012)	−0.013 (0.015)	0.045*** (0.012)	−0.014 (0.015)	0.031* (0.013)
Government	0.400 (0.508)	−0.321 (0.450)	0.314 (0.509)	−0.236 (0.450)	0.350 (0.509)	−0.370 (0.450)
Seniority	0.025 (0.017)	0.110*** (0.013)	0.027 (0.017)	0.109*** (0.013)	0.026 (0.017)	0.111*** (0.013)
Pari party group leader	−0.431*** (0.105)	−0.173* (0.078)	−0.411*** (0.106)	−0.186* (0.078)	−0.438*** (0.106)	−0.179* (0.078)
Minister	−0.158 (0.212)	−0.231 (0.154)	−0.180 (0.212)	−0.219 (0.154)	−0.153 (0.213)	−0.227 (0.154)
MP mandate	0.030* (0.015)	0.125*** (0.012)	0.027+ (0.015)	0.127*** (0.012)	0.028+ (0.015)	0.123*** (0.012)
Party seat share	−0.725*** (0.120)	0.216* (0.096)	−0.746*** (0.120)	0.227* (0.096)	−0.723*** (0.120)	0.218* (0.096)
Gender equality	0.654*** (0.084)	−0.097 (0.072)	0.690*** (0.085)	−0.124+ (0.072)	0.661*** (0.084)	−0.091 (0.072)
Gender*vulnerability			−0.610*** (0.150)	0.493*** (0.133)		
Gender*election proximity					−0.087** (0.028)	−0.078** (0.025)
Constant	−0.945*** (0.208)	−0.864*** (0.171)	−0.981*** (0.208)	−0.816*** (0.172)	−0.981*** (0.208)	−0.894*** (0.172)
N	42,995		42,995		42,995	
Akaike Inf. Crit.	79,837.770		79,793.100		79,827.590	

Notes: p < 0.1; * p < 0.05; ** p < 0.01; *** p < 0.001; coefficients estimated with multinomial logit regression; a control variable for legislature fixed effects is included in the models but not displayed; see Table A.4 in the Supplementary File showing the Models with interactions, excluding control variables.

Our second hypothesis posited that women in vulnerable list positions would ask fewer PQs on soft policy domains and more PQs on hard policy domains. In other words, the gender bias is expected to be smaller among vulnerable MPs than among MPs with safe seats. The results shown in Table 2 (Vulnerability Model) confirm this hypothesis. In fact, the coefficients for the interaction effects for both soft and hard PQs (again having neutral PQs as the reference category) are significant, negative in the former case and positive in the latter.

These results are clearer when considering the predictive margins illustrated in Figure 2 (left side). Women are represented by the blue line and men by the red line. Recall that the vulnerability variable ranges from 0 to 45, with higher values corresponding to greater vulnerability. In the upper graph, which relates to the PQs on hard policy domains, it is clear that more vulnerable female MPs have a greater probability of asking questions on hard policy domains than female MPs who occupy safe seats. It is interesting to observe that, although the slope is steeper for women, the tendency for male MPs is quite the contrary: male MPs who are electorally vulnerable ask fewer hard PQs than those who are more secure. In fact, when vulnerability reaches its highest point, there is no gender bias at all. This contrasting tendency for women and men highlights the gendered nature of parliamentary activity (Erikson & Josefsson, 2022; Erikson & Verge, 2022; Kenny & Verge, 2016; Lovenduski, 2005).

We also confirm H2 when we examine the women's line in the bottom graph, which corresponds to soft PQs, as we observe the opposite result from what is described above for hard PQs. Specifically, the more vulnerable female MPs are, the fewer PQs they ask on soft policy domains. In this case, the slope for male MPs remains completely flat, indicating that vulnerability does not affect the number of soft PQs they ask. Concerning soft PQs, the gender bias does not completely disappear among vulnerable MPs, but it declines significantly when compared to MPs occupying safe seats. Taken together, the results we obtained for both soft and hard PQs are consistent with our theoretical expectations that, in contexts of high intraparty competition, women adopt a competitive behavior to highlight their credentials to the party. Thus, they tend to distance themselves from domains that disadvantage them and focus on more prestigious hard topics. Looking at this from another perspective, they only prioritize soft topics if it does not compromise their individual re-election prospects (consistent with Höhmann, 2020).

The case study literature adds further nuance to these findings, indicating that although women in the South African parliament have become more elitist, professionalized, and focused on advancing their careers, they are now less concerned with the substantive representation of women's issues (Albertyn, 2003; Britton, 2005; Walsh, 2011). This does not mean that female MPs have alienated female constituents or soft issues in general, as H1 shows that gender bias is still there. However, these results reveal that female MPs adopt a more competitive behavior when they are in a more vulnerable position.

The results for the electoral cycle hypothesis are less straightforward. The expectation was that proximity to the elections would decrease the likelihood of women asking PQs related to a soft policy domain and increase the likelihood of their asking PQs related to a hard policy domain. Looking at Table 2 for the Election Proximity Model, we again observe significant results for both interaction terms (between gender and election proximity). However, not only are the coefficients much smaller than those observed in the Vulnerability Model, but the sign for hard PQs also goes in the opposite direction. Confirmation of the hypothesis would require the interaction term to have a positive sign; however, we observe a negative sign ($p = -0.078$). The coefficient
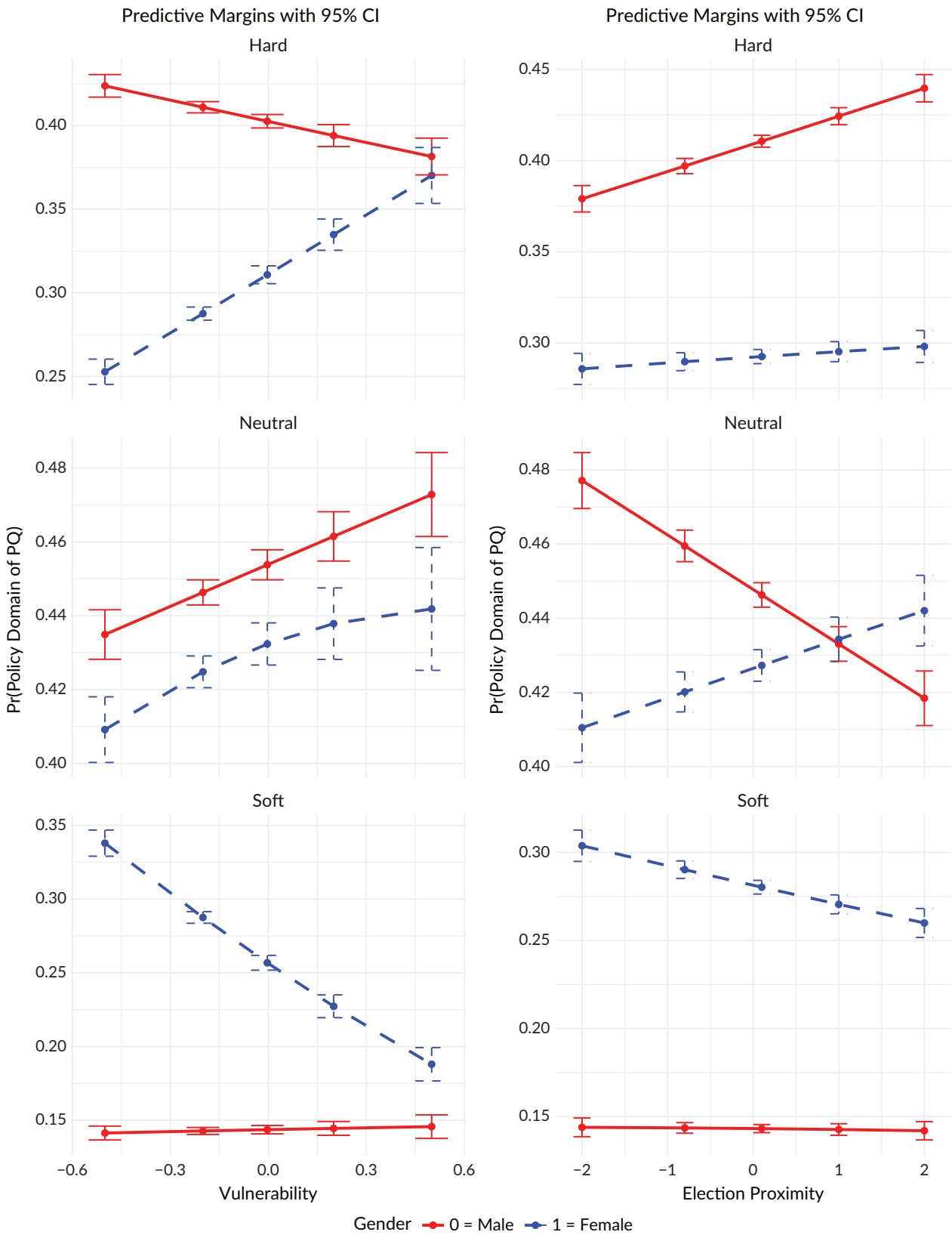
Figure 2. Predictive margins of posing soft, neutral, or hard PQs per gender according to vulnerability and election proximity.

for soft PQs follows the expected direction. These results are consistent with the graph on the right side of Figure 2. It is important to note that, overall, the slopes for the electoral cycle are much flatter compared to vulnerability, demonstrating that election proximity does not significantly shape the substantive focus of PQs along gender lines. Nevertheless, there are some noteworthy results.

First, we confirm the hypothesis for soft PQs. In fact, as elections approach, i.e., as we move towards the right side of the graph, female MPs tend to ask fewer soft PQs. Thus, once again we observe the same tendency for women to distance themselves from topics that do not benefit their career prospects. As observed in the case of vulnerability, the line for men is completely flat. Second, concerning hard PQs, the electoral cycle does not seem to produce an effect on women (flat blue line); this is in contrast to men who increase the average number of hard PQs as elections draw closer. This suggests that, at critical moments, men are more able to shine on the parliamentary floor with questions on topics that tend to be considered more relevant by voters (and party leaders). Considering the context of party constraints in the South African parliament (Sanches & Kartalis, 2024), including constraints on PQs, there is a strong possibility that female MPs are not given the opportunity to pose many hard PQs at such a crucial time in the electoral cycle.

Although our hypotheses focused exclusively on women, it is also interesting to reflect on some of the results we obtained for male MPs. On the one hand, the fact that the level of intraparty competition (operationalized both as vulnerability and election proximity) does not affect male MPs' propensity to ask soft PQs demonstrates the limited relevance that issues such as social affairs, health, and education tend to have for them. On the other hand, both vulnerability and the electoral cycle affect male MPs' decision to ask hard policy PQs. However, it is particularly interesting to note that these two effects move in opposite directions: While the number of hard PQs decreases as vulnerability increases, it increases as elections approach. This suggests that different mechanisms are at play. Although further research is necessary to confirm this, our interpretation of the result for vulnerability is that male MPs in safe positions, who are typically more senior in parliament, may prioritize the prestigious topics for themselves so that it is more challenging for newcomers to address them. Regarding the electoral cycle, there seems to be a similar mechanism to the one we hypothesized for women: At critical moments, whenever possible, male MPs tend to focus more on issues deemed important by both voters and party leaders.

Lastly, a natural expectation is that gender interacts with the electoral cycle and with vulnerability since proximity to elections is likely to have a greater effect on more vulnerable MPs (Fernandes et al., 2018). However, the results for the three-way interaction are not significant (Supplementary File, Table A.5).

6. Conclusion

PQs are one of the parliamentary procedures used strategically by MPs to enhance their re-selection and re-election prospects (Bailer, 2011; Ciftci & Yildirim, 2019). We argue that the way in which MPs use this tool, i.e., the issues they focus on, is likely to vary along gender lines, and in contexts of high intraparty competition. To test these claims, we proceed in two steps. The first analysis tested the widely supported finding that female MPs table more PQs on soft rather than hard policy domains. This was clearly supported by our data, indicating that there is gender bias in the substantive focus of PQs in the parliament of South Africa, despite the high level of feminization and key advances in women's rights (Albertyn, 2003; Britton, 2005; Walsh, 2011). These findings are similar to those observed in most parliaments in more consolidated democracies.

The second step involved a set of analyses to determine whether this gender bias varied depending on either the degree of intraparty competition induced by vulnerability or the stage in the electoral cycle. The theoretical expectations were that female MPs would try to increase their chances of being re-elected if they were in a vulnerable position in the electoral lists and/or as the election approaches by tabling PQs that focus more on topics considered more relevant and prestigious and less on those that do not benefit their prospects of re-selection. Women's more competitive behavior is expected to result from embedded gender norms, which require them to adopt roles and topics that go beyond those traditionally associated with them. In short, the necessity to display activity—vis-a-vis male peers—prompts a more competitive behavior.

The analyses conducted largely confirm our hypotheses. In particular, our data on vulnerability reveal a clear tendency for female MPs who do not hold a safe seat to prioritize hard policy domains and avoid soft ones. This not only underscores female MPs' capacity for hard work (Kantola & Agustín, 2019) but also their resilience and determination to overcome a parliamentary environment that tends to penalize women by distancing themselves from what is perceived as feminine (Erikson & Josefsson, 2022; Kenny & Verge, 2016; Lovenduski, 2005). These results nuance the common perception that women tend to shy away from competition (Niederle & Vesterlund, 2016) and findings suggesting that intraparty competition has a limited effect on the substantive focus of PQs (De Vet & Devroe, 2023b).

Conversely, the results regarding the electoral cycle are not as straightforward. Although there remains a tendency for women to focus slightly less on soft issues as elections approach, no discernible effect is observed for hard topics. In other words, they do not seem to be winning more question time on hard policy domains. Our interpretation of the weak results for the electoral cycle, vis-a-vis that of vulnerability, is that party control over PQs in South Africa is even stronger in the run-up to elections as it coincides with heightened voter attention on politics. Thus, party leaders may give precedence to male MPs to address the more relevant issues on the parliamentary floor; this is certainly apparent in Africa where the economy, which is clearly a hard policy domain, is of great relevance to voters (Wahman et al., 2021). The same is seen in South Africa, where citizens consistently rate hard issues—such as unemployment, crime and security, poverty, and management of the economy—as the most important issues to be addressed by the government (see Table A.6 in the Supplementary File).

Overall, our findings have two main implications. While it is widely acknowledged that male MPs tend to avoid soft policy domains, our research underscores the perception that these policy domains are considered less important by demonstrating for the first time (but see also Höhmann, 2020) that female MPs also steer clear of these topics when seeking to advance in politics. This highlights the fact that the gender difference in policy focus is in fact a form of gender inequality, with unequal career implications for female and male MPs. Second, the clear demonstration that most MPs (both male and female) see soft policy domains as less prestigious and advantageous draws attention to the danger of a decline in political responsiveness to areas such as education or health, ultimately impacting societal well-being and equity. For example, the discontinuation of the advances in women's rights observed in South Africa has affected the quality of political representation (Albertyn, 2003; Britton, 2005; Walsh, 2011).

The study makes a significant contribution to the literature on legislative behavior by highlighting the electoral conditions under which MPs are more likely to switch their focus of attention. Additionally, it contributes to the feminist institutionalism literature by providing further evidence of clear gendered

outcomes within parliaments. We hope this article will encourage further research exploring different dimensions of intraparty competition that, concerning gender, might affect the allocation of policy domains in parliament. Future studies should also consider replicating this analysis in parliaments with different institutional settings to confirm the validity of the results across varied contexts. Finally, further qualitative research (involving interviews) would help clarify whether how female and male MPs pose questions, in general, is shaped by non-electoral motives—e.g., preferences and intrinsic views.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The data used in this article will be made available upon request (ersanches@ics.ulisboa.pt).

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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