

COVID-19 and Legislative Representation in Taiwan: An Examination of Plenary Interpellations in the Legislative Yuan

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused substantial changes in human behavior and, at the same time, caught the lion's share of scholarly attention. Despite some efforts being made to study legislatures during the crisis of the COVID pandemic, how the pandemic changes the way legislative representatives behave in the legislature still remains a rather under-explored territory. In this paper, we study the impact of COVID-19 on legislative behavior by examining plenary interpellations made in the Taiwanese Legislative Yuan. Our analyses reveal robust evidence of a clear government-opposition divide in legislators' attention and engagement on COVID-related issues in the plenary interpellation process. Opposition legislators are generally more likely to pose COVID-related interpellations to government officials than their colleagues associated with the ruling group, and worsening pandemic situations make this behavioral divergence more pronounced. Therefore, these findings enhance our understanding of how COVID-19 shapes legislative representation and pose important implications for future research on democratic accountability and political communication in times of crisis.

Keywords: COVID-19; legislative behavior; issue attention; political communication.

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Introduction

Since the COVID-19 pandemic first hit the world in 2020, it has caused severe impacts on almost every single sector of human life and led to substantial changes in human behavior. Not surprisingly, the pandemic has caught the lion's share of scholarly attention and motivated vibrant literatures studying the pandemic and its effects on diverse subjects across different disciplines. Like many scholars in other disciplines (e.g., Eder et al., 2021; Kreps and Kriner, 2020; Tisdell, 2020; Yoosefi Lebni et al., 2021), political scientists have spent great efforts investigating the consequences of COVID-19 on a wide range of topics, such as various strategies and the conditions under which governments and parliaments adapt in response to the pandemic (Béland et al., 2021; Bolleyer and Salát, 2021; Engler et al., 2021; Poguntke, Scarrow, and Webb 2021; Clemens and Veuger, 2021), the challenges imposed on democratic institutions during the pandemic crisis (Bar-Siman-Tov, 2020; Flinders, 2021; Goetz and Martinsen, 2021; Petrov, 2020; Truchlewski, Schelkle, and Ganderson 2021; Neuvonen, 2020), regime performance on containing the pandemic (Cepaluni, Dorsch, and Branyiczki, 2021; Gaskell et al., 2020; Stasavage, 2020), and how voters react to the pandemic, its related policies, and government performance (Bol and Giani et al., 2021; Druckman et al., 2021; Kritzinger et al., 2021; Naumann et al., 2020; Rovny et al., 2022; Schraff, 2021).

Nevertheless, despite some research efforts being made to study legislatures around the world (e.g., Bolleyer and Salát, 2021; Malloy, 2020; Mills, 2019), whether, and if so, how, the COVID-19 pandemic shapes legislative behavior has received only scant scholarly interest in this body of work (Hájek, 2023; Merkley et al., 2020; Louwerse et al., 2021). For instance, given the public attention COVID-19 has received, are legislative members encouraged to address policy issues related to the pandemic in the legislature? Do they pay equal attention to these COVID-related issues? Moreover, if legislative representatives do reflect relevant issues in the legislature, does their attention change over different stages of the pandemic? What are the determinants that drive their attention to COVID-related issues and engagement strategies? Apparently, the answers to these understudied questions are of great importance to our understanding of democratic representation in times of crisis.

In this paper, we attempt to answer the above questions by investigating legislative members' issue attention on COVID-related issues in the Taiwanese Legislative Yuan during the COVID-19 period. In times of crisis, both government and opposition parties face a dilemma. Government members must decide whether to avoid crisis-related issues to distract public attention from the crisis or to actively address these issues to make themselves look responsive and responsible (e.g., Greene, 2016; Williams, Seki, and Whitten, 2016; Traber, Schoonvelde, and Schumacher, 2020), whereas opposition actors have to choose between collaborating with the government to overcome the crisis or directing public blames to the government to enhance their electoral prospects (e.g., De Giorgi and Moury, 2015). Building on prior research on political elites' issue engagement strategies (e.g., Petrocik, 1996; Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2010; De Vries and Solaz, 2019) and the incumbent's incentives to avoid blames when facing a crisis (e.g., Hinterleitner, Honegger, and Sager, 2022; Hood, 2010; Vavreck, 2009), we argue that legislators from the opposition generally possess greater incentives than their colleagues associated with the government to address crisis-related issues in the legislature. Moreover, we contend that this government-opposition divide expands as the pandemic crisis exacerbates.

We assemble a novel data set that documents all questions made by legislative members in the plenary interpellation process in the Legislative Yuan from February 2020 to April 2022, i.e., a period right after the initial outbreak of COVID-19 in Taiwan. Similar to question times in parliamentary systems, the plenary interpellation process is highly visible to the public, which allows legislative representatives to communicate with average citizens and their supporters (Martin, 2011; Salmond, 2014; Karlsson, Persson, and Mårtensson, Forthcoming). Therefore, examining the interpellation behavior of legislators offers us a great opportunity to explore the extent to which pandemic-related issues are reflected in these legislators' representational focus in the legislature. Consistent with our expectations, our analyses of these plenary interpellations reveal a clear divide between opposition legislators and their counterparts who sided with the government. On average, interpellations addressing COVID-related issues are more likely to be posed by legislative members representing the opposition than legislators connected to the ruling group. Further, we

also find that this behavioral difference between legislators from the two party-groups becomes more pronounced in situations where the pandemic loses control.

Overall, this paper enhances our understanding of how legislative members respond to the COVID-19 pandemic by demonstrating the conditions under which they strategically allocate their attention and engagement to relevant issues in the legislature. Therefore, it not only contributes to the emerging literature that explores various consequences of COVID-19 in the discipline of political science, but also to a more general literature on how crises structure the behavior of political elites. Moreover, as we will discuss in the concluding section, our findings also yield important implications for future search on democratic accountability and political communication in times of crisis.

COVID-19, the Government-Opposition Divide, and Issue Engagement Using Plenary Interpellation in Taiwan

In representative democracies, one of the central tasks legislative representatives perform is to tackle the issues citizens care about. Prior research has demonstrated that political elites often talk about issues of public concern, as reflecting what makes citizens anxious in the representation process can signal that they share similar concerns with the voters and that these voters are well represented (Ansolabehere and Iyengar, 1994; Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2015; Jennings and John, 2009). Moreover, addressing these issues further gives legislative members a unique opportunity to frame the issues in favorable ways, which allows them to expand electoral support by attracting voters who are interested in these issues (Green-Pedersen, 2007; Jerit, 2008). As COVID-19 and its consequences have been major concerns for average citizens since its presence (Merkley et al., 2020), we have a list of good reasons to expect that legislative members will engage on COVID-related issues.

Indeed, the presence of a crisis makes legislative members more likely to address topics related to the crisis and further shapes how they behave in the legislature. For instance, Blumenau and Lauderdale (2018) reveal that the EU crisis structures the voting patterns of legislators in the EU parliament, splitting these legislators along

the EU integration dimension rather than the traditional left-right dimension. Also, Hájek (2023) demonstrates that legislative members in Czech Republic substantially increase the number of bill introductions and roll calls during the pandemic period of COVID-19. Finally, Louwerse et al. (2021) shows that opposition legislators respond to different stages of the COVID pandemic by tailoring the expressed sentiment of their speeches in policy debates. However, while political elites sometimes address the same issues, they do not always pay equal attention to these issues (Sigelman and Buell, 2004). Instead, they strategically select specific issues to emphasize while avoiding engagement with others (Budge and Farlie, 1983; Greene, 2016; Wagner and Meyer, 2014; Seeberg, 2023). Doing so allows them to highlight the issues they want citizens to think about and, at the same time, distract voters from the issues they do not want voters to even notice (Petrocik, 1996).

In this paper, we focus on the plenary interpellation behavior of legislative members in the Taiwanese Legislative Yuan, and we explore the conditions under which legislators are more or less likely to address COVID-related issues.^① In the plenary interpellation process, legislators may question government officials such as the premier and cabinet ministers on various policy issues. Following prior research, we suggest that legislators generally possess different incentives to address COVID-related issues in the plenary interpellation process and that their engagement on these issues is strategic. More specifically, we argue that the presence of COVID-19 constitutes a government-opposition divide on legislators' engagement with COVID-related issues.

On the one hand, managing a crisis with a scale like the COVID-19 is no doubt a great challenge to the government, as significant electoral consequences may follow when the government fails to control how the pandemic develops. When engaging in COVID-related issues, the government is expected to offer policy solutions that may ease the crisis, which inevitably bears political responsibility and substantial

^① Indeed, one natural question arises as to whether COVID-19 is a completely different crisis/issue when compared to other crises/issues such as economic recession and immigration. While we are unable to fully explore the distinctions between COVID-19 and other crises/issues in this paper given data limitations, we believe that this is an important topic that worth more scholarly attention in future research.

risks (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2010). In this vein, legislators from the governing party have little incentive to talk about COVID-related issues, as engaging in these issues may raise unnecessary public attention to the government's COVID management performance and expose the government to potential risks.^② Indeed, de-emphasizing a particular issue can prevent voters from engaging the issue or attributing issue-related responsibilities to the government when making their vote decisions (Hart, 2013; De Vries and Solaz, 2019, but also see Traber, Schoonvelde, and Schumacher, 2020).

On the other hand, legislators from the opposition often rely on legislative procedures such as policy debates and parliamentary questioning to highlight the government's behavior or even wrongdoings (Kam, 2009; Bevan and John, 2016). By tackling COVID-related issues in the plenary interpellation process, opposition legislators can direct the public attention to the government's COVID management performance. Most importantly, doing so may substantially increase negative public evaluations of the government (Pardos-Prado and Sagarzazu, 2016; Seeberg, 2020; Thesen, 2013). In addition, while members of the opposition may as well offer policy solutions by engaging these issues, they are not held responsible as much as the government. As a result, this gives them an advantageous position by allowing them to focus on criticizing the government and advocating alternative solutions without worrying about potential electoral risks (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2010).

Following the above discussion, we expect that legislators representing the opposition have greater incentives to engage in COVID-related issues when questioning government officials in the plenary interpellation process, whereas their colleagues associated with the ruling group possess fewer incentives to do so. This argument leads to our first hypothesis:

H1: *Legislators associated with the opposition are more likely to present a COVID-related interpellation than legislators associated with the government.*

^② We do not suggest that legislators in the ruling group do not tackle these issues at all. Instead, we suggest that they are motivated to discuss these issues as little as possible. Essentially, being totally mute on the crisis everyone cares about is almost impossible for the government and its associated members, as voters may perceive the government as not responsive or even incompetent in crisis management (Traber, Schoonvelde, and Schumacher, 2020).

Moreover, we argue that how the COVID-19 pandemic is managed further conditions legislators' incentives to talk about COVID-related issues, making the behavioral difference between government and opposition legislative members more or less pronounced. More precisely, since incumbent parties are constantly being evaluated and held responsible by voters using their performance in office, the government's performance on COVID management has critical electoral implications during the pandemic period. While the negative development of the pandemic can easily bring electoral punishment in the next election, it strengthens the incentive of legislators sided with the government to avoid discussing COVID-related issues. Indeed, empirical research has revealed that governing parties address the economy less frequently or even attempt to shift public attention away from it when economic conditions deteriorate (Hellwig, 2012; Vavreck, 2009; Greene, 2016), and that government parties tend to actively diffuse public blames pertaining to worsening pandemic situations or even shift these blames to actors like local governments or citizens (Hinterleitner, Honegger, and Sager, 2022; Zahariadis, Petridou, and Oztig, 2020).

On the contrary, opposition parties are less politically constrained as voters do not link policy outputs to their reputations, which gives them greater freedom to be more responsive to citizens' concerns. As a result, when the pandemic situation worsens, opposition legislators are expected to have stronger incentives to increase their focus on COVID-related issues by constantly criticizing the government's COVID management performance and presenting alternative policy solutions. After all, one critical task of the opposition is to highlight those national problems and negative policy consequences for which the government could be held accountable (Blondel, 1997; Thesen, 2013; Russell et al., 2017; Hohendorf, Saalfeld, and Sieberer, 2020). Doing so also allows the opposition to portray the government as incompetent in leading the country and pushes the voters to attribute political responsibilities to government parties. All in all, this leads to our second hypothesis:

H2: *When the COVID pandemic situation worsens, it makes the behavioral difference between legislators associated with the opposition and the ruling parties on presenting COVID-related interpellations more pronounced.*

Data, Variables, and Modeling Strategy

Our central theoretical interest lands on the conditions under which legislators are more or less likely to address COVID-related issues in the Legislative Yuan. To empirically examine our argument, we focus on the 10th term of the Taiwan Legislative Yuan in which legislative members took office on February 1st 2020, right after the first confirmed case being reported in Taiwan. We collect all the interpellations made by legislators to the executive branch in the plenary interpellation process in the period between February 2020 and April 2022, from the online archive of the Legislative Yuan.^③ Unlike questioning behavior made in the committee deliberations, the plenary interpellation process is a highly visible venue that provides legislative members great opportunities to monitor government activities and to communicate with their constituents (Martin, 2011). In this period, legislators raised a total number of 745 interpellations^④ covering a wide range of issues on which the government is obligated to respond.^⑤ We then go through the details of each interpellation and manually identify whether an interpellation is related to the COVID-19 pandemic.^⑥ We consider an interpellation as COVID-related as long as the questioner explicitly mentioned the COVID pandemic or its associated policies in her interpellation, regardless of the specific issue area being addressed.

Figure 1 depicts the distribution of these plenary interpellations. More specifically, Figure 1a shows the number of plenary interpellations by issue types across political parties. Overall, COVID-related interpellations constitute about one-third of the total number of interpellations, and yet, the proportion of COVID-related interpellations varies across parties. While some parties pay more attention to issues related to the pandemic, other parties focus relatively more on other issues. Moreover, while the main purpose of the plenary interpellation process is to enable the legislature to control the government, it does not necessarily prohibit legislators

③ The last date an interpellation being recorded was April 12th 2022.

④ In Taiwan, each interpellation may consist of multiple questions.

⑤ As we are interested in the government-opposition divide, we exclude questions submitted by non-partisan legislators (i.e., independents). That said, it does not change our main conclusion if we include these legislators by categorizing them based on the party caucus they frequently work with in the Legislative Yuan.

⑥ As an alternative strategy, we rely on an automated method to isolate COVID-related questions by using a set of keywords, and we still obtain very similar results.

aligned with the ruling party from questioning government officials. As Figure 1b clearly demonstrates, the total number of interpellations each party proposes is highly and positively correlated with the seat share each party controls in the Legislative Yuan.^⑦

To investigate the conditions under which the presence of a COVID-related interpellation in the plenary interpellation process is more or less likely, we make our dependent variable COVID-related Interpellation an indicator variable that captures whether a plenary interpellation i posed by a legislator j concerns COVID-related issues. Our major explanatory variable *Opposition Group* is an indicator variable that distinguishes parties associated with the opposition and parties associated with the government. Here, we categorize the two largest opposition parties Kuomintang (KMT) and Taiwan People’s Party (TPP) into the opposition group, whereas the incumbent party Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) and two small opposition parties New Power Party (NPP) and Taiwan Statebuilding Party (TSP) are assigned to the ruling group. We consider NPP and TSP part of the ruling group as they have been working closely with the incumbent party DPP since the legislative election in 2020.^⑧

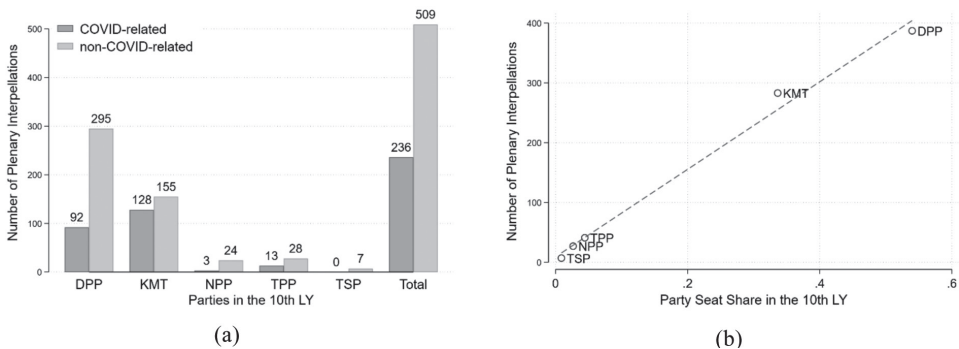


Figure 1. Distribution of Plenary Interpellations by Parties in the 10th Legislative Yuan

Source: The author.

^⑦ In fact, the correlation between the total number of questions and party seat shares in the Legislative Yuan is 0.99 in this period we study.

^⑧ Treating NPP and TSP as real opposition parties does not change our substantive conclusion.

Our theory suggests that the exacerbation of the pandemic strengthens the effect of the government-opposition divide on the likelihood of the presence of COVID-related interpellations. To capture how the pandemic develops (or the severity of the crisis), we rely on the *Number of Confirmed Cases* at the city level reported by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) during the period we study. In addition, since the plenary interpellation does not occur daily but rather on a session basis, we sum up the number of confirmed cases to the session level as a proxy to approximate the pandemic situation in that particular session at the city level. Essentially, this particular variable captures the total number of confirmed COVID-19 cases documented before the date of the last interpellation recorded in a session in a specific city where a legislator was elected.^⑨ Finally, we use the log-transformed value of the number of confirmed cases^⑩ and further create the interaction term *Opposition Group x Logged Number of Confirmed Cases* to examine our hypothesis H2.

In addition to the main variables of our interest, we also include two sets of control variables that may structure the likelihood of observing COVID-related interpellations, one at the legislator level and the other at the interpellation level. At the legislator level, we first include two dummy variables *Health Committee Member* and *Economics Committee Member* indicating whether legislators possess membership of either the Social Welfare and Environmental Hygiene Committee or the Economics Committee. As these committees represent issue areas that are closely connected to the pandemic, legislators with relevant policy expertise may have stronger incentives to pose COVID-related interpellations in the plenary interpellation process (Huber et al., 2022; Meyer and Wagner, 2021). Also, we create another dummy variable *Special Municipality* to capture whether a legislator's district is located in one of the six special municipalities.^⑪ Given the media attention these special municipalities receive, we expect that legislators from these cities are more likely to introduce COVID-related interpellations. Moreover, while district-elected

^⑨ For legislators elected from party-lists, we connect them with the total number of confirmed cases at the country level. Our conclusion remains the same even if we exclude party-list legislative members from our empirical models.

^⑩ We replace zero cases with 0.1 when taking the logged values to avoid missing values.

^⑪ These municipalities include Taipei City, New Taipei City, Taoyuan City, Taichung City, Tainan City, and Kaohsiung City.

legislative members tend to have stronger ‘personal-vote seeking’ incentives than their counterparts elected from party-lists (e.g., Bol and Gschwend et al., 2021; Carey and Shugart, 1995; Crisp et al., 2004), they are expected to have greater incentives to address hot issues such as the COVID pandemic for reputation-building purposes. Thus, we control for *Party-List Member* to distinguish legislative members elected from party-lists and those nominally elected legislators. Finally, we control for personal characteristics, including whether a legislator is *Female*, and the legislator’s *Age and Seniority* (i.e., terms served in the Legislative Yuan) to account for potential effects of these features.

At the interpellation level, we include three specific variables to account for potential impacts caused by the institutional design of the interpellation process. First, in the current Legislative Yuan, a legislator can interpellate the government either as an individual legislative member or as a representative of her party. We thus include an indicator variable *Individual Interpellation* (as opposed to party interpellation) to account for this distinction. Second, the legislator can pose her interpellation by orally questioning government officials or by submitting written questions. As written questions are not as publicly visible as oral questions, which may discourage legislators from addressing hot issues like the COVID pandemic, we control for a dummy variable *Written Interpellation* for its potential impact. Finally, legislative members are allowed to interpellate government officials jointly (up to three legislators), and therefore we include *Number of Questioners* in our empirical models. Table 1 provides the summary statistics of the variables we include in our empirical model.

Last but not least, as our final data set contains all interpellations submitted by legislative members in the 10th Legislative Yuan,¹² the legislator j appears as many times as the number of interpellations she poses, which makes our data structure hierarchical and the unit of analysis a legislator-interpellation dyad. Moreover, given that our dependent variable is a dummy variable indicating whether an interpellation is associated with the COVID pandemic, we perform several multilevel logistic

¹² Almost every legislative member has submitted at least one interpellation except for the Speaker (You Sikun) and the Vice Speaker (Tsai Chi-chang) of the 10th Legislative Yuan, and the DPP Caucus Whip (Ker Chien-ming).

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Key Variables

Variable	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Opposition Group	0.435	-	0	1
Number of Confirmed Cases (logged)	2.584	4.152	-2.303	9.583
Health Committee Member	0.125	-	0	1
Economics Committee Member	0.121	-	0	1
Special Municipality	0.395	-	0	1
Party-List Member	0.329	-	0	1
Female	0.450	-	0	1
Age	54.099	9.126	28	75
Seniority	1.399	1.563	0	7
Individual Interpellation	0.632	-	0	1
Written Interpellation	0.244	-	0	1
Number of Questioners	1.013	-	0	3

Source: The author.

regressions to examine our theoretical expectations. More precisely, we consider the legislator as the top level and the interpellation as the lower level, and we will include random intercepts at the individual level to account for unobserved heterogeneity when estimating our multilevel models.

Empirical Results

The estimated results are reported in Table 2. In Model 1, we only include *Opposition Group* in the estimated model to test our H1. Similarly, in Model 2 we estimate the model with the interaction term *Opposition Group x Logged Number of Confirmed Cases* and its constituent terms to examine our H2. Finally, in Model 3, we estimate the complete model in which we include the full set of control variables.

Through a glance at the estimated results across the models, one may see fairly consistent findings on the explanatory variables of our interest. Specifically, the positive and statistically significant coefficient on *Opposition Group* suggests that legislators from KMT and TPP are more likely to pose COVID-related interpellations than parties associated with the ruling group. This result clearly lends empirical support to our expectation depicted in H1.

Table 2. Determinants of the Presence of COVID-related Interpellations

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Opposition Group	1.065** (0.216)	0.813** (0.247)	0.903** (0.269)
Logged Number of Confirmed Cases		-0.041 (0.032)	-0.032 (0.032)
Opposition × Cases		0.097** (0.044)	0.102** (0.044)
Health Committee Member			0.299 (0.294)
Economics Committee Member			-0.289 (0.327)
Special Municipality			0.365 (0.273)
Party-List Member			-0.159 (0.303)
Female			0.208 (0.222)
Age			-0.007 (0.014)
Seniority			0.045 (0.079)
Individual Interpellation			-0.260 (0.191)
Written Interpellation			-0.088 (0.246)
Number of Questioners			1.431* (1.066)
Constant	-1.332** (0.153)	-1.261** (0.166)	-2.469* (1.066)
Ranef - Legislator	0.421* (0.181)	0.465* (0.191)	0.351* (0.177)
Observations (Individual-Interpellation Dyads)	745	745	745
Log-Likelihood	-441.15	-438.62	-431.27

Source: The author.

Unit of analysis: an individual-interpellation.

** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$, † $p < 0.1$

Furthermore, our theoretical argument expects that the difference between the opposition and the ruling groups in presenting COVID-related interpellations is conditioned by how the pandemic develops. More precisely, we expect the difference to be more pronounced when the pandemic exacerbates (i.e., more confirmed cases are reported). Since we employ a multilevel logistic regression, it is relatively difficult to directly interpret our results based on the coefficient of *Opposition Group x Logged Number of Confirmed Cases*. To facilitate interpreting our results, we compute and plot the marginal effect (along with the 95% confidence interval) of the Opposition Group on the likelihood of the presence of a COVID-related interpellation given different numbers of confirmed cases. As Figure 2 illustrates, COVID-related interpellations are more likely to be posed by legislative members from the opposition group, even when the pandemic is well contained in the city (i.e., confirmed cases = 0, logged value = -2). Nevertheless, as the pandemic heightens (i.e., increase in confirmed cases), this effect gets strengthened. This particular finding is clearly consistent with what we postulated in H2.

To better understand how the COVID-19 pandemic structures legislators' incentives to introduce COVID-related interpellations, we further calculate and plot

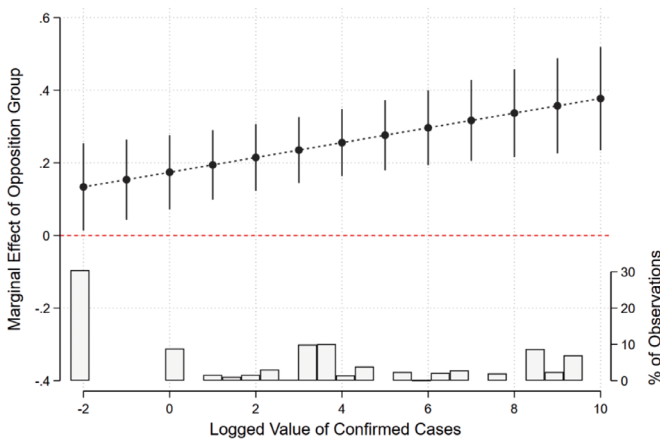


Figure 2. Marginal Effect of Opposition Group on the Presence of COVID-Related Interpellations by Number of Confirmed Cases

Source: The author.

the predicted probabilities (with the 95% CI) of the presence of COVID-related interpellations given different party affiliations and the numbers of confirmed cases. The results are illustrated in Figure 3. As one may immediately notice, the worsening pandemic in a city seems to condition how legislators from different party groups respond to it. As the pandemic exacerbates, legislative members from the opposition group are motivated to engage with COVID-related issues and therefore are more likely to present COVID-related interpellations. On the contrary, the increase in confirmed cases seems to discourage legislators sided with the governing group from posing COVID-related interpellations. To get a better idea of the substantive size of the effects we show in Figure 3, we further compute the predicted probabilities of the presence of an average COVID-related interpellation given different numbers of confirmed cases. For a legislator representing the opposition group, a one standard error increase in confirmed cases (i.e., log number of confirmed cases = 4.15, roughly 64 confirmed cases) makes a COVID-related interpellation 6.7% ([13.8%, 0.2%] as the 95% confidence interval) significantly more likely to be posed by the legislator. However, for a legislator who is aligned with the governing group, a one standard error increase in confirmed cases makes a COVID-related interpellation 1.6% ([1.7%,

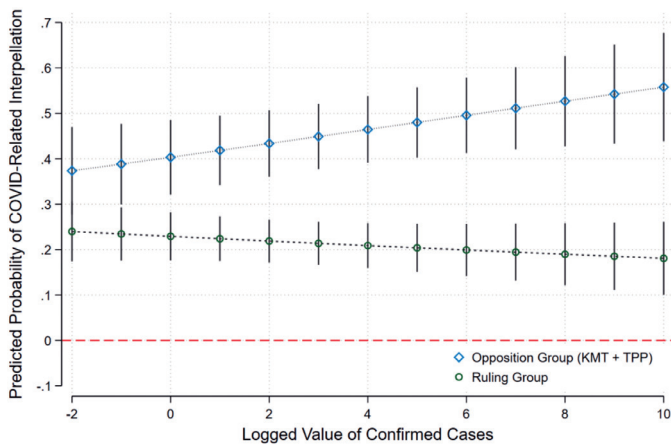


Figure 3. Predicted Probability of the Presence of COVID-Related Interpellations by Party Groups and Number of Confirmed Cases

Source: The author.

-4.5%] as the 95% CI) less likely to be presented by her, though this number does not reach the 0.05 significance level.

An Alternative Test of the Main Argument

Up to this point, we have relied on the number of confirmed cases at the city level as a proxy to approximate different pandemic situations, and we have empirically demonstrated how the pandemic develops at the local level can shape the incentives of legislators associated with different party groups to discuss COVID-related issues in the plenary interpellation process. Nevertheless, it is also worth investigating whether the general development of the pandemic in Taiwan at the country level exerts similar impacts on legislative behavior. To be more precisely, since the initial outbreak of the COVID pandemic in January 2020, Taiwan had contained the pandemic fairly well until another wave hit it in April 2021, after which the pandemic was under control again in July 2021, until the Omicron variant hit Taiwan in January 2022. Interestingly, as these different phases of the pandemic development in Taiwan correspond to legislative sessions fairly well,¹³ the correspondence thus allows us to perform an alternative test of our argument using sessions as proxies of different pandemic stages. In other words, in this section, we will examine whether the difference between the opposition and the ruling groups changes over time (i.e., sessions).

To empirically test what we described above, we perform the same set of multilevel models presented in Table 2 but replace the Number of Confirmed Cases with several dummy variables capturing different legislative sessions. In other words, in the new models, we will have several two-way interaction terms between *Opposition Group* and these *Session Dummies*.¹⁴ Instead of reporting the estimated results, we simply present the marginal effect (with the 95% CI) of *Opposition Group* across sessions in Figure 4. As the figure shows, the difference between opposition and government parties is mostly positive and statistically significant except for the

¹³ The accumulative number of confirmed cases for these five sessions are 34, 1, 21, 14,513, and 5,575, respectively.

¹⁴ In the estimated model, we use the first session as the reference group.

second legislative session, where plenary interpellations were scheduled at the end of 2020 when the impact of the pandemic was rather limited in Taiwan. These findings again reveal that legislators from the opposition generally have stronger incentives to engage in COVID-related issues and pose relevant interpellations than legislative members aligning with the government, particularly when the pandemic heightens (e.g., the fourth and the fifth legislative sessions).

In Figure 5, we also calculate and plot the predicted probabilities (with the 95% CI) of the presence of COVID-related interpellations given different party groups over time. The estimated results provide several interesting patterns across time and party groups. First, although the difference clearly exists, legislators from both party groups are much more likely to respond to the pandemic and pose COVID-related interpellations in the first legislative session, right after the COVID-19 first emerged, than in other sessions. Second, while the pandemic slowed down and was under control in the second legislative session, legislators seemed to lose motivation to address COVID-related issues, and the estimated difference between government and opposition legislators becomes statistically insignificant. Third, as different waves of the pandemic hit Taiwan again and more confirmed cases were recorded in the

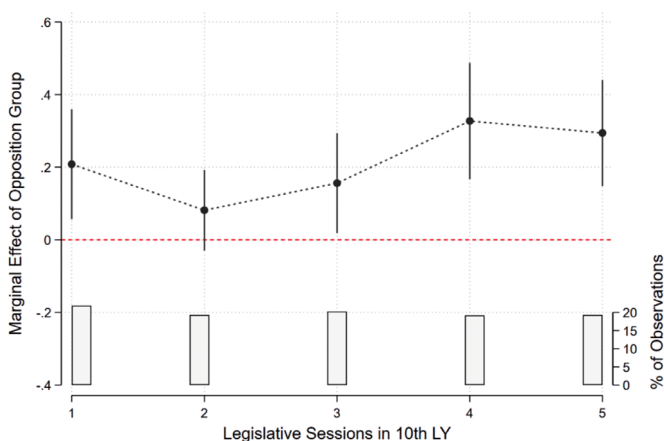


Figure 4. Marginal Effect of Opposition Group on the Presence of COVID-Related Interpellations by Time (sessions)

Source: The author.

following legislative sessions (i.e., sessions 3-5), legislators from both camps seemed to redirect their attention to COVID-related issues. In this period, legislators from the opposition group are much more likely to pose COVID-related interpellations than their colleagues from the ruling group. For instance, from the second legislative session to the fourth legislative session, a COVID-related interpellation is 15.3% ([18.9%, 5.2%] as the 95% CI) more likely to be posed by legislators in the opposition, while the pandemic development in this period only makes the interpellation 3.9% ([4.8%, 3.4%] as the 95% CI) more likely to be presented by legislators related to ruling parties. These findings are in line with our theoretical expectations.

It is worth noting that our findings in Figure 5 on how legislators in the ruling group behave are slightly different from what we reveal in Figure 3. Specifically, their attention to COVID-related issues increases moderately over time as the pandemic worsens, although, on average, they are still significantly less attentive than their colleagues in the opposition during this whole crisis period. As these are the results we derive from the models where we use time (i.e., sessions) as proxies for pandemic situations, a potential explanation for this discrepancy is that what we observe in Figure 5 is driven by these legislators' incentives to respond to opposition parties' issue attention to the COVID. Specifically, given the fact that the local elections are

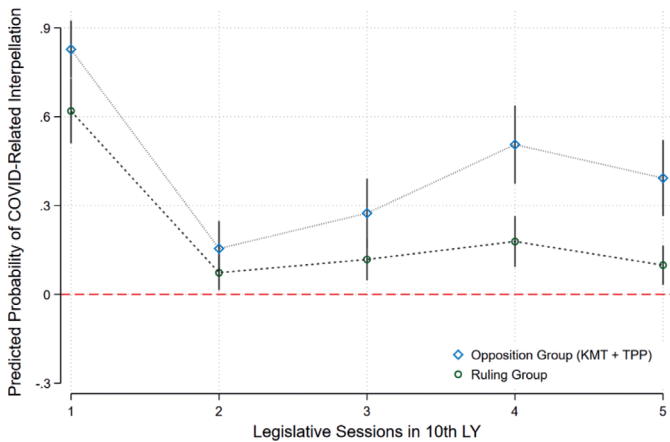


Figure 5. Predicted Probability of the Presence of COVID-Related Interpellations by Party Groups and Time (sessions)
 Source: The author.

approaching and that opposition parties discuss these issues constantly, government members are forced to engage with similar issues to avoid being considered incompetent by the voters (Seeberg, 2022).

Conclusion and Discussion

The outbreak of COVID-19 and its consequences have received great scholarly attention since its onset and stimulated vibrant research in the discipline of political science. In this paper, we join these scholarly efforts by exploring the interpellation behavior of legislative members in the Taiwanese Legislative Yuan. Specifically, we investigate whether legislators address COVID-related issues in the plenary interpellation process and examine the conditions under which they are more or less likely to do so. We argue that the nature of COVID-19 has created a government-opposition divide that shapes legislators' issue attention in the legislature, particularly when they interpellate government officials. Most importantly, the behavioral difference between government and opposition legislators diverges more significantly as the pandemic worsens.

Our empirical findings, consistent with our theoretical expectations, have contributed to our understanding of the relationship between the government and the opposition in times of crisis (e.g., Moury and De Giorgi, 2015). More precisely, they have shed light on the specific conditions that motivate political elites to engage with crisis-related issues differently. In line with recent evidence showing that crises tend to bring more conflicting behavior between government and opposition actors (e.g., De Giorgi and Moury, 2015), our results reveal that legislative members representing the opposition tend to use plenary interpellations to draw public attention to issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic, while legislators in the ruling group are discouraged from doing so. Moreover, we also find that the difference in these legislators' issue attention and engagement strategies is more pronounced when the pandemic heightens. These findings suggest that government members are motivated to move away public attention from the pandemic, while opposition actors strive to direct voters' focus toward it and, at the same time, demonstrate their competence in managing the crisis.

These findings also have important implications for future research on democratic accountability and political communication in times of crisis. First, democratic accountability is built on the central idea that governments will be punished electorally when their performance in managing the country's problems fails to meet public expectations. Our results showing that legislators of the governing group generally attend less to COVID-related issues naturally raise the question as to whether the government can be held accountable during the crisis. While some recent empirical work has demonstrated that diffusing public attention from a crisis or the strategy of "passing the buck" may shape voters' perceptions or behavior and therefore can help incumbents avoid being blamed (e.g., Doherty and Harbridge-Yong, 2020; León, Jurado, and Garmendia Madariaga, 2018; De Vries and Solaz, 2019), how democratic accountability can be reinforced under the crisis and whether incumbents' blame avoidance strategies work deserve more scholarly attention. Potentially, the very existence of the opposition and its various monitoring activities against the government play a critical role in ensuring democratic accountability (Helms, 2008; Seeberg, 2020).

Second, our results also have implications for research on how political elites communicate with citizens during a crisis. In particular, our findings imply that opposition legislators may use more negative rhetoric to criticize the government's pandemic performance when questioning government officials on COVID-related issues. That said, our work only studies legislators' issue attention to the pandemic in the legislature rather than how they address these issues, which limits our ability to draw clear conclusions about how legislators frame their messages and the effects of these strategies. As prior research has revealed that the government-opposition divide also presents in politicians' rhetorical strategies (Crabtree et al., 2020; Eichorst and Lin, 2019; Müller, 2022) and that political rhetoric indeed affects voter behavior (Blumenau and Lauderdale, Forthcoming; Jung, 2020), we may expect that legislators craft their messages strategically in response to the pandemic (e.g., Louwse et al., 2021). Therefore, more research on elites' communication strategies and their effects on public attitude and behavior should offer us a better understanding of the elite-citizen connection in times of crisis.

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新冠疫情與立法院內立委總質詢之議題關注

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摘 要

在過去幾年，新冠疫情的出現引起了廣泛的學界關注，不同領域的學者專家嘗試從不同層面來探究新冠疫情對於人類行為的影響。然而，從政治學的角度來說，新冠疫情如何影響民意代表的立法行為，仍未有太多的討論。本文藉由分析台灣立法委員在立法院內總質詢的議題關注，試圖找出新冠疫情對於立委質詢行為所造成的影響。根據本文的分析結果，朝野立委在總質詢時的議題關注上，有非常顯著的差異。相對於執政陣營的立委來說，反對陣營的立委更有可能在總質詢時將質詢的重心放在與新冠疫情相關的議題上。此外，朝野立委在議題關注上的差異，會隨著疫情升溫而變得更加明顯。整體來說，本文的研究發現除了能夠幫助我們進一步理解新冠疫情對於民意代表行為的影響之外，對於未來在危機時期下的民主課責以及政治溝通等相關研究議題，也提供了重要的研究意涵。

關鍵詞：新冠疫情、立法行為、議題關注、政治溝通

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