

Awaiting a reply

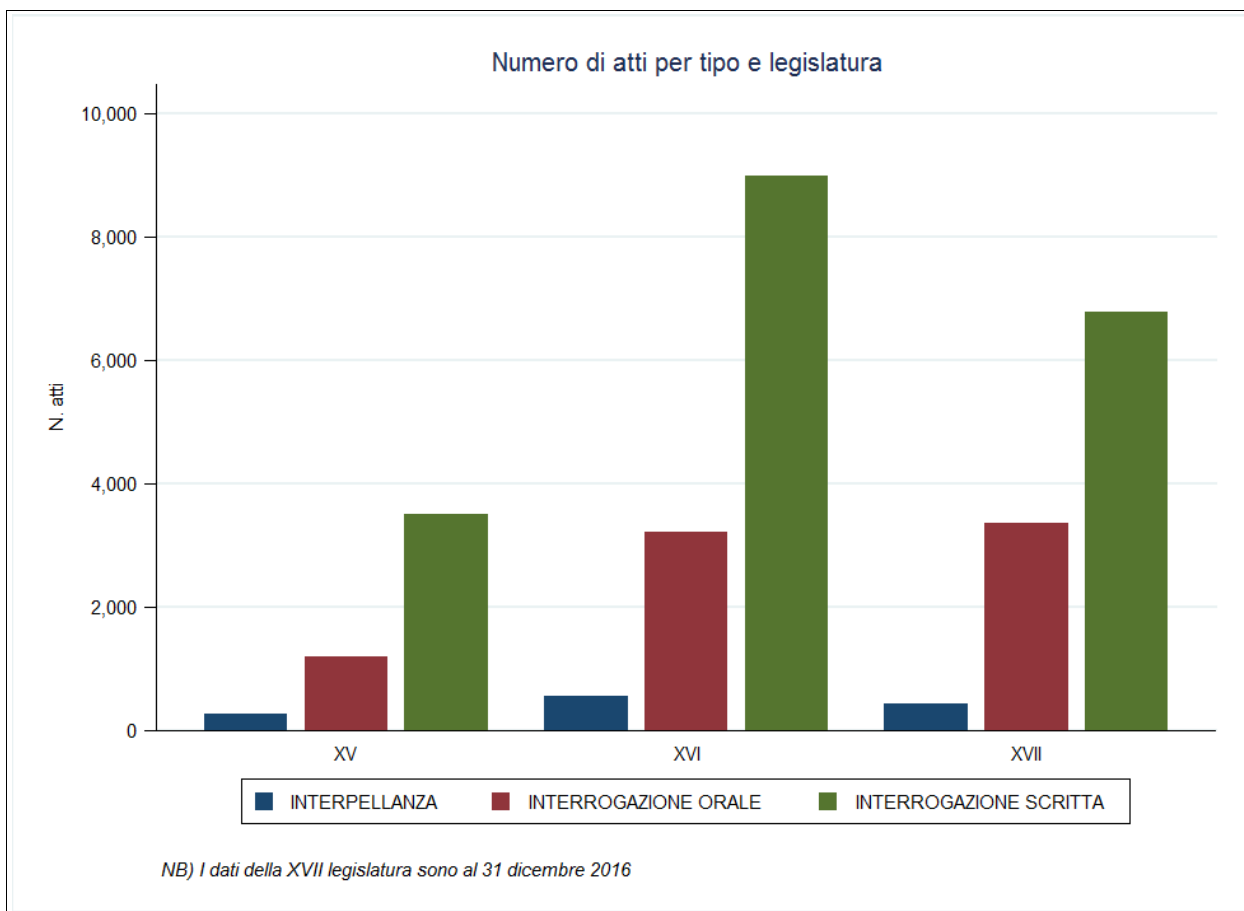
Ten years of questions and interpellations in the Italian Senate: the first statistical analysis on 28,000 instances of parliamentary oversight

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Majority and opposition Members of the Italian Parliament have the authority to take the Government to account thanks to a number of ad-hoc tools. From 28 April 2006 to 31 December 2016 – namely, from the start of the 15th parliament – senators have resorted to these tools 28,360 times: they submitted 1,271 interpellations, 7,780 questions calling for an oral reply and 19,309 calling for a written answer. Out of all these, 6,913 (that's about 24%) were either answered or followed up, with average response time constantly increasing from the 15th to the 17th parliament. Who was the main recipient of such information requests? How many instances of oversight did each Minister respond to? And how many days did it take? The Senate Sitings Service has analysed purpose, follow-up, procedure duration and final outcome for each document, particularly focusing on the 10,580 instances of the XVII legislature.

The starting point

- The 15th parliament featured 4,995 instances: 280 interpellations, 1,196 oral questions, 3,519 written questions
- The 16th parliament featured 12,785 instances: 560 interpellations, 3,220 oral questions and 9,005 written questions
- The 17th parliament (up to 31 December 2016) featured 10,580 instances: 431 interpellations, 3,364 oral questions, 6,785 written questions.

Graph 1. Number of reports by type and legislature

Drafted by the Assembly Service

Blue: interpellation – Red: oral questions – Green: written questions. Data from the 15th to the 17th parliament (up to 31 December 2016)

Analysis

- The swiftest procedure (two days) and the longest one (716) for interpellations were both registered in the 17th parliament, with an average duration of 122 days
- The swiftest procedure for written questions was recorded in the 15th and the 16th parliament: reply on the same day of submission. Also the lengthiest reply took place in the 16th parliament: 1,338 days
- The average follow-up time is currently 117 days for oral questions submitted in plenary committees, 118 for interpellations and 220 for written questions
- The senators' favourite fact-finding tool is the question calling for a written reply (accounting for 64-70% of the total)
- In the 17th parliament oral questions in the Committee exceeded, albeit by little (1,797 versus 1,567), those in the plenary
- The Letta government was asked questions and consulted 2,439 times: the Interior Ministry being the most frequently sought recipient with 277 instances (117 replies, taking on average 164 days), followed by the Prime Minister's Office with 259 reports (42 replies, taking on average 216 days)
- The Renzi government received 7,907 instances: the Interior Ministry received 1,213 and answered 220 (taking on average 182 days), followed by the Prime Minister with 796 instances (123 replies, taking on average 181 days)
- In its first 19 days, the Gentiloni government received 21 oral questions and 48 written questions
- The most prompt reply during the Letta government came from the Ministry for European Affairs (31 days); under the Renzi government, the quickest reply came from the Foreign Affairs Ministry (100 days)
- Starting from the 14th parliament (2001) there have been 92 question-time sessions, 35 of which in the 16th parliament and 44 in

the current one; on 25 July 2013 a Prime Minister question-time session took place, with the Prime Minister himself replying

- In the 16th parliament the ministers that most attended question-time (four sessions each) were those for Labour, Economy and Health; in the 17th parliament top spot went to the Ministers for Agriculture (five times, absolute record), followed by Environment, Defence, Labour and Economy.

Outcomes and response time: a detailed breakdown

Outcome. Aside from the withdrawn, expired or converted instances, out of the 28,360 documents submitted in the three legislatures, 20,079 (almost 76%) were not answered, nor had a follow-up.

Table 1. Reports, by outcome and parliament

Esito	Legislatura			Totali
	XV	XVI	XVII*	
In corso	3.398	9.012	7.669	20.079
DEC		83	80	163
RIT	28	121	144	293
SVL/RIS	1.389	3.218	2.306	6.913
TRA	180	351	381	912
Totali	4.995	12.785	10.580	28.360

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The percentage for replies/follow-ups varies from parliament to parliament:

- 10-15% for interpellations
- 18-21% for oral questions at the Assembly
- 33-34% for oral questions in the Committee
- 19-30% for written questions

In Europe

At the European Parliament, written questions (58,840 in the 2009-2014 parliament and 31,619 in the current one, as at 24 January 2017), feature a response rate of almost 100%. Out of the 1,071 oral questions submitted during the past parliament, 436 had a follow up (40.7%); out of the 360 submitted in the current one, 166 have been followed up (46.1%).

Response time. The maximum duration of the procedure varies, depending on the follow-ups, the term and the types of reports:

- from 275 to 716 days for interpellations
- from 427 to 1,070 days for oral questions at the Assembly
- from 380 to 757 days for oral questions in the Committee
- from 591 to 1,338 days for written questions

Owing to the lengthiness of the procedure, and when there is a government change, a response may even be given by a new government.

- Out of the 721 instances submitted during the Monti government which were given a response, 673 were answered by ministers of the Monti government itself, 42 by officials of the later Letta government and six by officials of the even later Renzi government.
- The Renzi government, in turn, answered six reports submitted to the Monti government (previous but one), 261 submitted to the previous Letta government and 1,462 submitted to its own ministers.
- In the 19 days of 2016 it was in office, the Gentiloni government answered 20 reports submitted to the earlier Renzi government.

Table 2. Follow ups, by procedure duration

Leg.	Tipo Atto	N. Atti	Durata (Giorni)			
			Media	Minima	Massima	Dev. Std.
Leg. XV						
	Interpellanza	43	76,81	7	275	63,58
	Interrogazione orale	293	72,13	1	427	72,94
	<i>In Aula</i>	166	87,87	1	427	74,00
	<i>In Comm.</i>	127	51,55	1	380	66,38
	Interrogazione scritta	1.053	155,45	0	591	105,66
Leg. XVI						
	Interpellanza	58	122,67	2	716	144,70
	Interrogazione orale	757	118,21	0	1.032	128,22
	<i>In Aula</i>	448	142,10	0	1.032	142,48
	<i>In Comm.</i>	309	83,57	0	699	94,11
	Interrogazione scritta	2.403	170,14	0	1.338	152,58
Leg. XVII*						
	Interpellanza	59	117,75	7	604	130,36
	Interrogazione orale	898	116,98	1	1.070	129,10
	<i>In Aula</i>	285	140,43	1	1.070	156,49
	<i>In Comm.</i>	613	106,07	1	757	112,64
	Interrogazione scritta	1.349	219,05	1	1.282	217,77

Table 3. Reports followed up, by government

Governò destinatario	Governò che risponde						Totali
	Prodi II	Berlusconi IV	Monti	Letta	Renzi	Gentiloni	
Prodi II	1.379	6					1.385
Berlusconi IV		2.356	185				2.541
Monti			673	42	6		721
Letta				406	266		672
Renzi					1.564	20	1.584
Totali	1.379	2.362	858	448	1.836	20	6.903

Drafted by the Assembly Service

Conclusions

The high number of reports unreplied or lacking follow-up action is common to the three parliaments considered here, independently of the sponsor's affiliation (majority or opposition). This could undermine their effectiveness as an instrument for Parliament's fact-finding power.

Response time hardly ever complies with the Rules.

Comments

Ways should be explored to enhance and make the most of parliamentary oversight, and this entails

- a need to identify tools urging the Government to comply with response obligations more promptly.
- a structure of parliamentary business that truly takes into account the need to take up interpellations and questions

- raising Members' awareness: they must be discouraged from improperly oversight authority, as if they were surrogate press releases, in order to find their original function, namely instruments supporting parliament's mandate.

The study was conducted by the
SITTINGS SERVICE
Senato della Repubblica

Focus by
IMPACT ASSESSMENT OFFICE
Senato della Repubblica
uvi@senato.it



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