

A Parliamentary-Style Question Period: Proposals and Issues for Congress

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Editor's note: The following is a brief summary of what is a fascinating report on the American Congress and Question Time. I commend the report in its entirety to you. It can be found as an html version on <http://ftp.fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/RL34599.pdf>. Order Code **RL34599**

Summary

In May 2008, Senator and presidential candidate John McCain stated that, as President, he would 'ask Congress to grant me the privilege of coming before both Houses to take questions and address criticism, much the same as the Prime Minister of Great Britain appears regularly before the House of Commons.' Such a 'question period,' in which the chief executive official appears before the legislature to answer questions, is a feature of most parliamentary systems. Prime Minister's Questions is a major component of British politics, receiving substantial press, radio, and television coverage. In many national parliaments, including the British House of Commons, questions are also directed to other Cabinet Ministers, serving as a major form of legislative oversight and constituency service.

In the early years of the U.S. government, the President and members of his Cabinet appeared occasionally on the floor of the House and Senate to advise on treaties and to consult on pending legislation. But the practice fell into disfavor and has been offered in the 19th and 20th centuries to establish a formal question period in one or both congressional chambers, but no proposal has ever been formally voted upon by the House or Senate.

Scholars and other observers have debated the merits of introducing a question system in Congress. Advocates argue that a question period will improve the performance of executive departments by improving congressional oversight capabilities, promote inter-branch dialogue and relations, increase public

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knowledge and interest in government affairs, and strengthen the institutional position of Congress within the government relative to the President. Opponents contend that a question period is ill-adapted for a non-parliamentary system, provides poor oversight, will intensify partisanship, will undermine the committee system, will be generally filled with theatrics and manipulation, maybe expensive, and will give the executive branch an unnecessary forum within Congress.

This report surveys the use of Question Time in Britain, Question Period in Canada, Question Hour in Germany, and Oral and Government Questions in France. Afterward, the report examines previous proposals for question periods in the United States, considers potential advantages and disadvantages of a question period, and outlines some legislative considerations for policymakers considering a question period for Congress. ▲