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Parliamentary Questions in Belgium: Testing for Party Discipline

RÉGIS DANDOY

This contribution seeks to explain the numbers of written questions in the Belgian House of Representatives (1995–2007). Important variations over time, party and coalition formula have been observed and ‘classic’ explanations – such as the size of the parliamentary party group, the linguistic group or the majority vs. opposition status of the party – only partly explain these observed variations. It is argued here that parliamentary party group unity and discipline is an important factor in shaping patterns of questioning. The findings of the statistical analysis confirm that disciplined and cohesive parties are more active in questioning the government than other parties.

Keywords: *parliamentary questions; Belgium; party discipline.*

In Belgium, journalists scrutinise MPs’ parliamentary activities at the eve of each election. Important newspapers such as *Le Soir* or *De Morgen* systematically publish a report on MPs’ legislative outputs and activism. The temptation is therefore high for an MP to be very active in questioning in order to receive ‘good marks’ from the media in the perspective of his/her re-election, confirming Wiberg’s statement that ‘MPs must be active in order to survive’ (1994, p. 359).

In this research, the focus is on written questions in the Belgian House of Representatives and explaining the varying number of parliamentary questions asked by MPs. The relationship between party discipline and parliamentary questions has – to our knowledge – never been tested in the literature. The suggestion here is that a positive relation between party cohesion and the number of written questions is expected. In other words, MPs from parties demonstrating a strong party discipline introduce more written questions than MPs belonging to less disciplined or cohesive ones. This suggestion is tested using a database of all parliamentary questions between 1995 and 2007 (more than 32,000 documents), controlling for the importance of partisan affiliation, party preferences and linguistic characteristics.

In Belgium, MPs have at their disposal different sets of tools for information and control of the government: (oral, written and urgent) questions and interpellations. Both may be expressed either in plenary session or in committee. A written question is limited to a 25-line statement. After translation, the question is sent to the mentioned individual minister who answers within 20 working days. If the minister respects the time limit, the question and its answer are published in

the 'question and answer report'. If the minister takes more time to answer, the question is published under the 'delay' heading. The Constitution does not make any provision for questions. The practice has been widespread in Belgium since 1897 on the basis of the UK example.

Questions constitute a mean for MPs to collect information in order to fulfil their political control function efficiently. Written questions concern primarily demands for clarification or confirmation. Among the conditions described in the House rules, questions may only imply a statistical answer, be documentation-seeking or looking for a single piece of legal advice. Furthermore, they may not be in relation to particular interests or to personal cases and they may not be similar to a previous interpellation. More generally, questions aim to expose a neglect, abuse or ill application of the law, and sometimes suggest legislative improvements and reform. They can also force a minister to voice an opinion on delicate matters (Dandoy and De Winter 2005).

Parliamentarian democracy takes its legitimacy from elections. But the MPs' legitimacy is also reinforced by parliamentary activities occurring in between elections (Strøm 1995). Even if some authors evoked the 'decline of parliament' on the profit of government (King 1976, Norton 1998), the Belgian federal government is still accountable to the House of Representatives. The control of governmental activities takes the form of (written and oral) questions and interpellations. These parliamentary activities have their own institutional characteristics, time sequence and political significance. But they all participate in the efforts made by the parliament to control the cabinet's decisions and actions. The current linguistic conflict between Flemish- and French-speaking communities transcends parliamentary activities and contributes to the overall complexity of the issue.

The Significance of Party Discipline

In Belgium, MPs are not only individual political entrepreneurs but above all representatives of a party. Since 1962, the House recognises political groups that gather at least five MPs from the same party (or party family since the green parties from both sides of the linguistic border usually sit together). Parliamentary party groups (PPGs) are central actors in the parliament but also strong agents of partitocracy (De Winter and Dumont 2000). With financial subsidies proportional to their number of MPs, PPGs are able to finance their staff and above all the hiring of a permanent political secretary who remains a House employee (De Winter and Dumont 2000).

PPGs' role is not only to collectivise resources but particularly to make sure that MPs respect a certain discipline and the coalition agreement if they are part of the governing majority. De Winter and Dumont (2000) state that because of the structural features of party government in Belgium, the hands of most MPs are securely tied regarding government formation and confidence vote, legislation, and also parliamentary questions.

Indeed, government formation gives little space for MPs' influence as PPGs' leaders are not involved in this process, even if the distribution of parliamentary leadership positions is negotiated during the formation talks. But the House cannot be ignored as the government needs its approval, which takes the form of a vote of confidence after an investiture debate. During this debate, criticism may occur but a negative vote from majority MPs is not conceivable as it would go against the previous validation of the party congresses.

De Winter concedes that the role of parliament is declining in Belgium but, regarding legislation, it does not take into account individual MPs' bills which constitute 'considerable levels of law-making activities' (De Winter 1998, p. 108), even if the bills have small chance of success or are of little importance. Indeed, the coalition agreement basically leaves no room for major individual initiative. If the issue at stake is not part of the governmental deal, it may not benefit from the required traditional consensus. That is why an MP must refer to his PPG leader who himself has to consult his colleagues from other parties and his party officials.

Contrary to oral questions or interpellations, written parliamentary questions do not require prior approval from the PPG leader. Nonetheless, permission from their group or group leader is required for parliamentary questions in some parties (De Winter 1996, p. 345). Furthermore, Wiberg (1994, p. 359) notices that 'questioning is to a large extent partisan activity' due to the importance attached to these PPGs. According to Bowler (2000, p. 159), 'the major resources are procedural advantages which help legislators shape the agenda and the policy outcomes of a legislature'. In this sense, parties provide an institutional structure to establish policy and ensure the compliance of individual legislators.

As a result, MPs may be seen as agents of the parties and as simple 'pawns' in the framework of the Belgian partitocracy. Indeed, having a stable government requires that parties – and more specifically majority parties – maintain a cohesive group in parliament. Party cohesion and discipline is essential for a cabinet's life as 'party cohesion is a means to an end: it ensures the parliamentary endorsement of government measures' (Rose 1983, p. 283). Party cohesion can be explained by two main arguments (Bowler 2000). It arises from the electoral arena, especially from the candidate selection process, or from the powers and incentives within the parliament.

The relationship between party discipline and parliamentary questions has – to our knowledge – never been tested in the literature. The suggestion here is that a positive relation between party cohesion and the number of written questions is expected. MPs from parties demonstrating a strong party discipline introduce more written questions than MPs belonging to less disciplined or cohesive ones.

Various studies demonstrate that Belgian parties are in general cohesive in the federal parliament (De Winter 1996, Depauw 2000, Castanheira and Noury 2007) but that significant differences can be observed between majority and opposition parties. Indeed, the MPs belonging to parties from the majority are not supposed to question a minister from their own party (Magnette 2004) for obvious reasons

of policy coherence (especially when getting close to elections). A similar hypothesis has already been tested as far as the control of the agenda of the plenary sessions and of the committees is concerned, and regarding law proposals and amendments (Depauw 1999, 2000). The results showed that party cohesion plays a role in the determination of the control of the committees' agenda and the amendments.

Data and Variables

The Belgian political arena is characterised by several phenomena that potentially have a significant impact on executive–legislative relations and consequently on parliamentary questions. These elements – many coalition partners, different coalition formulas, governmental and ministerial instability, and length of the government formation process – obviously have an impact on the number and nature of parliamentary questions. This research analyses the parliamentary questions between 1995 and 2007 as this period witnessed no governmental instability, only three different cabinet formulas,¹ 22 ministerial resignations and comparatively short periods of government formation (49 days on average) (Dumont *et al.* 2009).

The data on written questions originate from the information provided by the documentation services of the House, via the PAROLIS system. All 32,507 written questions that were introduced between 8 June 1995 and 2 May 2007 were analysed and coded. In order to allow the comparison across time and across legislatures, parliamentary seats are indicated as belonging to the same party, using the official party name as at 2007, even if it had changed since 1995. The modification of the party name is usually superficial and does not bring any drastic change regarding the structure and the ideology of the party. Exceptions have to be noticed for the Volksunie (VU) after 2001.²

In the empirical model, the independent variable consists in party discipline. In order to assess this party discipline among MPs in the Belgian House, Castanheira and Noury's (2007) data is used. The cohesion indicator ranging from '0' (votes of the MPs from the same party are always different) to '1' (MPs from the same party always vote similarly). This indicator based on roll call votes is taken as a valid proxy of the relationship between MPs and their parties. Their results demonstrate that Belgian parties are in general cohesive in the federal parliament, confirming previous research (De Winter 1996, Depauw 2000).

Before testing the influence of the party discipline on the amount of written questions, one has to control for factors such as time, legislature effects, election cycles, political parties and party families, parliamentary party group size, language, opposition vs. majority status, and the ideological positions of the different parties.

The number of written questions introduced by the 150 MPs in Belgium amounts to an average of 2,709 questions per year. But this number is not stable across time, as the 1999–2003 legislature witnessed fewer parliamentary

questions than during the other two legislatures (1995–99 and 2003–07). No institutional change occurred during this period and the length of the observed legislatures poorly explains these differences.³ On average, each Belgian MP introduced 72.4 questions per legislature, which is 18.1 questions per MP per year. As expected, the 1999–2003 legislature witnessed relatively fewer questions introduced per MP (58.6), while this average amount of questions per MP rose to 73.2 during the 1995–99 legislature and 86 during the 2003–07 legislature.

Each legislature is divided into sessions of one year, starting on the second Tuesday of October until the second Monday of October of the next year. The session is ‘extraordinary’ when the House meets after the elections and before the first ordinary session starting in October. Therefore, normal legislatures (that is, those not shortened by early elections) consist of one extraordinary session and four sessions. The majority of the questions are introduced during sessions one, two and three, that is, the three years in the very middle of the legislature. As we do not observe an increase in the number of questions during the last sessions of each legislature, the role played by the growing – institutional and policy – experience of the MPs and of their staff in the House does not seem to be relevant.

The relatively small number of questions during the extraordinary session can be explained by the fact that this is a period where some MPs need to recruit their staff, to familiarise themselves with the functioning of the institution and to increase their knowledge of the different policy sectors and competences belonging to the federal cabinet. Another explanation might be found in the ‘honeymoon’ hypothesis according to which MPs do not question the new ministers and the new cabinet members during the first weeks or months of their mandate, leaving enough time for the freshly nominated ministers to make their first (controversial) decisions and policy implementations. However, differences across sessions regarding the number of questions (per day and per session) are still present when controlling for the length of each session (in number of days).

Concerning the presence of electoral cycles, written questions in plenary sessions consist in a public and political platform for the MPs in the framework of the electoral campaigns (Wiberg 1994, Dandoy and De Winter 2005). Indeed, an important activism in the House can produce a public recognition and an image of expertise and of political skills in the population. As stated by De Winter, ‘many questions are only a means of information, inspired by mere electoral and publicity-seeking motives’ (De Winter 1996, p. 341). We expected to observe an increase in the number of questions introduced by MPs in the last months of the legislature, just before the next parliamentary elections.

One can enlarge the definition of electoral cycle to elections at other levels of decision-making as local and provincial elections occurred on 8 October 2000 and 2006 and as regional and European elections took place on 13 June 2004.⁴ MPs are expected to use their control activities of the cabinet’s decisions as a

tool to get public recognition and appear in the media on the occasion of these elections. Given the interdependence of the different levels in Belgium (local, provincial, regional and community, federal and European), most of the federal MPs are candidates for elections at other levels.

Large differences across parties are observed (see Table 1). The Flemish extreme-right party (VB) is the more active party in questioning ministers, with 6,937 questions in 12 years, followed by two other Flemish parties, the VLD (6,326 questions) and the CD&V (5,973 questions). The less active political parties are the French-speaking FN (143 questions), the CDH (1,012 questions) and the PS (1,519 questions).⁵ Unsurprisingly, the amount of written questions per party depends on the size of its group in the parliament. Larger parties (in absolute number of seats in the House) tend to introduce more written questions than smaller parties.

It is expected that, given the numerous political activities in the parliament, a PPG composed of numerous MPs can distribute the workload more equally and should introduce more written questions than a PPG composed of few individuals. According to Heidar and Koole (2000, p. 9), the smaller the PPG, the less differentiated its structure will be. But our results demonstrate a completely different perspective. For example, the N-VA, a party represented by just a few parliamentarians, is the most active Belgian party when calculating the amount of questions per MP.

Similarly, significant differences among party families are witnessed. Some party families, such as the greens, are on average more active than others. But this is partially explained by the majority vs. opposition divide as governmental coalitions at the federal level were always symmetrical until 2007. Throughout the observed period, the party families in the coalition generally introduced fewer written questions than parties in the opposition.⁶ The legislature Verhofstadt II constitutes a notable exception as the average number of questions per

Table 1: Number of Questions per Party, 1995–2007

	1995–99	1999–2003	2003–07	Total
VLD	1,856	1,436	3,034	6,326
MR	985	294	388	1,667
PS	566	624	329	1,519
SP.A	416	384	1,588	2,388
CDH	302	307	403	1,012
CD&V	1,822	1,859	2,292	5,973
ECOLO	1,058	319	1,155	2,532
GROEN!	1,336	354	0	1,690
VB	1,431	2,174	3,332	6,937
FN	115	0	28	143
N-VA	1,091	1,005	206	2,302
INDEP	0	18	0	18
Total	10,978	8,774	12,755	32,507

party is greater in the case of majority parties than for opposition parties. At the individual level, when comparing the number of questions introduced by majority MPs to the number from opposition MPs, the average number of questions asked by an individual majority MP is clearly smaller than the average coming from an opposition MP. An average of 43.1 questions was asked per legislature by each MP from the majority, while each opposition MP introduced on average 117.4 questions.

Given the linguistic characteristics of federal Belgium, variations in the amount of questions across linguistic communities are expected. The results are noteworthy. The amount of questions introduced by Flemish parties is approximately four times greater than those introduced by the French-speaking ones; the former introduced 25,667 questions between 1995 and 2007 while the latter only introduced 6891 questions during the same period, 21.2 per cent of all written questions. At the individual level, a Flemish MP introduced 95.3 written questions per legislature during the 1995–2007 period, while a French-speaking MP introduced 38.3 during the same period. The Flemish MPs are therefore much more active in the House as far as these activities are concerned.

Explanations for these significant differences can be found in the number of MPs that belong to each community and in the status of opposition vs. majority party. However the differences are expected to be related mainly to distinct political cultures, as pointed out by Heidar and Koole as an explanatory factor of PPGs' performance and structure (2000, p. 19). Overall, the smaller number of French-speaking MPs in the House only partially explains the smaller amount of written questions coming from this linguistic group as they represent between 39.3 and 41.3 per cent of the total number of seats, depending on the legislature. In addition, relatively more French-speaking MPs take part in the majority than Flemish ones.

Finally, the electoral programmes drafted before the elections by each party allow us to assess the ideological position of a party, mainly its position on a left–right continuum. This variable relies on the data collected in the framework of the Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP) (Budge *et al.* 2001, Klingemann *et al.* 2006).⁷ As one of the primary goals of parliamentary questions is to control the activities and decisions of the cabinet, it is expected that MPs belonging to a party being ideologically close to the cabinet on the left–right cleavage will introduce fewer questions than the MPs from a party far from it. In other words, parties ideologically far away from the cabinet's positions should put more written questions to federal ministers than other parties. Using CMP estimates for the position of the cabinet on a left–right axis,⁸ the distance between the positions of the cabinet and of each party has been calculated.

Results

The model presented here integrates the different variables in a larger explanatory model, using a negative binomial regression model. This model of regression

dealing with count data is an extension of the Poisson model and particularly appropriate when one wants to analyse dispersed data, that is, data whose variance is larger than the mean.

The dependent variable is the number of questions introduced by an individual MP distributed among parties and among sessions. Our model allows testing the party discipline hypothesis, based on a cohesion indicator – *Party Discipline*. The control variables consist in parliamentary sessions (dummy variable – *Session*) and the proximity to elections (number of days to elections – *Electoral Cycle*). Regarding control variables, the model includes dummies for each legislature (dummy – *Legislature*), the number of MPs per party⁹ (*Size*), the linguistic group of the party (dummy – *Language*), the position of the party in the majority or in the opposition (dummy – *Majority vs. Opposition*) and the distance between the party and the cabinet based on a left–right axis (based on positions from party manifestos – *Distance Cabinet*). Since no data about the content of the manifestos is available for the FN party concerning the three observed elections (1995, 1999 and 2003) and for the VB party concerning 1999 and 2003, the number of cases is limited to an *N* of 135 in the model.

Taking all variables into consideration in an encompassing model (see Table 2), four variables are proven to be significant confirming the hypothesis of the party discipline.¹⁰ Controlling for all other variables, the positive regression coefficient (3.161**) indicates that parties with a strong party discipline introduce more written questions than less cohesive parties. In other words, if party discipline – based on a cohesion index – increases one point for a party, each individual MP from this party would introduce approximately 3.2 additional questions per session, while holding the other variables in the

Table 2: Negative Binomial Regression Results

		Model	
Time-Related Variables	<i>Session</i>	0.049	(0.048)
	<i>Electoral Cycle</i>	0.009	(0.135)
	<i>Legislature 49^a</i>	8.915	(6.591)
	<i>Legislature 50</i>	39.179	(28.513)
	<i>Party Discipline</i>	3.161**	(0.948)
Party Variables	<i>Distance Cabinet</i>	-6.778	(4.905)
	<i>Size</i>	0.050**	(0.011)
	<i>Language</i>	0.679**	(0.153)
	<i>Majority vs. Opposition</i>	-0.925**	(0.178)
	Constant	-85.926	(0.135)
Negative Binomial		0.420	(0.0490)
Pearson Chi ²		113.059	
Log likelihood		-960.006	
Observations		135	

*Significant at 0.05 level; **significant at 0.01 level.

^aLegislature 51 is used as a reference category.

model constant. When one remembers that MPs introduce, on average, 18.1 questions per session, this finding is highly relevant.

Together with party discipline, three control variables have shown significant coefficients. As expected, MPs from parties in government introduce fewer questions than parties in opposition (variable *Majority vs. Opposition*). Obviously, as written questions are, among other things, a tool for controlling the action of the government and of the ministers, opposition MPs use this instrument more often than other MPs. And MPs rarely question ministers from their own party, especially if it implies asking embarrassing and complex questions.

In addition, large parties in parliament introduce more questions per MP than smaller parties (variable *Size*). This positive relation is significant but not very strong. It reverses the bivariate findings observed earlier and according to which small PPGs proportionally introduce more questions than MPs from large PPGs. Again, the variable of the status of majority vs. opposition of a party may take over most of the variation. Still, the results indicate that, as expected, a PPG composed of numerous MPs can distribute the workload more equally and introduce more written questions than a PPG composed of few individuals.

Finally, language remains the most important control variable (variable *Language*). Flemish MPs are significantly more active in questioning ministers than their French-speaking colleagues. Indeed, differences of political culture have been observed at the population level (see, for example, Silver and Dowley 2000, Billiet *et al.* 2006).

The expected effect played by other control variables is not confirmed. Regarding time-related aspects, MPs do not increase their parliamentary activity close to elections.¹¹ It appears that they do not particularly seek publicity in their campaigns through an increased questioning of ministers. But we do not observe the contrary either, MPs deserting the parliament in order to campaign in their electoral district. Legislative periods just before elections do not witness significant increase or decrease in the amount of written questions. Overall, activism in the federal House seems to be decoupled from campaign strategies. It is the case for the federal elections at the end of the legislative term but also for other mid-term elections such as local, provincial, regional and European ones.

The ideological position of a party, compared to the position of the cabinet, does not play a role in the number of questions introduced by its MPs. Contrary to bivariate correlation results, there is no tendency towards an increased activism in the case of parties distant from the cabinet. It could be explained by the fact that parties from both sides of the left–right axis are often included in the federal cabinet and that the status of majority vs. opposition of a party is controlled in this model.

Conclusion

Parliamentarians may be seen as agents of the electors in their information-seeking and control activities but MPs must also be considered as agents of the

political parties. This can limit significantly the room for parliamentary initiatives, especially in the case of majority parliamentary party groups (PPGs). The purpose of this study was to stress the most significant variables in explaining variation in the number of written questions asked by individual legislators in the Belgian House of Representatives (1995–2007).

Party discipline is of prime importance when one wants to analyse the behaviour of the Belgian MPs. The results demonstrate that the more organised and disciplined a PPG is, the higher the number of questions. Coupled with the findings regarding the size of the PPGs, it permits the conclusion that large and cohesive PPGs, relying on a well-organised labour division between its members, lead to a higher efficiency in the House.

A positive relationship exists also between the number of written questions and the size of the PPG. The same finding applies for the linguistic group, as Flemish MPs are more inclined to question ministers than their French-speaking colleagues. MPs belonging to large and Flemish PPGs introduce more written questions than other MPs. Besides, a negative link has been noticed between the number of questions and the parties that participate in the coalition in the federal cabinet. Unsurprisingly, opposition parties introduce more questions than majority parties.

These conclusions call for further research. Indeed, this statistical approach has to be deepened with a more qualitative perspective in studying the content of the questions. Not all questions are equal and some of them have a greater influence than others on the government and the questioned minister. Additional work should also be done in order to investigate the motivations for questioning fully. In addition to information-seeking and control, MPs' motivations could, for example, range from mere publicity-seeking objectives, to tactical positioning within the PPG – by being particularly active in some specific policy domains – or to larger strategic views on his/her career as a PPG leader or minister.

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Notes

1. The cabinet Dehaene II was composed of Christian democrat and socialist parties (1995–99); the cabinet Verhofstadt I of liberal, socialist and green parties (1999–2003); and the cabinet Verhofstadt II of liberals and socialists (2003–07).
2. This party split into two different movements (Spirit and N-VA). If the MPs stayed together until the end of the 1999–2003 legislature inside the political group of the VU, they participated separately in the federal elections of 2003 and in the 2003–07 legislature thereafter. First, Spirit joined the SP.A in an electoral cartel. We therefore have to keep in mind that the 2003–07 data for the cartel SP.A–Spirit represent not only the Flemish socialist party but also some MPs from the left-wing Flemish regionalists (six seats out of 23). The N-VA stood alone in 2003 and only got one seat. The figures concerning this MP were therefore coded as belonging

- to the VU party but we kept both names in order to assess continuity between both political movements.
3. The 1999–2003 legislature is only 3.4 per cent shorter than the previous one, and 3.4 per cent shorter than the legislature in 2003–07.
 4. Regional and European elections of 1999 occurred on exactly the same day as the federal elections.
 5. An explanation of the parties is as follows: VLD (*Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten* – Flemish Liberals and Democrats), MR (*Mouvement Réformateur* – Reform Movement), PS (*Parti socialiste* – Socialist Party), SP.A (*Socialistische Partij Anders* – Socialist Party Differently), CDH (*Centre démocrate humaniste* – Humanist Democratic Centre), CD&V (*Christen Democratisch en Vlaams* – Flemish Democrats and Flemish), Ecolo (*Ecologistes* – Ecologists), Groen! (Green!), VB (*Vlaams Belang* – Flemish Interest), FN (*Front National* – National Front), N-VA (*Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie* – New Flemish Alliance).
 6. Concerning the questions from majority MPs, huge differences are observed according to the different kinds of coalition. There are on average 776.5 questions per party in 1995–99 (four parties, centre-left coalition), 568.5 in 1999–2003 (six parties, ‘rainbow’ coalition) and 1,335 in 2007–03 (four parties, ‘purple’ coalition). The variation of the average number of questions introduced by opposition parties is less obvious.
 7. Data for 1995 and 1999 manifestos originate from the CMP databases (with the exception of Ecolo, Agalev and VLD). The 2003 manifestos were coded by the author.
 8. A government’s policy position is weighted by the proportion of parliamentary seats held by each party in the government. Data for 1995 and 1999 come from the CMP databases while 2003 data are based on the author’s own calculation.
 9. This number is not stable within sessions as three MPs left a party and sat as independents (Bastien, Pinxten and Decroly) and two MPs changed party affiliation (Pinxten from CVP to VLD in 2002 and Fournaux from CDH to MR in 2004).
 10. At a later point, this model was rerun in order to adjust for heterogeneity in the model. Using robust standard errors, the negative binomial regression coefficients deliver exactly the same results for the four significant variables. The coefficients for the ideological position of the party and the legislature dummies are slightly more significant but still do not reach the threshold of 0.05.
 11. The growing experience and knowledge of the functioning of the institutions and on the government’s decisions does not seem to play a role, as MPs do not introduce any more questions at the later stage of their term than at the very beginning.

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