

Parliamentary accountability in Europe: How do parliaments of France, Italy and Spain fight information asymmetries?

By

Manuel Sánchez de Dios

Universidad Complutense de Madrid- Spain
msanchez@cps.ucm.es

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Abstract:

In this paper one considers the variety of forms of parliamentary accountability in South Europe, the functions they can perform and the relevance they have from the viewpoint of the agency theory. In the paper there is also an evaluation of the cases studied. We conclude that there is not a distinctive model of parliamentary accountability in Southern Europe though the three parliaments are “proactive” in checking the executive and Spain and Italy have sound similarities. Plenary debates and policy evaluation are the most relevant activities in France while in Italy there is a big variety of procedures with different functions and high level of activity in committee. In Spain parliamentary accountability have a multifunctional character too and it is very precise and specialized.

A) INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to estimate the importance of the executive responsibility before the parliament in South European countries. At the same time it evaluates the quality of democracy since parliamentary accountability is one indicator of it. In a democracy parliaments have to ensure that the executive is kept under scrutiny and prevented from abusing its powers. In this paper one only pays attention to ex post accountability or “police patrol oversight” in terms of McCubbins and Schwartz (1984). The interest of the paper is to analyze how government decisions and policy implementation is scrutinized.

The paper focus on how parliamentary accountability has evolved the last decades and the forms it has adopted to permit the opposition to apply real scrutiny. Another objective of the paper is to think about how to rationalize and improve of accountability mechanisms to make them more effective. To explain the parliamentary responsibility of the executive one focuses mainly on the agency theory.

According to agency theory an agent (the executive) is accountable to his principal (the parliament) if he is obliged to act on the latter’s behalf, and the latter is empowered to reward or punish for his performance in this capacity. There are agency losses when the agent fails to act in the best interest of the principal or when the agent takes some positive action contrary to the will or interest of the principal (Strom 2000: 270). More precisely, the problem of “moral hazard” in a parliamentary government arises when ministers have incentives and opportunity to take unobservable action contrary to the parliament’s interest (Strom, 2003, 86). That agency problem is exacerbated under hidden information or hidden action. In other words, agency loss increases when MPs have limited information and resources (Lupia 2003, 35). As a result the main problem of the agency process in a parliamentary government is to combat information asymmetry favoring the government (Strom, 2003, 86).

As Bergman et al. (2003, 147) have pointed out the link between MPs and ministers, even if they belong to one and the same party, is always problematic. This is more the case in coalitions governments. This is why MPs from the majority and the opposition parties must look for institutional and other ways to ensure accountability at the very core of the government. Agency loss may be contained by parliamentary accountability that is based on the fact that the parliament has the right to demand information.

The fundamental of accountability in the agency process is the principal’s ability to learn from the agent’s behavior. The more principals can learn, the greater the confidence they can have in their agents, and the lesser the likelihood of agency loss. Consequently accountability of the

executive must be based on the learning capacity of MPs from the executive's behavior. Learning improves with the diversity of the sources of information available to the legislators. According to Lupia (2003, 49) there are three ways to gain information about an agent's action: direct monitoring, attending to the what the agent says about his activities, or attending to third party testimony about agent actions.

To safeguard against agency losses, MPs engage in various forms of oversight of the ministers. In practice parliamentary accountability is a mechanism of *ex post* control of the executive usually based on monitoring and reporting requirements. Monitoring or "police patrols" is based on information produced by the parliament, reporting is based on information produced by the executive. By monitoring parliaments, at their own initiative, examine samples of executive activity with the aim of detecting and remedying any violations of legislative goals and, by their surveillance, deterring such violations. Reporting mainly forces the executive to share with the parliament information that the latter might not otherwise receive.

The choice of monitoring devices to combat information asymmetries depends on whether a member belongs to a government or to an opposition party. The incentives of parties to use of such tools, in particular of opposition parties to press the government for information in the chamber, are inversely related to the government's control of the parliamentary agenda (Saalfeld 2000, 367). When the government has the power to control the parliamentary agenda unilaterally because it has a strong majority, the opposition has a high incentive to pursue a competitive strategy. However, if the opposition can quietly exert influence on government policy via parliamentary committees or extra-parliamentary ways, the opposition acts in a cooperative way.

There are some basic question we want to answer in the paper: how is parliamentary accountability organized? what forms have been adopted? how has parliamentary accountability been developed? what is the tendency it has developed and which procedures are the most relevant? is there one pattern of parliamentary accountability in South Europe or are there several?

According to he agency theory we assume, first, that parliamentary accountability should be very developed, specially in the twenty first century and that there must be a number of resources for scrutiny the executive well defined as formal procedures. Second, they should have different functions that permit to scrutinize, warn, and improve government action. Third, they should allow to develop different opposition strategies and different types of relationship between parties and with the government. With these procedures it should be possible to fight information asymmetries between executive and MPs and parliamentary

groups in particular from the opposition. Fourth, there should be a tendency in all systems to gradually acquire a homogeneous and uniform pattern of executive accountability. Parliamentary democracies will work in a similar way because they face the same problems and solve them in an analogous mode.

In this paper we consider these questions paying attention to the general structure of parliamentary systems, the party government, the accountability procedures and their practice in the low chambers of each country. The data has been obtained in the web pages of each parliament: www.assemblee-nationale.fr; www.camera.it; www.congreso.es.

B) RESOURCES OF PARLIAMENTARY ACCOUNTABILITY IN SOUTH EUROPE

1) Typology and multifunctionality of accountability instruments

When we compare parliamentary accountability in France, Italy and Spain in a general perspective we see that there is a big variety of accountability resources (table 1):

- a) First, parliamentarians can ask oral or written questions to the executive and demand reports to the public administration. In that cases MPs usually act as representatives of local interests, their own constituencies or interest groups.
- b) Second, there are general debates in plenary sessions such as confidence votes, censure votes, interpellations, motions, resolutions, executive declarations and the “state of the nation” debates. These debates are public and every party and the executive have to explain their points of view in relation to relevant problems of government policies. These debates can end with vote. Sometimes governments are criticized in the debates and even they must resign after a vote of censure, but other times party groups propose policy orientations.
- c) Third, there is also accountability in parliamentary committees throughout oral questions and resolutions. There are also hearings by which ministers and other members of the executive explain their policies, the budget implementation and the public expenditure. Sometimes committees write up reports evaluating policies. As a matter of fact committees are a place where it is possible to debate, bargain and reach an agreement between the government and the opposition. Committees permit specialization and expert knowledge, and when they are powerful, they are a place for cross-party

relations. In addition specialized committees prevent and combat efficiently the moral hazard problem. In addition there are special committees for inquiries and *ad hoc* committees to look for specific information. In fact parliaments have responded to the growing information asymmetry between themselves and the government by committee specialization (Sallfeld, 2000, 357)

- d) Finally there are other resources of control such as the Ombudsman or the Court of Audit, both are delegated by parliaments to oversee the public administration

This menu of oversight mechanisms facilitates accountability and the learning process of MPs. They relate to different tasks that can be fulfilled in the accountability process: to extract information from governments, to monitor their activities, to induce them to defend their decisions and to give orientation. In fact not all of the resources are used in the same way: some of them are employed for a general oversight of the administration, some others serve a purpose of scrutinizing policy implementation and they are instruments for specialized control, others are employed for criticizing the government, others to give *indirizzo* and others, finally, to dismiss the government.

Oversight is precise and it is worked on by means of written questions and demanding administrative reports. The policy supervision can be made by general debates, hearings and oral questions in plenary sessions and by oral questions and hearings with a specialized perspective in committee. Policy supervision implies a higher degree of control than general oversight. In both cases the main objective is to fight information asymmetries or lack of specific information by MPs and party groups. Policy supervision in committee is usually directed to the goal of party negotiation. Direct monitoring by general oversight and policy supervision combats moral hazard.

Critical control is another function of parliamentary accountability. Criticism can be produced in general debates on the floor of the House mainly by means of interpellations. Critical control is based on a high competition and confrontation between the executive and opposition parties. Finally there is policy orientation. It is related to the Italian idea of *indirizzo*, which means influence in parliamentary terms. There is a type of general *indirizzo* by resolutions and motions approved on the floor of the House and a type of specialized *indirizzo* related to specific policies by means of resolutions or reports of committees. *Indirizzo* is mainly a product of a cooperative behavior of opposition parties when they want to influence the policy making. Both critical control and *indirizzo* prevent moral hazard.

The distinction of procedures has been a process of parliamentary rationalization and has been reflected in the Standing Orders of every chamber. It is part of the rules of the game and facilitates the accountability of the executive. The main rationalization has been the differentiation of confidence and censure motions from other type of motions. In South Europe opposition parties only sanction a government and remove it by confidence and censure votes. The possibility to overthrow of governments is the ultimate weapon that MPs can use against the sitting cabinet, and the main fundamental of cabinet accountability before parliament. The other institutional instruments for active oversight are armed by the ultimate weapon of the vote of censure.

TABLE 1

Type of resource	Task
<i>By MPs</i>	
Written questions Administrative reports	General Oversight
<i>In Plenary sessions (general control)</i>	
General debates Censure votes Confidence votes Hearings Oral questions Interpellations Motions Resolutions	Policy supervisions Critical control <i>Indirizzo</i> or policy orientation Sanction
<i>In committee (specialized control)</i>	
Oral questions Resolutions Parliamentary reports Hearings Investigative committees Informative committees	Policy supervision <i>Indirizzo</i> or policy orientation Negotiation

When there is a big amount of and high variety of resources there are many possibilities and ways to make the executive accountable and fight information asymmetries, nevertheless some considerations should be

made about the practice of accountability. First, there are not the same resources in every country, for example, accountability in terms of diversity of resources is more developed in Italy and Spain than in France; however in all countries there are the same basic mechanisms of accountability such as questions, hearings and committees of inquire. More precisely, it is inexcusable for a minimal level of accountability in a parliamentary democracy to have written questions and urgent debates by oral questions (question time). Not only it happens in South Europe but also in Germany where there are oral questions (question time) and big and short interpellations (Grosse Anfragen) (*Kline Anfragen*) (Saalfeld, 1998, 63). In the United Kingdom in addition to the *question time* there are general motions and adjournment motions used to open general debates in the House (Sánchez de Dios, 1992, 71 y ss). In these cases there is also accountability in committee

Second, the use of resources varies with time, depending on the needs of parliamentary parties and the strategy they follow. Some times one type of procedure turns to be more relevant because opposition parties become weaker or stronger after elections. When a party loses strength and cohesion its opposition strategy is less competitive. On the contrary, when an opposition party is strengthen after elections its behavior is more aggressive and competitive, in particular if alternation in power is possible. Besides the kind of accountability changes after alternation in government. It is because the former government members, now in opposition, are very experienced about administrative practice and are very well informed, consequently information asymmetries are reduced and they can be very active and effective in specialized policy supervision. The experience and knowledge of MPs also count for accountability practice since it takes time to learn how to handle the different procedures. Usually lack of expertise appears when there is a high renovation of a parliament.

In total multiplicity and diversity of parliamentary mechanisms in South Europe signifies a high level of accountability institutionalization and rationalization. Moreover a big variety of mechanisms are necessary to combat efficiently agency losses and prevent moral hazard in the executive-legislative relations.

2) Level of parliamentary activity and relevance of procedures

If one pays attention to table 2 one can see, first, that in each country MPs have been very active looking for information through written questions and by demanding administrative reports. They are good sources of control that permit MPs to look for precise information in relation to specific interests they represent.

Secondly in the table below one can compare the usage of control in plenary sessions. Among them oral questions (question time) are the most important in number. They are very useful for debating every day problems, but they have not the same relevance in every country. Interpellations are also very significant in number, particularly in France. In Italy and Spain the amount of *indirizzo* procedures, resolutions and motions is significant. Thirdly there is control activity in committee by different means in the three countries.

Paying attention to the amount of procedures held in each chamber one can specify the four most relevant fields of parliamentary accountability in South Europe:

1.- The first place is for questions, both oral and written. This is the most important activity of the three parliaments in terms of procedures tabled and answered. It is based on direct monitoring. As Wiberg and Koura (1994, 31) explain there are basically two groups of questions: a) the ones looking for information on precise and limited issues, what means that they are useful to fight directly information asymmetries, and b) the ones (the rest) that look for a minister to be interested on a specific problem, to influence in a decision, etceteras.

2.- Interpellations are the second most important means of control. It is a classical procedure in the hands of opposition parties (Helander and Isaakson, 1994, 217) that has a central role when they have a competitive strategy. It is sometimes classified as a type of parliamentary question (Wiberg 1995:185). It is the most relevant procedure in France, though there is not a vote after its debate. Parliamentary rationalization in the three countries is the cause that interpellations are employed just as a resource for critical control and never for removing a government.

3.- The third place is for *indirizzo* activity. It is very important in Italy and Spain by means of general debates of motions and resolutions. In France it is based on policy evaluation by parliamentary reports.

4.- Finally, accountability in committee is also significant, mainly in Italy and Spain where there is committee specialization. One can say that accountability in committee should be considered as part of the bargaining process in the policy making because, according to Sartori (1988), activity in committees is mainly oriented toward party negotiations. However in South Europe committees are no so important as they are in Germany, UK or the Nordic Countries.

TABLE 2*Parliamentary accountability in low chambers (selected parliaments)*

	France 2002-2007	Italy 1996-2001	Spain 2000-2004
Written questions	100.154	11.448	71.165
Administrative reports	----	-----	4.516
<i>ON THE FLOOR</i>			
General debates	26	n.d.	8
Censure votes	7	0	0
Confidence votes	5	4 ^(a)	1 ^(a)
Hearings	----	-----	24
Oral questions	1.830	2.691	1.952
Interpellations	3.298 ^(b)	1.339	245
Motions	----	148	71
Resolutions	----	140	113 ^(c)
<i>IN COMMITTEE</i>			
Oral questions	----	3.567	1.063
Resolutions	----	321	510 ^(c)
Parliamentary reports	511	---	---
Hearings	3.720	n.d.	2.487
Inquiry committees	8	5	1
Informative committees	16	----	4

Source: www.assemblee-nationale.fr; www.camera.it; www.congreso.es

(a) Investiture vote; (b) Called oral questions with debate; (c) Called non law propositions;

C) MODELS OF PARLIAMENTARY ACCOUNTABILITY

Cross-national research on parliamentary institutions and behavior is not easy. As Copelan and Patterson (1994, 2) have pointed out, parliamentary institutions have not been studied extensively by scholars until recent times, not even in the case of Europe. Further more, it is difficult to establish comparisons for the South European cases because their academic analysis are usually divergent in theoretical foundations, aims, methodology, scope, complexity, or even in the nature of the data gathered and its utility for empirical generalization. To compare the cases we will consider in this paper principally three features: the institutional structure, the party government and the practice of accountability.

1°.- The French case:

Even though the French Fifth Republic is formally and structurally a parliamentary government (Avril, 2002, 268), its parliament has a subordinated position (Fabius, 1998a, 152). As P. Avril has written (1998, 1515), the parliament's weakness is mainly due to the fact that the government has always been responsible to the President of Republic and not to parliament, because it is a semi-presidential system (R. Elgie, 1998) with a strong tendency to presidentialism (Aromatario, 2007, 752). However from 1986 to 1997 there have been several cases of "cohabitation". In such occasions, the French system works like the Westminster model, that is, as a majority system, (Maus, 1999, 81) and the President becomes the leader of the opposition. Moreover, in case of cohabitation, the National Assembly is the main arena for the relations between majority and opposition.

The Fifth Republic has taken the shape of a rationalized parliamentary system with the aim of assuring that the executive can effectively direct parliament's activity (Auvret, 1998, 1517). The principal rationalization procedures in legislation are package vote and guillotine (Huber, 1992; Avril 1998, 1507). Parliamentary accountability has been rationalized by eliminating the vote on government declarations and interpellations and by establishing specific procedures for a vote of censure. As a consequence check on the executive is mainly based on reporting, that is on information given by the government to the chambers and by parliamentary debates without a vote at the end. The executive can only be sanctioned and removed by a specific motion of censure or when it loses a confidence vote. Since it is not possible to approve a non legislative proposal (general motion or resolution) it is difficult to effectively criticize or give *indirizzo* to the executive.

Coalitions have been the main characteristic of France's party government up to 2007. They are based on a one-dimensional party system that has a tendency towards bipolarization. (Thiébaud, 2000, 502), Coalition governments and, even more, multiparty coalitions tend to reinforce parliament. This is so because the decision process is based on constant negotiations needed for managing the plurality with coherence and for avoiding the risk of a blockage in Assembly. For example, in 1997, there was a multiparty coalition of the left which was double-edged: on one hand, parties allied to exercise power but, on the other, they were rivals as each party had its own program (Avril, 2002, 272). Another characteristic of France's party government is alternation of the majority after elections from 1981 to 2007. Coalition government and alternation usually causes an increase in parliamentary activity. (Avril 2002, 276). As a consequence

during the 1997 parliament there was an increase of accountability, in particular of oral questions and inquiry committees.

To sum up the determinants of accountability in France are the executive preeminence because of parliamentary rationalization, coalition government and frequent bipolar alternation.

France is a case of bicameralism. It is not a balanced bicameralism, as the National Assembly has the last word in the legislative process and the Senate cannot vote a censure on the government. The Senate has the same accountability procedures of the Chamber but opposition is mainly put in practice by blocking the legislative process by means of *navette* (Lavaux, 2004) that is an *ex ante* control resource.

In France there is a prevailing opinion that control of the executive needs to be further developed (Fabius, 1998b, 1306). P. Avril (2002, 277) points out that control activity is very reduced due to legislation's priority, majority's shyness and the opposition's incapability to exercise it. That is why in recent years, some reforms have been made in order to improve parliament's powers (Fabius, 1998b, 1303). The most important have been the reform of the Standing Orders of the National Assembly in 1994, and the constitutional reform of 1995. In the first case, greater importance was given to the committees' work and parliamentary control was improved (Jan, 1995, 991). But the second reform was much more impressive (Chrestia, 1999, 35), as it established an agenda's control one day a month by the National Assembly and the "unique period" of legislative sessions. As a result, in general terms, the number of control procedures has increased in the latest parliaments.

The two main procedures in *ex post* control activity are questions to the government and inquiry committees. There are several types of questions of which written questions are the most frequent. In 1997's parliament, 75.577 questions were tabled and 62.565 were answered in the National Assembly. The rate of 83% of questions answered is lower than that of the previous parliaments.

There are two kinds of oral questions: with or without debate. Every party can table a number of oral questions proportional to its parliamentary strength and, since the 1995 reform, every Tuesday afternoon MPs debate with the government during a short period of time. The matters in discussion are called "questions to the government". They are similar to interpellations but without a vote at the end of the debate. In these debates, every party has a limited time according to its parliamentary strength. The debate can also be seen on TV, which makes it a very important way of control. In 1997's parliament, there were 3.365 questions to the government, which is the highest number in the Fifth Republic's history.

On the other hand, oral questions without debate consist of a two-minute speech. In 2002's parliament, there were 1.830 of such a questions, increasing the number of previous parliaments.

The second important way of control is the enquiry committees. Their composition is based on a proportional parties' representation so that opposition has a limited capacity to control the government (Jan, 1995, 1015). According to Frears, (1990, 35), they are ineffective instruments of control without impact on public opinion. In France, enquiry committees have not been very numerous, although in 1997's parliament, 15 committees were set up. In fact, there were 125 proposals to set up a committee but only 36 succeeded.

Close to these committees are the "parliamentary offices" and the "informative missions" which have become more and more important with the time due to difficulties to set up a committee of inquiry (Maus, 1999, 80). The "offices" are, in fact, parliamentary delegations that inform the parliament around a particular policy (Chevilley-Hiver, 2000, 1687). In 1997's parliament there were six of these offices working. They produced 207 reports and had 645 hearings of which 65 were of ministers.

The "missions" are set up temporarily by the permanent committees and are very numerous. Their goal is to evaluate the implementation of laws and particular policies, for example the Mission of Evaluation and Control (MEC) set up by the Committee of Finances of the National Assembly for reporting about the efficacy of public expenditure has been re-launched every year since 1997 (Chevilley-Hiver, 2000)

The inquiry committees, parliamentary offices and informative missions work, in the French case, as *indirizzo* mechanisms rather than as supervisory or accountability mechanism. More precisely, they are mechanisms used to evaluate policies and to give some orientation to the government under a cross party mode. The result of this activity is a number of reports that can be very numerous. In France, there is also some *indirizzo* from the standing committees through their reports. In this aspect, standing committees elaborated 169 informative reports in 2002's parliament. In addition, they had 1.130 non legislative hearings, out of which 498 were of ministers.

Hearings play a very relevant role in evaluative *indirizzo*. In the parliament of 2002 there were 3.720 hearings in standing committees, offices and delegations, inquiry committees, and missions. Out of them 630 were hearings of government members.

In addition to the control mechanisms mentioned above, there are some other such instruments. For instance, in 2002's parliament there were 26 government declarations with their corresponding debate, which is a frequent procedure in France, 5 confident votes after the President's government nomination and 7 failed votes of censure. According to

Thiebault (2004, 521) it is almost impossible to pass a vote of censure in France because of the existence of a stable, coherent, and disciplined majority and this fact undermines cabinet accountability before parliament.

TABLE 3

Forms of parliamentary accountability in France- Assemblée Nationale

	IX* 1988-1993	X * 1993-1997	XI 1997-2002	XII 2002-2007
WRITEN QUESTIONS				
- Tabled	70.886	56.243	75.577	123.418
- Answered	6.6484	47.271	62.565	100.154
- Signalled	--	2.109	1.669**	2.873
GENERAL DEBATES				
- Government declarations	--	6	18	26
- Confidence votes	2	--	1	5
- Censure motions	17	7	2	7
ORAL QUESTIONS	601	2.415	3.376***	3.298
QUESTIONS TO THE GOVERNMENT				
- Tabled				1.919
- Answered	670	1.328	1.719	1.830
INQUIRY COMMITTEES				
- Introduced	s.d.	s.d.	124	173
- Created	6	4	15	8
MEC/MECSS			2**/--	11/6
INFORMATIVE MISSIONS			31**	16
TEMPORARY MISSIONS			10**	76
NON LEGISLATIVE REPORTS				
- Standing committees			133	169
- Offices and delegations			207	203
- Informative Missions			93**	139
HEARINGS (non legislative)				
- Standing Committees			1.047	1.130
- Government			-367	- 498
- Delegations and Offices			645	733
- Government			-65	- 65
- Informative Missions			121**	1.533
- Government			-8**	- 41
- Inquiry committees			945	937
- Government			-18**	- 18
- MEC			96**	173
- Government			-18**	-3
- MECSS			4**	344
- Government			--	-5
TOTAL				3.720

* Source: D. Maus: "Pratique Constitutionnelle de la Veme. République" in *Notes et Etudes Documentaire*, n° 5067 de 1998

** Data from X-1999 to VI – 2002

*** Included 11 questions with debate

MEC: Evaluation and Control Mission; MECSS: : Evaluation and Control Mission of Social Security

To sum up the French model of accountability is characterized by a very important role of executive reporting in plenary debates and a relevant *indirizzo* of policy evaluation. In spite of the polarization of the party system the great importance of policy evaluation by subcommittees shows that there is a dominant activity of cross party mode in France to prevent the problem of moral hazard. Another characteristic of the model is a lack of specialization of committees that shows a limited institutionalization of the parliamentary accountability and a low efficiency in fighting information asymmetry.

2°.- The Italian case

In Italy, the parliament is at the core of the institutional system, but it is not clear whether it has also a central position in political terms (Pegoraro, 2002). Before the 90's, and mainly in the 70's, the parliament was the main field for political debate (Cotta, 1997; Manzella, 2001). The parliament's *centralita* was based on an especial consociational relationships pattern between the parties (De Micheli, 1997, 155). However, in recent legislatures the parliament entered in a shadowy period or certain decadence due to parliamentary fragmentation that, as an example, increased the practices of parliamentary obstructionism. Fragmentation produces uncertainty and instability to the government coalitions and, at the same time, causes a deep crisis in the Italian parliament because it cannot give legitimacy to the government; in words of Manzella (2001, 68), this is the "Italian paradox". Party fragmentation is the reason for a critical functioning of the parliament at present time (Pasquino, 2007, 8)

In spite of this, nobody can affirm that the Italian parliament is submerged in a real process of decline. (Pegoraro, 2002, 126). On the contrary, analysts such as Della Salla (1998, 75) explain that it can still play a very important role since it is strongly institutionalized, whereas Furlong (1990, 65) admits that the Italian parliament has a comparatively strong formal power in the law-making and it is able to exert considerable influence in the policy process.

A main feature of the Italy is a coalition party government. Since 1993 usually two bipolar coalitions alternate in government. The 1996-2001 legislature, that is the last one we can compare, was characterized by the high fragmentation of the center-left coalition and its lack of cohesion. In addition, the majority supporting the government in parliament was partially different from the electoral cartel, the Ulivo, that won the election of 1996 (Verzichelli and Cotta, 2000, 444). As a result, the legislature had great instability and there were four government changes. Another feature

of party government is alternation in the government after every election. It began in 1996 when center-left was governing in Italy for the first time since 1947. Party fragmentation and alternations result in a high parliamentary activity. There have been more legislative proposals and control acts from 1993 than ever before.

The determinant factors of parliamentary accountability in Italy nowadays are, first, fragmentation of government coalitions, second, bipolarization of the party system (coalitions) and, last but not least, frequent processes of alternation. All of them explain the competitive behavior of opposition parties and the development of interparty relations.

Symmetrical bicameralism is a characteristic of the Italian parliament. The Senate and the Chamber of Deputies have similar functions and both can be veto players in the law-making because a bill cannot be adopted without one of the chamber's approval. Consequently, there is a strong relationship between both chambers (Zucchini, 2001, 119): deputies and senators can initiate legislation and control the government. In addition, both chambers have a similar committee system. The support of the government is also similar in both chambers (Verzichelli and Cotta, 2000, 437 and 441). The main difference, on the other hand, is that party leaders are always deputies of the Chamber.

We will fix our attention on the activity of the low chamber (*Camera dei Deputati*), although it must be said that, due to symmetrical bicameralism, some procedures, like confident votes, are duplicated and that the global activity of the parliament is extremely high in comparative terms because both of the chambers are very active.

In general terms, the Italian parliament is very active controlling the executive in both chambers, although scarce attention has traditionally been paid to it (Capano and Giuliani, 2003 and 2005, 18). The debate about *la centralita* of the parliament has been based on its legislative capacity, considered as an arena for political debate, but not for the executive accountability. (Cotta, 1997, Manzella, 2001)

The number of acts of oversight has been constantly growing since the 1987 parliament. Until the 90's, these mechanisms have been under-used both by the opposition and by majority backbenchers, because of the period's latent legislative consensualism (Capano and Giuliani, 2003 and 2005, 20).

There are different types of questions. In the 1996 parliament there were 34.664 written questions tabled in the *Camera*, but only 11.448 of these were answered. The rate of 34% of the written questions answered is very low compared to other countries as we will see.

Oral questions can be tabled on the floor or in committee and can be also presented under an urgency procedure (*risposta immediata*). The urgent procedure on the floor, which takes place every Wednesday, is

similar to the British “question time”. The Prime Minister’s question time has been introduced recently. However, the answer in committee only takes place two times a month. In the 1996 parliament, the amount of oral questions on the floor of the *Camera* was as follows: 6.963 tabled, 2.691 answered, and 179 transformed into a written question. In committee there were 8.893 oral questions tabled and 3.567 answered.

Interpellations in Italy produce small debates between MPs and ministers concerning some aspects of a particular policy. They are considered an *indirizzo* means or parliamentary guidance to the government. Some of them are urgent interpellations that must be supported by a parliamentary group. The total number of interpellations tabled in the *Camera* during the 1996 parliament was 2.949, but only 1.479 of these generated a debate.

Motions are tabled by a parliamentary group, sometimes after an interpellation, other times after a petition. They are also considered as an *indirizzo* means that generates a general debate in the chambers. Motions about the same topic, or amendments to a motion, are debated together. A motion is voted only if it is demanded by a group. In the 1996 parliament there were 515 motions tabled in the *Camera*; but only 148 of these were debated and 48 approved. There were also 4 investiture votes, one for each government. Confidence motions and censure motions are not common though government crisis are frequent. Coalition crisis are usually caused by extra-parliamentary instability and their main reasons are disputes between or within the governing parties (Furlong, 1990, 58). In Italy there is a practice of formally attaching confidence in the government on to a piece of ordinary legislation. Then the censure is produced by a contrary vote on the proposal, that is an *ex ante* control of the executive.

The resolutions are proposed by MPs after a motion or a government’s communication. There are also resolutions in committee that require the participation of a government member in the debate. All of them are procedures of *indirizzo*. In the 1996 parliament there were 155 resolutions tabled in the *Camera*, 140 of these were debated and 68 approved. For as in committee, there were 1059 resolutions tabled, of which only 488 were debated and 255 approved.

Finally, inquiry committees can be set up in every chamber by law. There are also bicameral committees when both chambers have the same inquiry. Each committee has a proportional representation of parliamentary groups. These committees work as the permanent committees do and have the same limits as the judicial power. In the 1996 parliament, there were 32 proposals in the *Camera* to set up 19 inquiry committees, but only 3 were created and 2 more were prorogated.

To sum up, the Italian case is characterized by the major relevance of direct monitoring through oral questions that open urgent debates on

current issues. Moral hazard is prevented by both *indirizzo* activity throughout resolutions and motions and critical control. There is a variety of procedures with different functions and high level of activity in committee. As a result one can say that Italy has a very relevant accountability activity and it is highly institutionalized. It is a proactive parliament controlling the executive and fights efficiently information asymmetry.

TABLE 4
Forms of accountability in Italy- Camera dei Deputati

	IX 1983-1987	X 1987-1992	XI 1992-1994	XII 1994-1996	XIII 1996-2001
WRITTEN QUESTIONS					
- Tabled	21.854	31.750	22.330	19.105	34.664
- Answered	11.828	14.717	5.358	6.121	11.448
<i>ON THE FLOOR</i>					
ORAL QUESTIONS					
- Tabled	3.473	3.547	1.675	891	6.983
- Answered	1.144	1.194	408	227	2.691
RESOLUTIONS					
- Tabled	93	206	36	52	155
- Debated	93	206	35	32	140
- Approved	n.d.	n.d	14	18	66
INTERPELATIONS					
- Tabled	1.111	1.825	1.234	890	2.949
- Debated	355	613	220	220	1.339
MOTIONS					
- Tabled	239	593	245	230	515
- Debated	129	300	60	57	140
- Approved	n.d	sn.d	5	21	41
<i>IN COMMITTEE</i>					
ORAL QUESTIONS					
- Tabled	3.170	3.517	2.016	2105	8.893
- Answered	1.146	1.203	499	537	3.567
RESOLUTIONS					
- Tabled	364	547	384	613	1.135
- Debated	149	204	172	256	560
- Approved	s.d	s.d	96	129	321

3°.- The Spanish case

The *Cortes Generales* have a central position in the institutional system, but the parliamentary government is not based on the idea of parliament's primacy. Consequently, one can say that the *Cortes* is relatively powerful and influential in policy making (Sole and Aparicio,

1984, 183; Capo and alt. 1990, 116). According to Guerrero (2000, 171) the Spanish parliament has a decisive function in the system, but it is moderately institutionalized and it has a weak decision making capacity. The causes for this are the executive's preeminence in decision making and that parties' rule in the parliament.

One can say that the Spanish parliamentary model is the most pro-executive in Western Europe (Heywood, 1992; Lopez, 1997, 189), because its constitutional design was thought to protect the government from parliamentary crisis (J. Capo et alt, 1990, 100). In Spain, there is a rationalization of parliamentary government throughout the investiture vote and the constructive vote of censure that are good resources to protect minority governments. According to the constitution the executive can only be removed by a constructive vote of censure (Sanchez de Dios, 1992, 268).

Executive preeminence and parliamentary weakness depend on the party government. During the transition there were minority governments and the parliament served as an arena to debate, negotiate and look for consensus, as it was conceived (Powell; 2000, 421); however from 1982 till 1993 there were solid majorities and the parliament lost centrality and influence in the policy making as well as public recognition (Paniagua, 1997, 417). A new trend appeared from 1993 till 2000, due to two minority governments. The parliament became again a relevant player and minority parties recovered some political capacity and influence. The 2000-2004 parliament had a strong majority of the conservative Popular Party, and thus, things changed again. The *Cortes* lost ground once more, but they were no completely subordinated to the government as opposition parties were well structured and able to control the government.

The main critic to Spain's parliamentary government is the parties' strong position in the system (Herrero, 1997, 50; Casacajo, 2000, 2; Santamaría, 1997, 47) even though they have a low membership, as only 2% of voters are party members (Gallagher, Laver and Mair, 1985, 245). Parties have strong leadership based on strong party discipline, and play the principal role in parliament (Sanchez de Dios, 1999). They are one voice actors and the vote of a representative is worth exactly the number of members of the group (*voto ponderado*).

One can say that the main determinants of parliamentary accountability in Spain are, first, alternation of two parties sometimes with a majority government and others with a minority one. Second, the strong party discipline and leadership and, third, primacy of the executive thanks to parliamentary rationalization. All that results in a very competitive behavior of the major opposition party and a cooperative behavior of the nationalist minorities in case of minority governments. There is also a development of cross-party relations.

The Spanish *Cortes Generales* is an asymmetrical bicameral parliament because, in general terms, the *Congreso* is much more important than the *Senado* (Paniagua, 1999; Roller, 2002). The Senate has only “limited veto power” in policy making. In case of legislative conflict between both chambers, the *Congreso* decides. In terms of control of the executive, there are some limits to the Senate. Only the *Congreso* can vote on the Prime Minister investiture and decide a censure motion or a confidence vote demanded by the Prime Minister. As a result, the Senate’s activity is reduced both in law-making and in control of the executive.

Questions are the most important parliamentary procedure of accountability in number, summing almost 75% of the total. Around 90% are answered, that is why it is considered a good source of policy scrutiny. In the 2000’s parliament, there were 75.326 WQs tabled in the *Congreso* and 71.165 answered, which makes a high proportion. These big numbers are twice the ones of the previous parliament.

Administrative reports requested usually to the central administration also became with the time an important means of control. In the 2000 parliament, 4.697 reports were requested and 4.516 were delivered. Administrative reports are close to WQs but they give a more precise information to MPs. Thank to the requests MPs obtain the documents related to the decision process, that is a kind of information without the political filter that answers to WQs have (Guerrero, 2004:228).

In the Spanish case, the oral questions on the floor of the House is a satisfactory procedure although, according to Sole and Aparicio (1984, 228), it does not have the political impact that it has at Westminster. In every plenary, a total of 24 oral questions must be answered, among them three by the Prime Minister. Their number has increased in the 2000 parliament reaching 2.280 questions tabled and 1.952 answered. In the 2000 parliament, there were 4.016 questions tabled in the committees of the *Congreso* and only 1063 answered.

Interpellations are a traditional means of control in Spain. They are very efficient when the opposition is strong. Interpellations end in a vote and each party has limited number per session period. Since 1983, urgent interpellations became the normal procedure. In the 2000 parliament, 338 were tabled and 245 debated.

Interpellations can end in a motion which permits an evaluation in a second debate and government position’s vote on a policy. The efficacy of motions is closely linked to the strength of the opposition. That is why in the 2000 parliament there were not many motions: 242 were tabled but only 71 were voted. The same happens with non-law propositions on the floor (also called resolutions) that are usually tabled after a government communication. There are also non-law propositions in committee. Non-law propositions play an important role and its use has been constantly

increasing. In the 2000's parliament there were 849 tabled on the floor but only 113 were debated, which is a normal number compared to former parliaments. There were also 2.369 non-law propositions tabled in committee and 510 debated, which is a high number compared to previous parliaments.

Non-law propositions and motions, which are very similar, are procedures of *indirizzo*. Their relevance is due to the publicity surrounding their debate. *Indirizzo* activity is very high when there is a minority government in Spain.

Hearings can be requested by the House or a committee or can be decided by the government itself. Usually they are requested by the opposition parties. In committee not only ministers but also other government members, civil servants and citizens are subject to this procedure. The number of government hearings on the floor requested in the 2000 parliament was of 77, but only 24 of these took place, which is a low number. In committee, there were 2.487 hearings requested and 1.754 took place, which is also a low number (50% of Ministers). Usually, less than 5% of the hearings held in committee are usually related with bill debates.

Inquiry committees are a very powerful procedure of control because they can ask for any person to inform and, since 1994, they are open to the media. They are more effective with minority governments. In fact during the 2000's parliament there were 36 proposals of investigative committees, but only one was set up. On the other hand subcommittees for gathering information about minor problems are becoming more and more relevant.

Other means of control are the vote of censure and the confidence vote requested by the government. They are not frequent in Spain. However, there are some general debates every parliament, as the annual "state of the nation" debate. In the 2000's parliament 4 such debates took place.

One can state that the *Cortes* have been "highly active" in control activity and, as a result, the Spanish democracy has a great vitality from the accountability point of view (Capo, 2005, 108). Parliamentary accountability has steadily growing in Spain and it has become very precise and specialized with time thanks to a great variety of procedures which are clearly differentiated. Direct monitoring is highly expanded and also specialized scrutiny in committee. There are also critical control and *indirizzo* to prevent the moral hazard problem. As a consequence parliamentary accountability is very institutionalized, has a multifunctional character and is efficient fighting information asymmetry. It is a proactive control

TABLE 5
Forms of accountability in Spain- Congreso de los Diputados

	III 1986-89	IV 1989-93	V 1993-96	VI 1996-2000	VII 2000-04
WRITTEN QUESTIONS					
- Tabled	19.458	15.309	14.886	32.720	75.326
- Answered	17.901	14.236	12.951	30.757	71.165
ADMINISTRATIVE REPORTS.					
- Requested	1.928	4.957	3.168	2.588	4.697
- Delivered	1.253	4.313	2.788	2.303	4.516
<i>ON THE FLOOR</i>					
QUESTIONS					
- Tabled	1.510	2.003	1.610	2.112	2.280
- Answered	1.087	1.502	1.191	1.731	1.952
INTERPELLATIONS					
- Tabled	214	225	142	203	338
- Debated	115	150	112	181	245
MOTIONS					
- Tabled	102	145	108	175	242
- Voted	23	41	50	60	71
NON LAW PROPOSITIONS					
- Tabled	164	272	261	439	849
- Voted	23	44	84	123	113
HEARINGS					
- Requested	26	58	34	46	77
- Held	14	24	19	21	24
<i>IN COMMITTEE</i>					
QUESTIONS					
- Tabled	1.593	2.464	1.865	2.829	4.016
- Answered	908	1.256	970	1.103	1.063
NON LAW PROPOSITIONS					
- Tabled	245	514	692	1.800	2.396
- Voted	39	77	221	684	510
HEARINGS					
- Requested	2.220	3.656	3.678	4.606	4.174
- Held	1.643	2.084	2.170	2.993	2.487
ENQUIRY COMMITTEES					
- Requested	14	20	25	19	35
- Created	--	3	5	3	1

4° Comparison of cases

In South Europe there is a tendency to reinforce parliamentary accountability (Norton y Leston- Bandeira, 2003, 182), however there are important differences among the countries studied. In France and Italy legislative activity of parliaments is privileged over control of the executive, although Italy has more control activity than France. On the contrary, parliamentary accountability is very valued in Spain, that is why there is a big variety of mechanisms and it is highly rationalized. Italy's

and Spain's parliaments have developed a big diversity of scrutiny resources that they use constantly.

Different levels of activity and the diverse control resources signify that both Italy and Spain have a fully proactive parliamentary accountability while France has a limited proactivity. It means that MPs and parties in Italy and Spain have the initiative to control the government and they use mainly monitoring procedures of oversight, policy supervision and policy orientation. France's proactivity is limited because critical control and evaluation of policies are more the most relevant procedures, although oversight through written questions is really high.

In comparative terms the Spanish case is closer to the Italian one due to its specialization and level of activity. This proximity is a result of institutional factors rather than party government or patterns of opposition. In both cases the executive has a very developed legislative capacity through decree-laws and legislative decrees. It shows a preeminence of the executive in the policy-making and also a situation close to the moral hazard problem of "hidden action".

Even though written questions and administrative reports play an important role in all countries, as we can see in table 6, in Italy they are less significant. In Italy the proportion of written questions in relation to total control activity is lower than in the cases of Spain and France. As a result one can say that accountability by parliamentary debate (reporting) is more relevant in Italy than in the other countries probably because of its high party fragmentation.

The cause of the high relevance of WQs in France and Spain is that more than 85% are answered, moreover there is neither any limit nor any control by parties on the number each MP can table. As a matter of fact they are a good mechanism to fight information asymmetries because they look for precise information and can be used for interest representation. The elevated development of WQs in South Europe conducts to the fact that most ministerial departments spend a good part of their time and functional resources to answer these questions.

In table 6 one can see how important accountability in committee is in the three cases, however in France it is mainly based on hearings and reports of offices and missions (subcommittees for policy evaluation). In Italy and Spain there is direct monitoring through debates in committee. The main difference among the three countries is that accountability in Italy and Spain is produced by powerful specialized committees. These committees have their own jurisdiction and are very influential in legislation because they can pass laws. As Sartori (1988) explains they are a place for bargaining and searching for consensus on the policy making, though a high rivalry between parties can shrink their capacity (Midiri, 2007, 1037). In practice parliamentary accountability in committee by

hearings, questions and resolutions are useful for policy supervision in order to negotiate policy agreements and prevent moral hazard. Questions permit to fight information asymmetries and resolutions to give *indirizzo* or policy orientation to the executive. Because of the committee system Italy and Spain have a “viscose” parliament, what means that it is complex and highly institutionalized (Norton, 1998).

One can affirm that France has a different model, since its committees are not specialized. France has only six Standing committees with a very limited power and control of the executive is not an important activity for them. They are mainly used for legislative purposes with a technical character, although nowadays there is an increase of information and control of the committees (Avril and Gicquel, 2005, 273). The lack of specialization povoqued the development of subcommittee activity. In fact policy evaluation by subcommittees looks an efficient mechanism for fighting moral hazard in a cross- party perspective. Inquiry committees are more relevant in France than in the rest of the countries, but in all cases they have a limited worth as mechanisms to combat information asymmetry on account of the fact that they are submitted to the majority will.

The expansion of accountability in committee in Spain is related to the facts that there are a real preeminence of the executive and an almost bipartisan system with highly centralized parties. Consequently committees are a main arena for party negotiations.

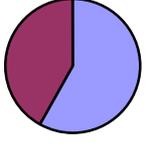
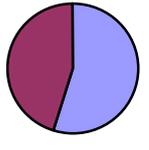
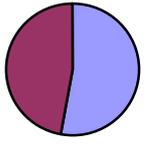
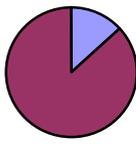
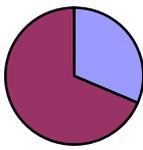
Debates on the floor are more formal and more solemn than in committee, at the same time they reach the public opinion more easily. A feature of debate on the floor is that it is broadcasted on television. As a matter of fact public debate on the floor is a basement of parliamentary life. There are different procedures to open debates on the floor about general topics with intervention of all party groups, being the most important ones the confident votes and censure votes. They are very common in France and Italy, in particular with fragmented coalitions. To open plenary debates in France and Spain there are Government declarations. Other mechanism that produce debates on the floor are interpellations for critical control and resolutions and motions, to give *indirizzo*. Activity on the floor is more relevant in France and Italy than in Spain because of party fragmentation and government coalitions.

Question time is a basic form of control. There has been an increase over time on the number of oral questions answered in the three parliaments. Based on a simple debate between a MP and a minister this control is really direct, therefore it is more related to critical control than to oversight of policy implementation. Due to televised coverage, questions are more linked to a competitive behavior between government and opposition than just to a process of fighting information asymmetries. Oral

question is a good resource for small parties, in fact the bigger part of their accountability activity is based on questions on the floor. It is also a resource for intra party relations but in that case it is used to give support to the government. The question time is really relevant in Spain and is becoming more and more important since it is televised. That relevance can be explained by the fact that the Spanish pattern of party government is close to a mayoritarian (bipartisan) system.

In the three countries there is *indirizzo* or policy orientation, so it can be said that it is a common feature of South European parliamentary accountability. Sometimes it is based on direct orientation by motions and resolutions in plenary sessions or in committee, as it happens in Italy or Spain, other times it is based on evaluation of policies through informative committees and parliamentary reports as it happens in France and Spain. In any form *indirizzo* is directed to prevent the moral hazard problem. In the three countries there is also critical control produced mainly by interpellations and censure motions. It is directed to combat moral hazard problems. If one compares both critical control and *indirizzo* (see table 6) taking into account the amount of procedures debated and approved, one can see that *indirizzo* is more relevant in Spain while critical control is in France and Italy. First it is explained by the fact that the number of interpellations that can be tabled by the parties in Spain is limited by the Standing Orders of the Congreso, although it doesn't mean that they are without importance as a means of control. Second it is explained by the institutional preeminence of the executive and the need of opposition parties to give orientation preventing hidden action of the government. The cake shows the enormous relevance of interpellations (called questions to government) in France even though they don't end in a final vote because of the parliamentary rationalization. It is a tradition mechanism for parliamentary debate with a multiparty system that it is very important to combat moral hazard.

TABLE 6

<i>Written questions and administrative reports (sky blue) as percentage of the total activity (dark red)</i>		
France 2002-2007	Italy 1996-2001	Spain 2000-2004
		
<i>Percentages of activity on the floor (sky blue) and in committee (dark red)</i>		
France 2002-2007	Italy 1996-2001	Spain 2000-2004
		
<i>Question time (sky blue) as % of the total activity on the floor (dark red)</i>		
France 2002-2007	Italy 1996-2001	Spain 2000-2004
		
<i>Proportion of Indirizzo activity (sky blue) and critical control (dark red)</i>		
France 2002-2007	Italy 1996-2001	Spain 2000-2004
		

D) CONCLUDING REMARKS:

We do not pretend to establish a distinctive model for the cases in study, because, as Liebert (1990, 251) has explained, France's, Italy's and Spain's parliamentary regimes are neither sufficiently similar between them nor sufficiently different from other parliamentary systems. However, within the three cases there are strong similarities due to the great regional influence each one receives from the rest.

One main feature of parliamentary democracy of South Europe is a variety of mechanisms for *ex post* control of the executive to combat information asymmetry. Both MPs and party groups can act independently, there is accountability with and without public debate and there is accountability on the floor and in committees. In addition accountability procedures have different functions. That is why there are a lot of possibilities to check on the executive power and to fight agency losses. It is possible to oversee the executive activity, to supervise policies on a specialized basis, to criticize the governments, to give them *indirizzo* by policy orientation and policy evaluation and sanction it by a vote of censure.

Another characteristic of South European democracies is the proactive nature of parliamentary accountability. In fact one can say that there is no decline of parliaments in scrutinizing the executives. In addition accountability tends to be better structured and more specialized. There is going to be an increase of control in parliamentary committees where the bargaining process of the policy making usually takes place. In spite of that, one can conclude that South European countries pursue an increase and development of *ex post* accountability to reduce agency losses between the executive and MPs and parties, and to have more institutionalization. As a matter of fact accountability of the executive tends to be vital to improve the quality of democracy. Accountability improvement is not only due to a competitive dynamics of government-opposition but to an institutional enhancement of the parliament as an arena for interaction of parties and for public debate, where the executive is called to account and give information of its policies.

Another feature of South European democracy is that *indirizzo* or government orientation in parliament is more important than it could seem at first sight. It means that competitive strategies are not always dominant, besides there is a certain degree of development of the cross-party mode. In all cases, one finds a big amount of *indirizzo* activity through a variety of procedures: motions, resolutions and informative reports of committees. They are instruments in the party hands to advise the government on policy implementation and to prevent moral hazard.

As it was written before there is no a single pattern of parliamentary accountability in South Europe, though there are sound similarities between Italy and Spain and the three cases have been rationalized. France's parliament is mainly oriented towards legislative activity, while Italy's and Spain's parliaments have developed a big variety of *ex post* control mechanism to filth information asymmetry that they use constantly. Standing committees are a good example of this control activity. At first glimpse, it looks like Italian parliament's centrality is based on its legislative activity, but, in a comparative perspective, one can state that its executive accountability is still more relevant.

The substantial differences among the three countries doesn't permit to say that it would be a convergence in the future. France has a moderate level of control activity and it can be considered as a limited proactive case of parliamentary accountability. On the contrary, in Spain there is a mixture of mechanisms with high activity in all of them. It is clearly a proactive case. Italy is in between both countries in terms of diversity of resources of control an level of activity.

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