Curbing Their Antagonism:
Topics Associated with a Reduction in Personal Attacks at Prime Minister's Questions

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This study of leaders' exchanges in Prime Minister's Questions considers the potential for foreign policy debate to be associated with uncharacteristic personal respect between political opponents. Using an existing dataset coded for a specific form of verbal aggression – personal attacks – questions to the Prime Minister spanning a 37-year period were further analysed for policy topic. Compared to questions and responses focused on domestic policies, foreign policy exchanges were significantly lower in personal attacks. Discussion includes the possibility of this being a British example of the old US adage *politics stops at the water's edge*. Credible theoretical explanations include intergroup theories, and one linked to another US political science phenomenon (the *rally 'round the flag effect*), specifically, *patriotism*.

Keywords: Aggression, disrespect, incivility, personalisation, PMQs.

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There are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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A study by Clayman *et al.* (2007) – imaginatively entitled *When does the watchdog bark?* – evaluated the varying nature of questions in US presidential news conferences. *The watchdog* relates to news journalists who question the President at those events. Expanding their canine metaphor use, *bark* signifies questioning practices identified as aggressive in nature. An earlier publication by the same researchers (Clayman *et al.*, 2006) highlighted an increasing trend in journalistic aggression directed at the President. Latterly, their specific focus was the conditions under which the aggressive questioning was associated. Their analysis spanned a 48-year period, from the presidencies of Eisenhower through to Clinton. They measured aggression via a multi-dimensional analysis of the journalists' questions. Measures included directness, assertiveness, and adversarialness. They reported aggressive questioning to be associated with declining economic performance, and to be more likely in second terms of office. However, and most relevant to the focus herein, they reported that questions related to foreign policy were significantly lower in aggression than those related to domestic policy. Furthermore, this gentler approach linked to foreign policy questioning has remained stable across the latter half of the twentieth century. Will a similar situation be apparent in UK politics – namely, in questions to the Prime Minister?

Below is a review of research related to this phenomenon, and how it has been defined and explained. To follow will be a summary of the process by which the UK Prime Minister (PM) is questioned – not by journalists but by government and opposition politicians – a regular parliamentary event known as Prime Minister's Questions (PMQs). The measure of aggression in PMQs is based on personally antagonistic language in the exchanges between political opponents. This form of *personalisation* is described in the Method section below.

1. Research review

Relevant research connected to foreign policy, particularly overseas military action, includes analysis of the *rally 'round the flag effect* (RE). The RE has received widespread attention from researchers of US politics with regard to the actions of the electorate, journalists, and the political elite. It relates to claims of a short-term boost in presidential popularity due to the nation's involvement in an international crisis (Mueller, 1970). Empirical research findings vary in support for the RE: from supportive (*e.g.*, Kernell, 1978; Mueller, 1970) to casting doubt (*e.g.*, Brody, 1991; Oneal and Bryan, 1995). Theoretical explanations for the effect include *patriotism* (*e.g.*, Lee, 1977) and *opinion leadership* (*e.g.*, Brody, 1991). The *patriotism* explanation is based on a tendency for people to unite behind their leaders when the nation's interests are under threat, or when a threat is perceived. At such a time, some may regard critical opposition of the President to be potentially detrimental to the nation. This perspective has its basis in Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1986): the notion that people support and maintain favourable views of their own group, particularly at a time of potential intergroup conflict. The *opinion leadership* explanation suggests that dramatic events of an international focus engender an abatement in apparent criticism by political opponents, or may even prompt them to be somewhat supportive (see Kam and Ramos, 2008). Consequently, the President may benefit from a higher approval rating and an increase in public support, albeit temporarily, due to kinder rhetoric from the political elite. Oneal and Bryan (1995), however, claim that media coverage of the President's response to international crises is a prominent factor in the size of a rallying effect. The influence of elite debate on any RE is reportedly a complex one, according to Groeling and Baum (2008). They point out that, as well as the partisan affiliation of the elite debater, the credibility of their message is also a factor. The recent expansion of information through technology, including

the advent of social media and the abundance of partisan news outlets, is also likely to have lessened the impact of opponent criticism on public opinion (Baum and Potter, 2019).

Lambert *et al.* (2011) considered the RE from a social psychology perspective via an evaluation of participants' responses, some of whom watched video clips of the September 11th 2001 terrorist attack on the USA (hereafter, 9/11). The 9/11 attacks boosted the approval rating of the incumbent President, George W Bush, by almost 40 percentage points. In the aftermath of 9/11, his rating (90%) was the highest ever recorded for a US President; beating the previous record (89%) held by his father, George H W Bush, during the Gulf War in 1991 (Gallup News, 2018). Lambert *et al.* considered the potential for elicitation of the RE from a range of testable psychological models. Firstly, under the banner *security-based models of threat*, they included anxiety-based formulations of authoritarianism (Doty *et al.*, 1991), motivated-social-cognition theory (Jost *et al.*, 2003), terror-management theory (Greenberg *et al.*, 1997), and uncertainty-management theory (Van den Bos *et al.*, 2005). A common theme from these four models is a motivation for people to feel secure, and a grave external threat like 9/11 should engender a sense of alliance with a leader or an administration with the means to reinforce security. Secondly, they proposed an alternative model: one contingent upon anger. The anger-based model, derived from Anderson and Bushman (2002), proposes that a provocation like 9/11 can prompt an angry reaction against the offending outgroup. This reaction may turn people towards those able to retaliate, in this case, the Commander-in-Chief: the US President. Results from the study by Lambert *et al.* (2011), calculated from participants' responses to a battery of questions, were more supportive of the anger-based model than those centred on anxiety. Their findings suggested that, in a situation which provokes anger, support will increase for a politician deemed likely to respond with aggressive action.

Thus far, this review has considered evidence of reduced journalistic aggression in foreign policy questioning (Clayman *et al.*, 2007), and increased public support during international crises from the RE literature. Is there a tendency for opposition politicians to display similar restraint and supportiveness in relation to foreign affairs? The opinion leadership explanation associated with the RE concerns the rhetoric of opponents, but it is claimed their lower levels of criticism may be due to a lack of information on the crisis situation (Brody and Shapiro, 1989). However, there is research evidence for higher bipartisan support in foreign policy over domestic policy (*e.g.*, King, 1986), where the adage *politics stops at the water's edge*[1] is commonly quoted. Subsequent research suggests this bipartisanship is declining (*e.g.*, McCormick and Wittkopf, 1990; Meernik, 1993). These studies, typically concerned with congressional voting, do not relate specifically to interpersonal behaviour between opposing politicians. In this sense, the research evidence is more scarce.

The focus now turns to British politics, where studies of the RE are far fewer, though there is some empirical evidence for its existence (*e.g.*, Chowanietz, 2010; Lai and Reiter, 2005). The following reviews are concentrated on UK parliamentary discourse research and, chiefly, the highest profile frequent event in UK politics, and the specific focus of this study, PMQs. Before reviewing relevant research, a brief history and procedural summary of PMQs is presented.

2. PMQs in the UK Parliament

Though the questioning of the PM by other MPs was a feature of parliamentary proceedings long before the twentieth century, PMQs did not become a regular scheduled event until

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[1] 'Politics stops at the water's edge' was an opinion voiced by Senator Arthur Vandenberg in a call to unite US politicians in the early part of the Cold War.

1961 (House of Commons Information Office, 2010b). Until 1997, PMQs was programmed for around 15 minutes on Tuesdays and Thursdays whenever Parliament was sitting. Since 1997, the event has been scheduled for each sitting Wednesday, beginning at noon, and lasting around 30 minutes. After the ritual of the opening routine question, where an MP asks the PM to list his/her official engagements, the MP is granted the opportunity to follow up with a *supplementary* question on a topic of their choosing. There is no requirement for the PM to be given any prior knowledge of a supplementary question, therefore the potential for unpredictability and surprise exists. The session continues with further supplementary questions from MPs, each followed by a response from the PM. The questioning MPs are chosen randomly from a selection process known as the *shuffle* (Coe and Kelly, 2009). Generally, MPs are limited to a single question, but the Leader of the Opposition (LO) may ask up to six, affording her/him the opportunity to follow up on the PM's response should they wish. The person charged with keeping order during PMQs is known as *the Speaker*. An important duty of the Speaker is to admonish MPs should they use language deemed unacceptable, for example, accusing other members of lying. Historical examples of *unparliamentary* language which the Speaker has objected to include blackguard, rat, hooligan, guttersnipe, git, stoolpigeon, swine, coward, and traitor (House of Commons Information Office, 2010c).

2.1 Related research and opinion

PMQs is renowned across the world for the adversarial nature of the debate. An article by respected journalist Simon Hoggart summarised it thus: 'It is the most famous parliamentary session anywhere in the world. In Britain it is both reviled and relished. The present Speaker, John Bercow, knows that for the most part the public dislikes the schoolboy rowdyism and

tries periodically to quieten things down. He rarely succeeds for long' (Hoggart, 2011).

Lovenduski (2012) assessed PMQs in relation to gender, and concluded that the event

continues to be characterised by ritualistic adversarial confrontation associated with

masculine culture. Harris (2001) reported that there is an expectation on MPs for what she

termed *systematic impoliteness* towards political opponents, and that face-threatening acts

are commonplace. Bull and Wells (2012) analysed 18 PMQs sessions and claimed that MPs'

reputations are enhanced by engaging in aggressive communication; they described the

event, figuratively, as 'a form of verbal pugilism' (p. 46). Bates *et al.* (2014) conducted a

comparative analysis of five recent PMs and reported, among other findings, an increase in

rowdy behaviour in PMQs and a growing dominance of the proceedings by the party leaders.

Research by Waddle *et al.* (2019) covered the same five premierships, but focused specifically

on personal attacks between party leaders. Findings revealed increases in attacks across each

premiership, and the highest levels of personal antagonism by the more recent leaders,

particularly PM David Cameron.

The PMQs studies above highlight the confrontational, impolite, aggressive,

disorderly, and disrespectful interpersonal behaviour associated with debates in the UK

Parliament, but what evidence is there, if any, for restrained conduct linked to non-domestic

issues? The extensive analysis of Bates *et al.* (2014) included an evaluation by question topic,

but only to compare their relative proportions across premierships. Shaw (2000) conducted a

gender-based study of UK parliamentary debates, though not specifically of PMQs. She

compared the behaviour of male and female MPs in terms of rule violations, and included the

topic of each debate analysed. One form of rule violation – illegal interruptions – includes

criticisms of the speaking MP. Shaw described such interruptions as a strong marker of power

and dominance in the debates. Though a relatively small data corpus, and not including any

inferential statistics, it was noticeable that none of the debates had fewer illegal interruptions by MPs than that which focused on foreign affairs.

2.2 Current research focus

The purpose of this research is an evaluation of PMQs, with the focus on question topic and how that might be reflected in the nature of interpersonal behaviour between the main players in these debates (the party leaders). Analysis of behaviour is based on our recent study of personal attacks in PMQs across a 37-year period (Waddle *et al.*, 2019). Therein a coding system was proposed to identify personal attacks in the questions and responses: referred to also as *personalisation* (described below). Personalisation was defined in an earlier research project on political interviews as 'discourse directed at someone present which is intended to be personally relevant to them' (Waddle and Bull, 2016, p. 432). The focus of our PMQs personalisation research was exchanges between the LO and the PM; the analysis period from 1979 to 2016 covered the early and latter sessions of Margaret Thatcher's premiership through to David Cameron's (a total of 1,320 speaking turns). Here, those findings are used in conjunction with an identification of question topic – based on the UK Topics Codebook[2] (John *et al.*, 2013). Although the method here differs from that of Clayman *et al.* (2007), our personal attacks coding system is an equally valid assessment of aggression in political communication. Furthermore, whilst PMQs discourse research has been wide-ranging, the current focus is the first of its kind.

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[2] Developed by the UK Policy Agendas Project, the UK Codebook uses original categories from the US version from the *Comparative Agendas Project* created by Frank R. Baumgartner and Bryan D. Jones. Its aim is to create a consistent record across time of political and public policy issues receiving attention in parliament (as well as in the media and public opinion). It includes topics specific to the UK. The practicality of the coding system for PMQs has been demonstrated in subsequent research (Bevan and John, 2016). Topic codes are detailed in the Method section.

Consideration of various research findings contributed to the hypothesis for this study. Clayman *et al.* (2007) found significantly lower aggression from journalists when questioning the US President on foreign policy issues. Articles centred on the RE have reported reduced criticism by elite political opponents in association with national security crises (*e.g.*, Chowanietz, 2010; Kam and Ramos, 2008); and there is evidence from the US of increased bipartisan support for non-domestic policy issues (*e.g.*, King, 1986). Finally, although of a relatively narrow scope, Shaw's (2000) study of UK parliamentary debates showed foreign affairs to be associated with the lowest levels of illegal interruptions. Conceivably, illegal interruptions are a form of parliamentary verbal aggression. With these findings in mind, it was reasoned that analyses here would reveal the highest levels of personal attacks by party leaders during questions connected to domestic policies, and thereby politer interaction to be associated with foreign policy.

3. Method

There were five PMs and eight LOs included in this study[3]. Some politicians featured as both PM and LO. The PMs were Margaret Thatcher (Conservative PM 1979-90), John Major (Conservative PM 1990-97), Tony Blair (Labour PM 1997-2007), Gordon Brown (Labour PM 2007-10), and David Cameron (Conservative PM 2010-16). The LOs were those in opposition to the respective PMs at the times of each analysis period. They were James Callaghan (Labour LO 1979-80), Neil Kinnock (Labour LO 1983-92), Tony Blair (Labour LO 1994-97), John Major

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[3] It is important to note that, as analyses are based solely on exchanges between the PM and the LO, only the two largest political parties in the UK parliament are represented here (Conservative and Labour). During PMQs, members of other political parties may question the PM (e.g., the leader of the Scottish National Party is currently permitted to ask the PM two questions). However, the exchanges featured here and in the previous study (Waddle *et al.*, 2019) were those which typically attract most press attention, often for their personal antagonism – the LO's questions and the PM's subsequent replies.

(Conservative LO 1997), William Hague (Conservative LO 1997-2001), David Cameron (Conservative LO 2005-10), Ed Miliband (Labour LO 2010-15), and Jeremy Corbyn (Labour LO 2015-present).

Transcripts of PMQs sessions were accessed from Hansard via two official websites: https://www.parliament.uk/ and http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/. Hansard is the official record of UK Parliament proceedings. It is not an entirely verbatim transcription – obvious errors and repetitions are removed in the editing process – but it forms a substantial, near comprehensive record of the spoken words of MPs in parliamentary debates (House of Commons Information Office, 2010a).

3.1 Dataset

The dataset for this research comprised the same questions and responses used in our previous study (Waddle *et al.*, 2019). There, the intention was to devise a method to identify personal attacks in PMQs, then to look for differences in the use of such personalised language between party leaders and across premierships. On that basis, the first and last 60 question-response sequences from each of the five premierships were used. Analysis was restricted to exchanges from only the permanent LO and the PM. When that research began, Cameron was the current PM, so to represent his latter period we used the most recent at that time: the final sessions prior to the 2015 General Election. Following the referendum on the UK's membership of the European Union (EU) – held on 23 June 2016 – Cameron resigned as PM. His resignation prompted further data collection from his actual latter period, his final sessions from 2016. This current study does not include comparative analyses between PMs or across premierships, but uses the existing coded dataset comprising 660 questions and 660

responses to analyse personal disrespect in relation to question topic. Table 1 shows the PMQs sessions which incorporate these 1,320 speaking turns.

TABLE 1 NEAR HERE

3.2 Personal attacks

The coding method for personal attacks was based on language characterised as disrespectful. Full details of the coding procedure for personal attacks can be found in Waddle *et al.* (2019). To summarise, identification of a personal attack was based on comments aimed specifically at the member opposite which contained or were couched in personal disrespect. Table 2 shows forms that personal attacks can take, with illustrative examples. Each turn – the LO's question and the PM's response – was analysed for instances of personal disrespect, and coded as either 0 (containing no personal attack) or 1 (containing at least one attack).

TABLE 2 NEAR HERE

3.3 Question topics

Prior to the actual coding of question topic, an established list of topics (or policies) to select from was required, and one befitting the broad range likely to be encountered in PMQs. For this purpose, the *UK policy agenda codes* (John *et al.*, 2013) was used, which comprises 19 major topics and over 200 subtopics. The titles of the major topics are shown in Table 3.

TABLE 3 NEAR HERE

Coding of the topic of each LO question was conducted by the first author. Most questions were readily identifiable as one topic. Occasionally, the LO's turn included more

than one question. In these cases, if more than one topic was apparent, the topic of the final question in the turn would take precedence for coding[4]. For question turns where the LO made no obvious reference to a topic, the preceding questions were assessed for the ongoing topic. The following question is a rare occurrence in terms of ambiguity for coding of topic, but is used to highlight the coding procedure.

> A pattern seems to be developing. It is quite simply this: the Prime Minister has a Health Secretary who is imposing a contract on junior doctors, against the wishes of patients, the public and the rest of the medical profession; and he has an Education Secretary who is imposing yet another Tory top-down reorganisation that nobody wants. When will his Government show some respect and listen to the public, parents and patients, and indeed to professionals who have given their lives to public service in education and health? When will he change his ways, listen to them and trust other people to run services, rather than imposing things from above?
> (LO Corbyn to PM Cameron [Hansard, HC Deb, 27 Apr 2016, col. 1424])

The above question from Corbyn includes two questions within the turn, therefore the final one is coded. In isolation the final one here shows no obvious topic, therefore what preceded it is considered. In this case it is apparent that there is no single predominant topic; Education and Health appear equally weighted. Therefore, account is taken of the preceding turns to establish the ongoing predominant topic; in this instance it was Education.

In some instances, although relatively rare, an LO's turn does not include an actual question. The following is an example of this. Under such circumstances the coding is based on the predominant topic of the LO's turn; in this case it was Health.

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[4] Though relatively rare, two topics may be apparent in an LO's turn. For example, an LO may begin his turn with a follow-up to the PM's preceding response, occasionally in the form of a question, then go on to ask a question on a different topic. In these instances, it was deemed the LO had shifted the agenda, therefore the final topic was coded as that which was ongoing.

The very problem that the health service has had is an ideological Tory Government causing difficulties. That is why we have 20,000 more managers and 50,000 fewer nurses. If the Prime Minister believes his case on the health service, education and other issues, let him have the courage of his convictions and put the matter to the country now.

(LO Blair to PM Major [Hansard, HC Deb, 4 Mar 1997, col. 707])

To check reliability of coding here, an interrater reliability test was conducted utilising the coded dataset available from the UK Policy Agendas Project (http://www.policyagendas.org.uk) (John *et al.*, 2013) via the Comparative Agendas Project (http://www.comparativeagendas.net). Their dataset spans PMQs from 21 May 1997 to 17 December 2008 – a total of 9,062 questions to the PM. 180 questions from this study's dataset (coded blind to theirs) featured in their dataset. This enabled a reliability evaluation using over 27% of our coded questions. The result of the interrater reliability test using Cohen's (1960) kappa was $k = 0.76$, $p < .001$, indicating *substantial agreement* (Landis and Koch, 1977).

Finally, to suitably address the main research question, it was necessary to establish a valid distinction between topics befitting foreign policy and those of a domestic agenda. Based on research investigating bipartisanship in US politics (*e.g.*, Meernik, 1993), the following dichotomy was used. For this new variable, topics previously coded Defence, Foreign Trade, and Foreign Affairs were chosen as a justifiable representation of *Foreign (non-domestic) Policy*. The remaining topics, each predominantly of a non-international nature, were coded as *Domestic Policy*. This method is comparable to Clayman *et al.* (2007), who compared domestic affairs questions with questions on foreign/military affairs.

4. Results

Table 4 shows the descriptive statistics related to question topic and the occurrence of personal attacks in both the questions from the LOs and in the responses of the PMs. In terms of topic frequency, questions on economic issues were the most common, closely followed by those focused on government operations. Together, these two topics accounted for close to half (46.67%) of the questions to the PM in this dataset. There were no environment or energy questions. Only 7.42% of the questions were identified as focused specifically on foreign affairs.

TABLE 4 NEAR HERE

Disregarding topics occurring infrequently (<20), questions related to government operations contained the highest proportion of personal attacks, and prompted a similarly high level of attacks in the PMs' responses – both in excess of 46%. Questions concerning social welfare and issues of law/crime also featured high levels of attacks by the LOs – over 40% in both cases. For social welfare, half of the responses contained a personal attack by the PM; but for law/crime, less than a quarter were identified similarly disrespectful. Mid range levels of personal attacks were associated with economy and health questions. Topics lowest in personal disrespect between the leaders were Defence, with around one in five turns containing an attack, and Foreign Affairs, where only 14% of questions and 10% of responses contained a personal attack.

A generalised linear model (GLM) was used to conduct inferential analyses using the dichotomous variable (Domestic policy – Foreign policy), of which the descriptive statistics are shown in Table 5. Questions centred on domestic policy issues were more than twice as likely to be couched in personal disrespect than those aligned with foreign policy matters. The GLM analysis revealed that this difference was highly significant ($p < .001$). Similarly,

responses by the PMs were more inclined to include personal attacks when debating domestic issues, though here the difference was almost three-fold, and again highly significant ($p < .001$). Figure 1 shows the proportions of personal attacks in the questions and responses in relation to domestic or foreign policy.

TABLE 5 NEAR HERE

FIGURE 1 NEAR HERE

Finally, to evaluate the association between questions and responses, the phi coefficient (φ) was computed. This analysis provided an indication of how the personalisation coding of the LO's question (containing an attack or not) might prompt something similar in the immediate response by the PM. Effect size interpretations were based on Cohen (1969). For the domestic questions, there was only a small effect of question on response ($\varphi = .23$, p < .001). However, for the foreign questions, there was a large effect ($\varphi = .47$, p < .001).

5. Discussion

The descriptive analysis focusing on how the levels of personal disrespect in the leaders' exchanges related to individual question topics revealed a range of findings worthy of discussion. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the most frequent topic in this corpus of 660 parliamentary questions was Macroeconomics. Clayman *et al.* (2007), in their analysis of US presidential press conferences, reported aggressive journalistic questioning to be strongly associated with a declining economy. Though relatively high in personal aggression – almost one third of those LO questions and PM responses contained a personal attack – economic debate in PMQs was not associated with the highest levels of disrespect. When topics which

occurred rarely were discounted (*e.g.*, Transport, of which there were only three questions), exchanges on government operations were the most personally antagonistic. Here, where aggression was measured via personal attacks on the leaders, there are logical explanations for the highest levels of personal aggression linked to government operations questions. As the subtopics of Government Operations encompass donations to parties or candidates, government mismanagement, misconduct in public life, sleaze, and scandals related to leading government personnel, high levels of personal disrespect are somewhat inevitable. Indeed, close to half (47%) of the questions on government operations included a personal attack. Questions related to health, law and crime, and social welfare also scored highly in personal disrespect (35%, 41%, and 42%, respectively). Relatively low levels of personal attacks (around 20%) were associated with leaders' exchanges linked to defence issues. Debate of foreign affairs in PMQs was associated with the lowest levels, where attacks on their political opponent occurred in only 14% of questions, and in 10% of responses.

Noticeably, the topic Foreign Affairs includes policy issues related to the European Union. The UK's membership of the EU (and a host of contingent matters affecting the UK) has been one of the most contentious issues in British politics for around 30 years. The UK's relationship with the EU[5] has adversely affected at least three premierships to a high degree. In 1990, PM Margaret Thatcher's stance on EU issues prompted a leadership challenge, culminating in her departure from office. The premiership of her successor, John Major, was dogged by disharmony within his own party due to European issues. Famously, in an unguarded moment in 1993, Major was heard referring, reportedly, to Eurosceptic[6] cabinet

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[5] The UK joined what was then known as the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1973. In a referendum held in 1975, the UK public voted by 67% to 33% to remain a member. In the referendum of 2016, 52% voted to leave the EU, 48% to remain.
[6] A 'Eurosceptic' is a person opposed to the UK's increasing involvement with the EU.

ministers as "bastards" (Routledge and Hoggart, 1993). Most recently, the UK's relationship with the EU brought David Cameron's premiership to an abrupt end. Cameron had campaigned for the UK to remain a member of the EU; the referendum on 23 June 2016 resulted in what has become known as 'Brexit' – the UK's decision to leave the EU. The following day, Cameron announced his decision to resign.

Despite this apparent contention in UK politics related to the EU, the inclusion of EU debate in the topic Foreign Affairs did not have a marked effect on the low level of personal attacks associated with non-domestic debate. For the inferential analysis, Foreign Affairs, Foreign Trade, and Defence questions were categorised as *Foreign (non-domestic) Policy*; all other question topics were categorised as *Domestic Policy*. Using that distinction, analysis revealed significantly lower levels of personal disrespect in foreign policy questioning. Similar significance was evident in the PMs' responses to the questions. These findings are in line with the stated hypothesis and, taking personal attack levels as a valid assessment of aggressive questioning, support those of Clayman *et al.* (2007) who found reduced aggression from journalists when probing US Presidents on foreign policy matters.

Previous research has proposed a potential function of personal attacks to be an attempt to deconstruct political opponents (Reid, 2014; Waddle *et al.*, 2019). Support for this proposed function can be found in the memoirs of a former PM's advisor, Alastair Campbell (2007). His role as Director of Communications to PM Tony Blair included preparation for PMQs. Their strategy to attack LO William Hague, claiming his renowned wit came at the expense of sound political judgement, fits the notion of deconstruction. Thus, if personal attacks are considered an unsupportive action towards a political opponent, findings here are analogous with research of US politics showing higher bipartisan support in foreign policy over domestic policy (*e.g.*, King, 1986).

5.1 Rationale for respectful foreign policy discourse

The findings herein of significantly lower personal disrespect by political elite when debating foreign policy raises the question: in a political system famous for its verbal aggression, what lies behind this politer behaviour? This section will consider explanations for this particular UK version of *politics stops at the water's edge*, with speculation on the cogency of the foregoing theories and schools of thought.

Lambert *et al.* (2011) applied a social psychology perspective to the RE associated with 9/11. In their analysis, they considered testable psychological models in relation to an upsurge in support for the US President following the terrorist attack. They claimed findings were not supportive of explanations based on *security-based models of threat* (which highlight peoples' motivation to feel secure) towards elicitation of the RE. In terms of PMQs, arguably, the LO, a politician whose political aim is to become PM and to lead his/her country, would be unlikely to limit personal attacks on their opponent due to a need to feel secure. From their results, Lambert *et al.* favoured an anger-based model, derived from Anderson and Bushman (2002). They suggested an act of aggression on the nation could spark anger towards the outgroup (the aggressor), which can then engender support for a leader deemed able and prepared to retaliate. An act of aggression on the UK could well provoke anger in any politician. However, the current assessment of foreign policy discourse covered non-domestic topics in general, not a specific act of armed aggression. Therefore, an anger-based explanation here appears inappropriate.

There are two prominent explanations for the RE: *opinion leadership* (*e.g.*, Brody, 1991) and *patriotism* (*e.g.*, Lee, 1977). The argument behind opinion leadership is that national leaders benefit from a boost in public approval ratings at times of international crises due to reduced criticism, and sometimes increased support, from elite political opponents. It

is further argued that a key factor in the reduction is that opposition politicians may be less well informed on the crisis situation than those in power (Brody and Shapiro, 1989). The LO asking the questions at PMQs is indeed the most prominent elite political opponent, and may be at a disadvantage in terms of information. A lack of information on a crisis situation might cause an opponent to curb their personal criticism, especially when a crisis is yet to fully unfold. Such situations, however, can only be the exception in the broad scope of non-domestic question topics here, therefore do not provide a fitting explanation.

The patriotism view is, perhaps, a more appropriate explanation for reduced personal disrespect during foreign policy debate in PMQs. The school of thought for patriotism driving the RE is based upon a tendency for the public to unite behind national leaders when the interests of the nation are perceived to be under threat. Based on Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1986), this explanation follows the proposition that, at such times, people have an increased sense of attachment to the ingroup. Thereby, people tend to rally behind their group leaders to preserve the status of their group. When LOs are questioning PMs on matters related to foreign policy, it is plausible that patriotism may feature in the nature of their discourse, and equally plausible that it may be less of a feature when the agenda is a domestic one. The three original question topics categorised as *non-domestic* (Foreign Affairs, Foreign Trade, and Defence) have an element of ingroup status preservation in the face of outgroup competition (or worse), and to a degree that the domestic topics do not. So, conceivably, in matters of foreign policy, an LO may be affected by a sense of patriotism and therefore less inclined to attack, or at least want to avoid appearing unpatriotic in the eyes of the electorate.

5.1.1 Intergroup theories. The argument presented above is in line with intergroup theories, and how they relate to language and interpersonal communication (see Dragojevic and Giles, 2014). A model proposed by Gaertner and Dovidio (2000) argues that during intergroup encounters, conflict may be reduced because of a common ingroup identity. At certain times, a superordinate group may increase in salience, reducing that of intergroup distinctions (see Ellis, 2006). For example, national identity may at times take precedence over party differences when foreign policy is the topic of discussion. The heightened emphasis of a shared identity over a distinct party identity, albeit temporary, may lead to more respectful exchanges between political opponents. This intergroup explanation may account for the reduction in disrespect between politicians from opposing parties during debates of a non-domestic nature.

5.2 Question-response relationship

Much of the foregoing previous research focused on analysis of only one side of a discursive process. For example, Clayman *et al.* (2007) analysed journalists' questions to the President. Others considered elite opinion of the President (*e.g.*, Groeling and Baum, 2008). Here, with the focus on UK party leaders, analysis covered both the questions to the PM *and* the responses by the PM. This enabled assessment of the relationship between question and response, namely, whether a personal attack in the LO's question tends to be followed by similar disrespect in the PM's response. In our previous study (Waddle *et al.,* 2019), we found only a small effect of question on response overall. However, there were no significant differences in any period between political opponents in their levels of personal attacks. Conceivably, a PM may respond to a question couched in disrespect without any personalised retaliation, but then step up the attacks in subsequent responses. The current study provided

the opportunity to evaluate the question-response association in relation to question topic. Analysis revealed only a small effect for the domestic questions and responses. This matches our previous study where, in our assessment of early and late periods for each of the five PMs, we found, with the exception of one medium effect, only small effects or no effect. Here, however, there was a large effect of question on response when the topic was foreign policy. The inference thereby is that the level of respect shown to the PM in foreign policy questions has a strong likelihood of being reciprocated in the response by the PM to the LO.

5.3 Limitations and future directions.

This study utilised an existing dataset already coded for personalisation via the personal attacks coding system (Waddle *et al.*, 2019). The opportunity was taken to further evaluate the corpus of questions and responses in a distinct way, though one with the potential to be highly relevant. It should be acknowledged that there are five different PMs and eight different LOs involved in the exchanges here. Both of these factors have the potential to be related to personal attack levels. Indeed, significant differences between individual politicians in terms of their overall personalisation were revealed in the previous study. Conceivably, politicians may also display individual differences in relation to their personalisation levels during, specifically, foreign policy debates. Furthermore, significant differences in personal attack levels across premierships were also found in the previous study. However, it was decided not to take account of these factors here, in part, because of the uneven distribution of foreign policy questions; for example, Blair faced only two questions identified as foreign policy in the early period of his premiership, but faced 16 in his latter period. A future research project might expand the data collection and look more closely at individual differences between politicians or across time, or whether the proximity to a general election has any

relevance. In this current research, however, a sizeable dataset was utilised to test the prediction that, like US press conferences (Clayman et al., 2007), foreign policy questioning in PMQs tends to be associated with a politer style of communication.

6. Conclusions

The focus of this research was an assessment of personal attacks in PMQs in association with the topic of the question and, consequently, expanding the analysis of foreign policy discourse into this specific area of UK politics. Research into US politics, specifically, presidential press conferences (Clayman *et al.*, 2007), showed that questioning of national leaders by journalists was lower in aggression when the topic was a non-domestic one. On a similar vein, though reportedly declining over recent decades, there is evidence of increased bipartisan support for the US President for foreign policy matters (King, 1986). Such findings tend to be accompanied by the old adage *politics stops at the water's edge*. Here, analysis of exchanges between party leaders in PMQs revealed something similar. Foreign policy questions were significantly lower in personal disrespect than those associated with domestic policies. The patriotism explanation (*e.g.*, Lee, 1977) for another phenomenon from US political science, the *rally 'round the flag effect*, could have some merit in this UK context. A sense of patriotism, or at least a desire to avoid appearing unpatriotic, may account for an LO's reduction in personal attacks when debating foreign policy with the leader of the nation. Intergroup theories (see Dragojevic and Giles, 2014) complement the patriotism explanation. The emergence of a common ingroup identity (see Gaertner and Dovidio, 2000) may at times take precedence over their usual political rivalry when the agenda is foreign policy, thereby making personal attacks less likely. Furthermore, for questions on foreign policy, in terms of personalisation, the LOs' questions had a large effect on the PMs' responses. The tendency

for PMs to respond with a personal attack was significantly reduced – almost threefold – when the topic was non-domestic. To summarise, this study has highlighted a tendency for personally aggressive discourse between elite political opponents to be greatly reduced when debating foreign policy. The famous adversarialism of PMQs has been likened to a bearpit (Lovenduski, 2012). Switching from an ursine metaphor back to a canine one, this research has highlighted conditions under which the barking subsides.

Table 1 PMQs sessions analysed

PM	Period	Session dates
Margaret Thatcher	Early	22 May 1979 – 7 Feb 1980
Margaret Thatcher	Late	8 May 1990 – 27 Nov 1990
John Major	Early	29 Nov 1990 – 23 Apr 1991
John Major	Late	3 Dec 1996 – 20 Mar 1997
Tony Blair	Early	21 May 1997 – 19 Nov 1997
Tony Blair	Late	21 Mar 2007 – 27 Jun 2007
Gordon Brown	Early	4 Jul 2007 – 5 Dec 2007
Gordon Brown	Late	6 Jan 2010 – 7 Apr 2010
David Cameron	Early	13 Oct 2010 – 19 Jan 2011
David Cameron	Late (2015)	14 Jan 2015 – 25 Mar 2015
David Cameron	Late (2016)	13 Apr 2016 – 13 Jul 2016

Table 2 Personal attacks in PMQs (based on Waddle *et al.*, 2019: p.68)

Comments containing or couched in personal disrespect, *e.g.*,	Examples
Negative personality statements	PM Cameron: *If he had an ounce of courage, he would rule it out.* (HC Deb, 11 Mar 2015, col. 288)
Implications of an enduring negative character trait	LO Miliband: *Is not the truth that, just like on every other issue, we get broken promises from this Prime Minister?* (HC Deb, 19 Jan 2011, col. 834)
Negative names/labels	PM Cameron: *He is just the nowhere man of British politics.* (HC Deb, 24 Nov 2010, col. 261)
Aspersions/disparaging insinuations	LO Miliband: *He is being funded to the tune of £47 million by the hedge funds. Everyone knows that is why he is refusing to act, but what is his explanation?* (HC Deb, 4 Feb 2015, col. 265)
Patronising, condescending remarks	PM Cameron: *That is a much better question; I think we are making some progress.* (HC Deb, 20 Oct 2010, col. 939)
Mockery	PM Cameron: *Apparently, someone can go around to his office, and he stands on a soapbox to make himself look a little taller.* (HC Deb, 4 Mar 2015, col. 938)
Badgering	LO Cameron: *The Prime Minister claims to be a numbers man, so is it 90 per cent, is it 95 per cent or is it 98 per cent? Come on.* (HC Deb, 25 Jul 2007, col. 836)

Table 3 List of topics

Code number	Topic	Abbreviation
1	Macroeconomics	Economy
2	Civil Rights, Minority Issues, Immigration, and Civil Liberties	Civil Lib.
3	Health	Health
4	Agriculture	Agriculture
5	Labour and Employment	Employment
6	Education	Education
7	Environment	Environment
8	Energy	Energy
10	Transportation	Transport
12	Law, Crime, and Family issues	Law/Crime
13	Social Welfare	Soc. Welfare
14	Community Development, Planning and Housing Issues	Housing
15	Banking, Finance, and Domestic Commerce	Commerce
16	Defence	Defence
17	Space, Science, Technology and Communications	Tech
18	Foreign Trade	Foreign Trade
19	International Affairs and Foreign Aid	Foreign Affairs
20	Government Operations	Govt. Ops
21	Public Lands, Water Management, Colonial and Territorial Issues	Public Lands

Note. Code numbers as John *et al.* (2013).
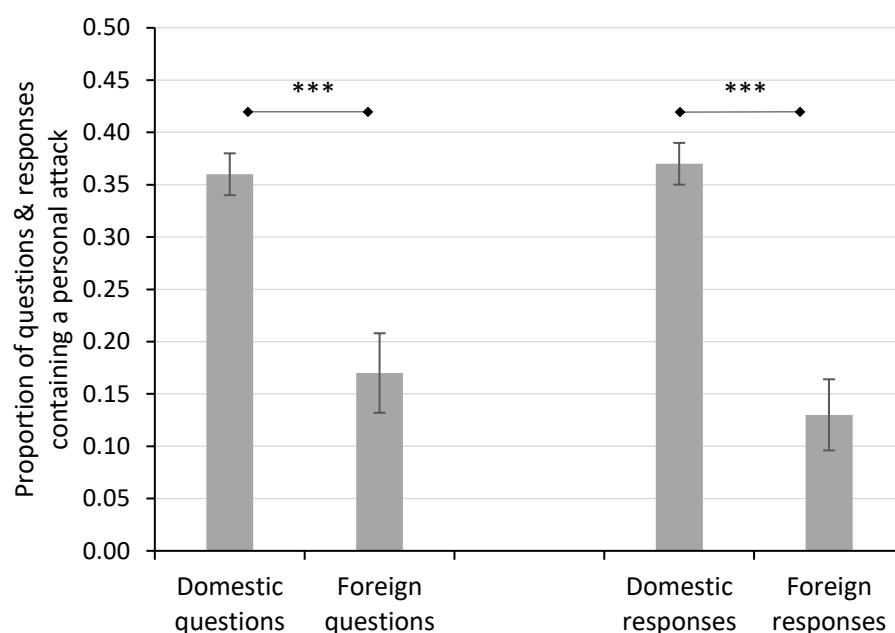

Table 4 Personal attacks in questions and responses

Topic	No. of Qs	LO questions		PM responses	
		Containing an attack	% containing an attack	Containing an attack	% containing an attack
Economy	161	50	31.06	53	32.92
Civil Lib.	10	3	30.00	4	40.00
Health	60	21	35.00	21	35.00
Agriculture	14	2	14.29	7	50.00
Employment	28	7	25.00	8	28.57
Education	38	10	26.32	15	39.47
Environment	0	–	–	–	–
Energy	0	–	–	–	–
Transport	3	2	66.67	2	66.67
Law/Crime	22	9	40.91	5	22.73
Soc. Welfare	38	16	42.11	19	50.00
Housing	8	1	12.50	1	12.50
Commerce	22	7	31.82	7	31.82
Defence	42	9	21.43	8	19.05
Tech	1	0	0.00	0	0.00
Foreign Trade	8	1	12.50	0	0.00
Foreign Affairs	49	7	14.29	5	10.20
Govt. Ops	147	69	46.94	68	46.26
Public Lands	9	5	55.56	0	0.00
Totals	660	219	–	223	–

Note. LO = Leader of the Opposition. PM = Prime Minister. Qs = questions. See Table 3 for full topic details.

Table 5 Personal attacks in questions and responses.

Topic (overall)	No. of Qs	LO questions		PM responses	
		Containing an attack	% containing an attack	Containing an attack	% containing an attack
Domestic	561	202	36.01	210	37.43
Foreign	99	17	17.17	13	13.13
Totals	660	219	–	223	–

Note. LO = Leader of the Opposition. PM = Prime Minister. Qs = questions.

Figure 1. Personal attacks in LO questions and PM responses.
Note. 'Proportion' relates to the estimated marginal means from the GLM.
Error bars represent standard error. Domestic Qs, N = 561; Foreign Qs, N = 99.

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