

Legislative Organization, Electoral Vulnerability and Constituency Focus in the British House of Commons and the German Bundestag

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Abstract

In this paper, which reflects work in progress both empirically and conceptually, we examine the extent to which British and German legislators use questions for written answer to voice concerns relating to their electoral districts. We find considerable variations in the use of written questions across the two chambers collectively, among the members of each chamber and across individual legislators' career trajectories. Our focus is the extent to which the number of written questions relating to electoral districts varies across legislators' parliamentary careers. We are investigating, for example, whether the distribution of written questions across legislators' careers reflects a declining interest in local matters and an increasing focus on national policies as they adapt to the rules of the legislative game and reduce their initial electoral vulnerability. We compare data from two parliaments because we seek to explore the behavioral implications of trends that some political sociologists have considered to be almost universal in established liberal democracies, namely the professionalization of political elites and their growing independence from their democratic principals among voters and party activists. While we cannot derive any generalizations from the study of MPs in two parliaments, we are able to reduce the risk of overgeneralization. At the same time, the binational comparison still allows the development of sufficiently sensitive validation strategies for the automated content analysis of the texts of parliamentary questions. Using multi-variate panel regressions for three legislative periods between 2001 and 2015 in the UK and two periods between 2002 and 2009 in Germany, we do not find any significant decline of the number of parliamentary questions with a constituency focus across legislative careers in either of the chambers. Based on data for the UK, we find that electoral vulnerability is a strong, consistent and significant predictor that also moderates the effect of parliamentary experience.

Electoral Incentives, Parliamentary Careers and Constituency Focus in the British House of Commons, 2001-2015

Thomas Saalfeld and David Beck¹

Introduction

Three legislators represent the German electoral district of Bamberg in the German Bundestag elected in 2017. In Germany's two-tier electoral system, the Christian Democrat Thomas Silberhorn secured the plurality of votes in the Bamberg constituency and was duly elected to serve as its 'direct' representative. Two further representatives were drawn from competing parties' state lists and elected under proportional representation: the Social Democrat Andreas Schwarz and the Green party representative Lisa Badum. Between January and March 2021, Badum – a fresher first elected in 2017 – asked 105 questions of which seven explicitly referred to the Bamberg constituency. Another six questions related to the plight of 'Brauereigaststätten' (inns owned by local breweries) under the restrictions imposed by national, state and local governments to battle the Covid-19 pandemic. Such inns are characteristic of the region. Demonstrating concern for their problems signals strong and popular advocacy on behalf of prominent local businesses with a long tradition, which are important to the local identity. Badum ensured that her standing-up for key businesses in the district was advertised on her personal website, her Youtube channel and in the local media. Schwarz and Silberhorn did not ask any questions at all, by contrast. In Silberhorn's case the reason was obvious. He served as a junior minister in the Ministry of Defense. As a member of the government his duty would be to respond to questions submitted by backbench legislators. Schwarz, first elected in 2013 and member of the influential faction of the 'Seeheimer Kreis', was a backbencher like Badum. Yet he decided to promote the region's economic interests behind the closed doors of the Bundestag's Budget Committee of which he was a member. Did Badum's more experienced Social Democratic colleague know that he could achieve more for his region in private committee deliberations rather than by publicly raising questions with the national Minister of Economic Affairs? Did his more senior status within his parliamentary party group give him access to a less visible but technically more effective strategy to deliver benefits to the district? Was his choice of strategy, at least in part, evidence of legislative professionalization and learning where ambition, ideology and the passion for local causes are gradually tempered by a 'legislative learning process, especially with respect to the chamber's demands for incrementalism and compromise' (Barnett 1999: 8)?²

In this paper, we examine variations in the extent to which British and German legislators used parliamentary questions for written answer ('written questions') to signal concern for their constituencies or constituents. To what extent are British and German legislators employing Badum's or Schwarz's strategies? Our analyses are based on automated content analyses of more

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² Barnett's observation refers to the 104th Congress.

than 650,000 written questions submitted to the government in the British House of Commons between June 2001 and May 2015. For Germany we used the 26,417 written questions tabled in the German Bundestag between October 2002 and September 2009. Our dependent variable consists of counts of questions with an explicit focus on a legislator's electoral district for intervals of six months in the House of Commons and three months in the Bundestag.³ Our key independent variables relate to different dimensions of time: (a) a legislator's biological age, (b) the cohort s/he belongs to (that is, when s/he was elected to parliament for the first time) and (c) the period in the relevant legislative term (distinguishing, for example, whether a count refers to a time interval immediately after or before an election).

This paper focuses on the extent to which British and German legislators (as their voters' agents) develop looser ties with electoral districts as their careers progress and gradually shift their representational focus from their local electoral districts to national policies. In institutional theories, such looser ties might be caused by growing incumbency advantages of sitting legislators or processes of legislative learning in the chamber referred to above. The theoretical approach that informs our paper relates to the institutional conditions for MPs to shift their focus from their local constituents to questions of national policy or politics as their careers progress. Institutionally, democratic representation will be conceptualized as an agency relationship between representatives ('agents') and represented ('principals'). Both principals and agents are in a quasi-contractual relationship of delegation but tend to retain their own desires, beliefs and preferences. Democratic delegation is fraught with transaction costs as contracts tend to be incomplete; they can be complex as one agent may simultaneously serve competing principals such as voters, party activists or interest groups (Carey 2007). The behavior of legislators in the chamber can be assumed to be consistent with the fact that party activists and voters (as the legislators' ultimate principals) have the power to revoke the delegation at the next election. Whether they do so depends partly on the complexity of the dominant issues involved and partly on the legislators' ability to engender trust and demonstrate how their behavior has been in the principals' best interest, even if the latter do not agree with the former's policies (Bianco 1997).

This institutional perspective is complemented by sociological debates dealing with the rise of 'career politicians' (Allen et al. 2020) and the 'cartellization' of party politics (Katz and Mair 1995). Summing up his research on the predominance of career politicians in the UK King, for example, claimed that British Members of Parliament (MPs) maintained links with the public but 'constitute a distinct and distinctive "political class", one that is set apart from the rest of the population, even from the journalists who write about them and the civil servants who work for them when they are in luck and in office' (King 2015: 64). A related debate has taken place among students of political parties where some have argued that the leaderships of so-called 'cartel parties' living 'off politics' have increased their autonomy *vis-à-vis* civil society by accessing state funding for what might be called the 'party in public office', especially the ministers and legislators leading the party (Katz and Mair 1995, 2009).

³ This was done for purely practical purposes. In the next iteration, we will calculate three-month time slices for the House of Commons as well.

What we have learned so far

Several approaches have been influential in describing and explaining variations in the extent to which legislators use their parliamentary resources to demonstrate concern for their districts. Scholars studying legislative roles have mapped how the role of legislator is constructed in a sociological sense (Eulau et al. 1959; Herzog 1990; Searing 1994). Wahlke et al.'s (1962) types of 'delegate,' 'trustee' and 'politico' are early examples of such important typologies of representative roles, which helped to conceptualize the relationship between legislators and their districts. Later work (Andeweg 1997; Searing 1994) has adjusted such typologies to the political and institutional context of European democracies. Nevertheless, typologies of role orientations have rarely shown much promise in terms of explaining actual legislative behavior. Even more problematically, there have been well-founded doubts whether roles are actually exogenous variables that can be used to explain behavior, or whether they are merely patterned (but endogenous) responses to recurrent situations that require explanation themselves (Strøm 1997; Zittel 2012). Empirically, many studies of legislative roles have been based on interviews of relatively small samples of legislators at specific points in time (Kerrouche and Schüttemeyer 2018; Siefken and Costa 2018). Neither do such studies capture longer term developments such as the professionalization of the role of legislator (Best and Cotta 2000; Herzog 1975; Rush and Giddings 2011), nor are they suited to describe the processes of adaptation legislators go through as their careers progress. Only very few studies have tracked the evolution of role behavior over time (Badura and Reese 1976; Bailer and Ohmura 2013, 2018). In short, the literature on roles has been crucial in developing a theoretical language to describe the link between legislators and their constituents in conceptual terms, but the explanatory status of roles has remained disputed, empirical evidence has been based on snapshots and little of it has been able to account for the role of institutions. Although some authors have exploited the institutional variation in mixed-member electoral systems to estimate the impact of single-member district elections and party-list elections (Gschwend and Zittel 2015b, 2015a; Wüst et al. 2006), it has been exceptional for single-country studies to examine the effect of institutional rules in the chambers themselves.

In European parliamentary systems, parties have been the main agents of electoral accountability. The discipline and agenda control party leaders have been able to impose in the chamber reduced the role of individual legislators to an agency relationship with the party leadership in the chamber. As a result, studies of policy responsiveness (e.g., Klüver and Sagarzazu 2016; Klüver and Spoon 2016; Spoon and Klüver 2014) and democratic accountability for policy performance (Duch and Stevenson 2008; Kayser and Leininger 2016; Kayser and Peress 2012) have focused strongly on political parties and government popularity. This focus on parties in research mirrored the behavior of legislators. Even in Britain with its single-member plurality electoral system, incentives for MPs to cultivate a personal were seen to be low for a long time (Carey and Shugart 1995). In the 1950s, for example, one authoritative academic observer stated that 'no candidate is worth 500 votes' (Butler 1955: 3). So dominant were the parties in terms of electoral accountability and so focused were the main parties on the minority of 'marginal seats' that personal vote-seeking strategies seemed to make very little difference. However, as electoral volatility increased and party competition has effectively become a complex multi-party contest (especially in regions such as Scotland), even relatively large majorities in a district may no longer offer sufficient reassurance to sitting MPs, especially if they took up a political career early in life and have become economically dependent on their 'job' as an MP (King 1981).

Growing volatility among voters and a declining base of party activists to support campaign efforts (Mair 2013) contributed to legislators' increased electoral vulnerability and increased their incentives to cultivate a personal vote in most electoral systems (cf. André, Depauw, and Martin 2014; Zittel 2017). Hence, students of legislative behavior have increasingly paid attention to individual vote-seeking strategies not only in electoral campaigns (see above) but also in legislative behavior in the chamber. Individual 'parliamentary policy statements' (Keh 2015) have become a stronger research focus. This increased opportunities for students of representational behavior in parliamentary systems of government to seek inspiration from U.S. literature on representational 'styles' (Fenno 1978, 2003). Grimmer's (2010) attempt to treat such styles as signals to voters and to identify conditions for U.S. legislators to present themselves either as advocates of local interests or as national policy-makers is a case in point. There is evidence for some legislatures that electoral competition may have been a factor driving a stronger constituency focus of legislators in their work in the chamber (rather than in their campaign activities or constituency offices). British, Canadian and Norwegian MPs, for example, have been shown to use written questions more extensively, if they are electorally vulnerable (Kellermann 2016; Rasch 2009; Soroka, Penner, and Blidook 2009). Studies of France and Ireland, by contrast, find no evidence of an electoral connection driving the frequency of individual parliamentary policy statements (such as parliamentary questions) in general (Lazardeux 2005), or a focus on constituency matters in the chamber (Martin 2011).

Beyond studies inspired by the new institutionalism in political science, the growing 'individualization' of legislative activities in many parliaments, some students of parliaments have highlighted the professionalization of parliamentary politics in recent decades (Norton 1994). Not only have legislatures increased their resources, the support they offer to legislators and parliamentary party groups, they have increasingly applied professional standards and ethics to the job of legislator. Not least, most legislators are now economically dependent on their parliamentary 'jobs'. Their desire for 'job security' is seen to be a strong driver of their behavior. This may have contributed to higher levels of 'service responsiveness' (Eulau and Karps 1977) in relation to constituents' demands. Moreover, professionalization may have increased the social recognition legislators receive from their peers and in the general public for being 'good constituency members' in legislative chambers (Searing 1985). Working on behalf of one's constituents may provide a certain degree of job satisfaction to backbenchers where power is relatively centralized in parliamentary leaderships, and oppositions are relatively weak in terms of direct policy influence.

In sum, there has been growing interest in the representational styles and constituency focus of legislators not only in the U.S. presidential system but increasingly also among students of parliamentary systems of government. Not only have studies focused on election campaigns but increasingly on the way legislators use parliamentary policy statements individually (rather than collectively as delegates of their parliamentary party groups). Much progress has been made in studying the electoral connection (e.g., electoral vulnerability) as a driving force of constituency focus. However, most studies focus on single cases. Comparative studies are exceptional (Cain, Ferejohn, and Fiorina 1987). Moreover, most studies are cross-sectional and neglect the impact of incentives stemming from legislative organization or social change in the legislatures.

Mechanisms: Why should constituency focus vary across a legislative career?

Many scholars have analyzed changes in legislator behavior over the course of a political career. Some have referred to this in the context of learning and professionalization (Barnett 1999); others have discussed evidence of growing ‘detachment’ of legislators from their democratic principals in the electorate and their local parties (Reiser 2018) and the evolution of an allegedly remote ‘political class’ (Allen et al. 2020; King 2015). Political sociologists sought to characterize systematic differences in political values between elites and voters as ‘democratic elitism’ (Higley 2009). Populist political parties and politicians have sought to instrumentalize and radicalize such observations in their critique of political elites (Hawkins et al. 2018; Mudde 2007). In the present paper we seek to conceptualize such phenomena as a (possibly declining) constituency focus of legislators in their behavior in the chamber, using two legislatures where a considerable number of parliamentarians have incentives to cultivate a personal vote in their electoral districts. In the United Kingdom and Germany, the electoral systems are known to generate such incentives.

There is little doubt among scholars of electoral and legislative politics in the United Kingdom that a strong focus on the constituency is an increasingly important condition for MPs to get re-selected by their parties and re-elected by voters in their districts (Hanretty, Lauderdale, and Vivyan 2017; Vivyan and Wagner 2015, 2016). Germany’s essentially proportional system has a strong personalized component. Hence many authors refer to Germany as having a mixed-member system with approximately one-half of the candidates for legislative office elected by plurality of the votes in single member districts and (typically) slightly more than one-half via party lists in the federal states (Saalfeld 2005). However, the vast majority of candidates elected via party lists typically *also* stand as candidates in a single member district of the relevant state (they can be nominated for both). For them to be re-selected for a winnable place on the state party list, their local and regional parties expect of legislators elected via a party list a strong presence in the relevant district not only during election campaigns but also between elections. Irrespective of their election mode, German legislators receive monies to fund a staffed constituency office. Nevertheless, some studies of legislative behavior have shown that ‘directly’ elected legislators maintain a stronger link with their districts or ask more parliamentary questions with an explicit constituency focus (Bol et al. 2021; Stratmann and Baur 2002; Zittel, Nyhuis, and Baumann 2019). In other words, ‘directly’ elected German legislators could be expected to display similar behavioral patterns as British MPs. Those German legislators elected via a state party list should generally also show a certain amount of constituency focus in their behavior in the Bundestag but it should be weaker than for ‘directly’ elected Members of the Bundestag.

Apart from some differences induced by the electoral system, there is one further institutional constraint: German legislators are allowed to ask up to four questions for written answer per month. British MPs are not restricted at all. As a result, British MPs asked about 46,000 written questions per year between 2001 and 2015. German legislators, by contrast, asked only around 3,700 per annum between 2002 and 2009. Despite these considerable differences in scale, there was considerable variation between legislators in both chambers.

Our focus in this paper relates not so much to the institutional differences. It mainly relates to the parliamentary experience of legislators and the extent to which experience predicts constituency focus in parliamentary questions. What would be mechanisms suggesting a link between

experience and constituency focus? The *first* mechanism relates to legislative *socialization*, which could be defined as 'the process by which newly elected members of a legislature become acquainted with the institution's rules and norms of behaviour. This process may, to a significant degree, shape their attitudes towards the legislature and their role and behaviour in it ...' (Rush and Giddings 2011: 56). Research on the House of Commons has produced elaborate typologies of legislative roles, including the roles of constituency agent, policy advocate or 'parliament man' (Searing 1994). If these roles are acquired by socialization, this would involve 'learning the rules and procedures of the legislature' and consciously or unconsciously adapting their attitudes and behaviour to legislative norms and their roles as a member (*ibid.*). While there is a rich body of scholarship on legislative roles and the importance of political socialization as a mechanism (Andeweg 1997; Best and Vogel 2014; Blomgren and Rozenberg 2012; Eulau et al. 1959; Rush and Giddings 2011; Saalfeld and Müller 1997), longitudinal assessments of legislative socialization as a *process* have so far been exceptional. Survey-based longitudinal studies (usually based on two waves of interviews) such as the one by Badura and Reese (1976) or Rush and Giddings (2011) are exceptional. One of the innovative aspects of this paper is its aim to exploit modern techniques of quantitative text analysis to map the evolution of individual behavior across time and using appropriate statistical techniques to model possible *processes* of adjustment (caused by socialization, if the presence of the mechanism is to be confirmed).

The *second* mechanism is based on the notion of a division of labor between legislators who *specialize* in a particular policy area and produce cues for fellow legislators who become experts in other areas (Saalfeld and Strøm 2014). Some authors have claimed that, historically, the professionalization of legislative recruitment has led to 'the establishment of a fairly autonomous field of political action with specific (although mostly informal) rules for access and reward' (Cotta and Best 2007: 14). Some authors have claimed that professional career politicians start with their political careers at an earlier age, often shortly after acquiring a university degree and a relatively short period as policy advisors to leading politicians (King 1981; Saalfeld 1997). These younger career politicians should lose their interest in the constituency dimension of representation soon as they are less likely to maintain close local ties. As part of their specialization they should turn to national policy relatively quickly. After a frontbench career, their constituency focus may increase again. Observable implications would include a tendency for more experienced legislators to obtain specialized leadership positions in their parliamentary party groups and shift their focus from their own local district to matters of policy and process. Because they are more influential in formulating party policy, they will also be less likely to ask questions in the House.

A *third* type of mechanism may define an MPs' ability to gain autonomy from voters, interest groups and their parties' extra-parliamentary organizations through institutional incentives. Some authors agree that legislative roles – such as the role of constituency representative – exist but are strategic responses of vote-seeking or office-seeking actors to incentives (Strøm 2012). Building on classical texts (e.g., Cain, Ferejohn, and Fiorina 1987; Carey and Shugart 1995), there is a sophisticated discussion on the measurement of electoral competitiveness arising from different electoral systems, including Westminster systems (e.g., Blais and Lago 2009; Kayser and Lindstädt 2015; Stoffel 2014). Some authors, for example, have argued that institutions such as electoral systems may interact with variables such as electoral volatility to increase the potential costs and risks for legislators to behave autonomously (André, Depauw, and Martin 2014). Thus, 'when MPs believe that they are electorally vulnerable, they will adopt more of a constituency orientation if they believe that constituency service will help them to win re-election. Regardless

of their preferred role in the legislature, members must ensure that they are re-selected by their party and re-elected by their constituents in order to pursue their preferred role in the legislature' (Kellermann 2016: 94). Hence, increased electoral vulnerability in a candidate-based electoral system can be expected to lead to an increase of legislative activities that help to signal the legislator's individual effort and a stronger focus on the relevant electoral constituency, be it the legislator's extra-parliamentary party (often responsible for re-selection as a candidate) or voters.

This leads us to formulate the following propositions:

H₁: Parliamentary experience. The percentage of parliamentary questions with an explicit constituency focus will decline as the parliamentary experience of a legislator increases.

A number of mechanisms may be at work here: There may be incumbency effects ranging from improved chances to get re-selected for a safe seat by the local party activists, to get re-elected in the district and to influence party policy. Alternatively, the legislator may get socialized into the representative role of trustee, which maximizes the legislator's leeway; he or she may increasingly feel responsible for national policy and politics rather than 'parochial' constituency matters. The length of parliamentary service is used as a proxy for this assumed process of socialization. This effect should be moderated by electoral vulnerability.

H₂: Specialization. Legislators with specialist parliamentary leadership roles should table fewer questions with an explicit constituency focus than backbenchers.

The argument is similar to the one advanced in *H₁*, except that there will be a stronger emphasis on MPs' functional roles within the legislature and within their parliamentary party groups.

H₃: Electoral vulnerability. Legislators increase the share of questions with constituency focus, if they are electorally vulnerable. This includes newly elected MPs, MPs returned with relatively small majorities over their nearest rival and those MPs returned repeatedly who suffered above-average electoral losses compared to the previous election. Vulnerability should induce particularly strong incentives to signal activity to the constituency in run-up to a general election.

Research design and methods

We use written parliamentary questions to investigate how British and German legislators' constituency focus varies over time. After compiling all questions asked by MPs in the German Bundestag (2002-2009) and the British House of Commons (2001-2015), we constructed dictionaries consisting of terms that indicate a constituency focus.

These terms consisted of constituency names for both cases as well as district's municipalities for the German case.⁴

By applying hand-coding methods on random samples from the data we found that a vast majority of constituency-related questions in the British parliament explicitly mentioned the name of the constituency and we are thus confident that our data does not include many misclassifications. This method, however, was not sufficient for operationalizing constituency focus in the Bundestag. Even though some constituency related questions mentioned the name of the constituency, in many cases questions referred to specific municipalities within an electoral district (electoral districts in Germany tend to be larger than in the UK). We thus applied additional search terms, consisting of all municipalities which make up an electoral district⁵. While this method proved to be more successful than just relying on the name of the constituency in identifying whether a question had a constituency focus, some questions – as validation by hand-coding procedures showed – were not classified correctly. We specifically found that questions relating to infrastructure projects within an electoral district often do not mention a specific town or area. We are thus planning to supplement our approach by a more sophisticated classification method in the next iteration of this paper.

After determining the constituency focus of each question, we summed up the number of questions that resulted in a match for each legislator over a period of six months for the House of Commons (three months for the Bundestag). We based this aggregation pragmatically on the timing of general elections within the respective country.⁶ At present our analyses are based on those legislators who asked at least one question in at least one of the time intervals.

We chose parliamentary questions for written answer as an indicator, because they provide the most comprehensive and continuous picture of individual legislators' activities as representatives across our window of observation (2001-2015 for the House of Commons; 2002-2009 for the Bundestag). Over time, legislators in most European democracies have increasingly made use of this opportunity to request information, press for action, demand explanations, test governments and ministers, show concern for the interests for constituents, gain publicity and build a reputation in particular policy areas (Russo and Wiberg 2010: 217-218). The value of written questions for MPs (not only in the UK context) can be summarized as follows:

⁴ This method will have to be refined for Germany following, for example, the method employed by Zittel, Nyhuis, and Baumann (2019: 694) who used far richer constituency-specific dictionaries. An alternative would be the use of a named entity algorithm as employed by Fernandes, Won, and Martins (2020).

⁵ Municipalities, here, refer to *Gemeinden* in Germany

⁶ In Great Britain elections were held in the middle of the year, while the elections in Germany were held in late September for the period under consideration. Thus, to be able to include variables that depend on the year, such as an MP's age, we had to use intervals for aggregation that did not produce any overlap between years.

“Written parliamentary questions are formal parliamentary acts that appear on the public record and force the government to respond to inquiries by MPs. Questions can lead to additional publicity for members ... Members can encourage media attention formally, through a press release drawing attention to the question and the answer, or informally, by encouraging members of the press to report on the issue. At the margin, this coverage helps members to build name recognition and cultivate an image as an active, effective legislator” (Kellermann 2016: 93).

Rather than being merely ‘cheap talk’ (for a general discussion and model see Austen-Smith & Banks, 2002), we would argue that parliamentary questions for written answer are particularly suited to demonstrate individual MPs’ representational focus. Compared to other forms of legislative speech (such as speeches in debates), parliamentary questions for written answer tend to be subject to less centralized control through the party leadership. In a careful content analysis of parliamentary rules of procedure, Keh (2013) demonstrates that there is no method of making a personal policy statement in the Commons that is less constrained by central party control in the United Kingdom (as well as in other democracies). Therefore, parliamentary questions for written answer tend to offer more varied insights into individual legislators’ issue agendas and the content of their representative activities than speeches on the floor, which tend to be the most constrained type of personal policy statement. Given their large number, parliamentary questions for written answer can be aggregated to various levels and allow for analysis over the course of an entire legislative term.

One argument against the use of written questions as an indicator might be the fact that they are submitted in writing and receive a written answer. Hence public attention is not as strong as for other instruments such as Prime Minister’s Questions or high-profile speeches. There are two arguments in favor of using written questions nonetheless. A single written question in itself is rarely noticed. However, legislators frequently re-use them in their communication with voters and in the chamber. Many British Members of Parliament, for example, post them on their personal websites to demonstrate how they have raised important concerns of their constituents with the government. When they receive a ministerial response, they frequently do the same to emphasize how successful they have been to raise a matter with a minister and how responsive (or unresponsive) a government has been. They also proactively report questions to local media and interest groups (Franklin and Norton 1993; Norton 1993; Saalfeld 2011; Saalfeld and Bischof 2013).

In short, parliamentary questions for written answer are a particularly useful tool to assess individual representative activity. Many MPs use them to raise constituency-related matters with the government. Although the direct focus of the mass media is more on parliamentary debates on the floor and oral questions, access to the latter instruments is far more strongly controlled by party leaders and restrictive procedures of parliamentary agenda control.

The independent variables are derived from the timing of the parliamentary questions. When we extracted the data, we also extracted the relevant time stamps. These data were combined with personal and political background information on each MP from Work Package 1 of the PATHWAYS project (www.pathways.eu), including their age and parliamentary experience.

Parliamentary experience, our proxy for socialization in the legislature was measured by calculating the difference between the calendar year an MP was elected for the first time and the calendar year for which the number of constituency-related questions were aggregated for a six-month interval (i.e., experience has the same value for two six-month intervals). Since our first analysis revealed a curvilinear relationship between experience and the number of questions, we added a squared term.

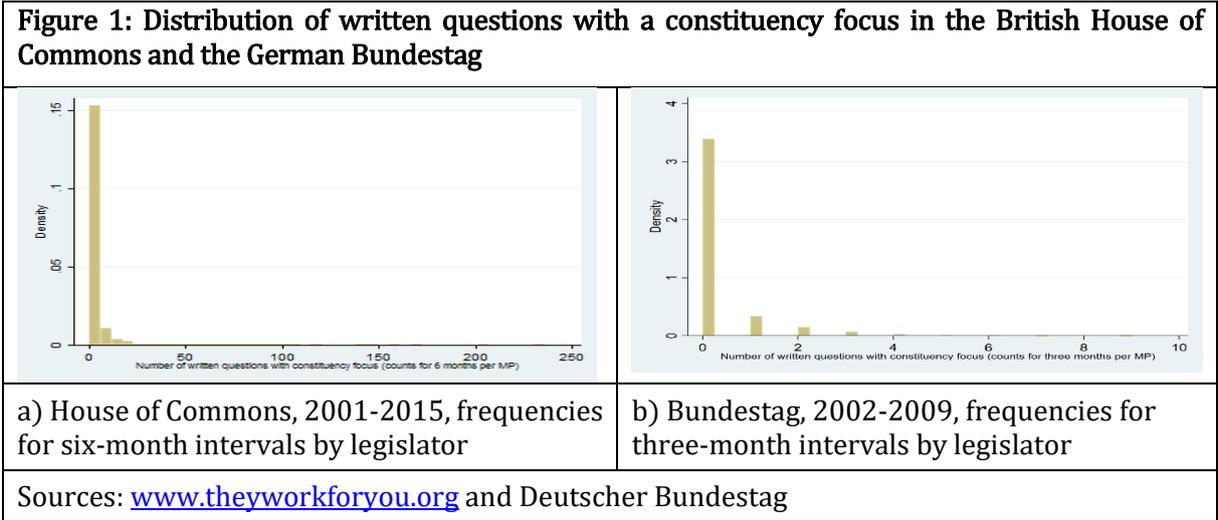
Legislative specialization was measured both at the level of the relevant parliamentary party group and for each MP. The opportunities for longer-term specialization in a particular policy area or for a particular role are a function of the sheer size of the parliamentary party group. Larger parliamentary parties are able to develop a far more complex internal division of labor, e.g., in policy-specific working groups. Hence, one of our contextual indicators is the size of the parliamentary party group. The second contextual variable affecting specialization is turnover in the parliamentary party, e.g., from one legislative term (Parliament) to another. If there is a large turnover, the parliamentary party group includes many newly elected MPs who are less experienced and will only begin to specialize. Hence we use the percentage of 'rookies' in each parliamentary party group as an indicator for turnover. While these variables shape the context for specialization, individuals will vary within each parliamentary party group. We sought to capture specialization (a) by measuring whether an MP assumed a special role or position (party spokesperson or chair/deputy chair) within at least one permanent committee (typically a select committee) and (b) whether he or she had any leadership role either in the chamber or in the parliamentary party group. In addition we added a dummy-variable registering '1', if the MP had been part of the same committee during the last legislative term, assuming this would reflect an increased expertise in the respective policy area.

Additionally, we sought to capture electoral vulnerability in a number of alternative ways: Following practice in other studies (Kellermann 2016), we primarily focused on the margin of an MP's victory over his or her nearest competitor in the general election preceding the legislative term in question. We also measured whether this margin had increased or decreased since the election to the preceding parliament. Assuming that incumbents, in particular, would be sensitive to a strong decrease in the margin of victory, we measured (a) whether an MP defended his or her seat and was re-elected as an incumbent and interacted this measure with the change in the margin of victory between the election at time t_0 (the election to the relevant Parliament) and the election at time $t-1$ (the election to the previous Parliament, if the MP was re-elected). We have not yet

added the relevant information on the Bundestag, which is more complex to calculate given the combination of first-past-the-post and party-list elements. In the next iteration of this paper, we will use the method proposed by Stoffel and Sieberer (Stoffel 2014a; Stoffel and Sieberer 2018) to add comparable indicators for electoral vulnerability to our model for the Bundestag as well.

For the Bundestag we added a variable indicating whether a specific candidate was elected directly in his or her district or via a state party list. The 25 legislators who were elected via a state party list and did not compete in any district and were excluded from the analysis, since we cannot easily determine any constituency focus for these cases.

In addition, we controlled for a number of relevant effects that are not central to our models but may affect the result. We created dummy variables for each parliamentary term and used the 2005-2010 parliament (2005-2009 for the Bundestag) as the reference category. We created a dummy variable for opposition MPs as parliamentary questions are often considered to be an instrument of the opposition against a government controlling the legislative agenda on the floor. Also, we are controlling for partisan peculiarities. Since the Conservative and Labour parties were by far the most dominant parties during our window of observation, we created a dummy variable for the Conservatives against all the others. In addition, we are controlling for regional parties such as the Scottish National Party, Plaid Cymru and the parties of Northern Ireland, which we found to ask fewer questions on constituency matters but more questions on the relevant regions. Finally we accounted for the fact that a number of MPs retain very strong local ties, using a dummy variable registering '1', if the MP held a leadership position in a local party organization during the relevant Parliament, as Russo (2011) found for Italy.



Since we are interested in changes over time and our data have a panel structure, panel regression is the most suitable way of estimating the effect of our independent variables

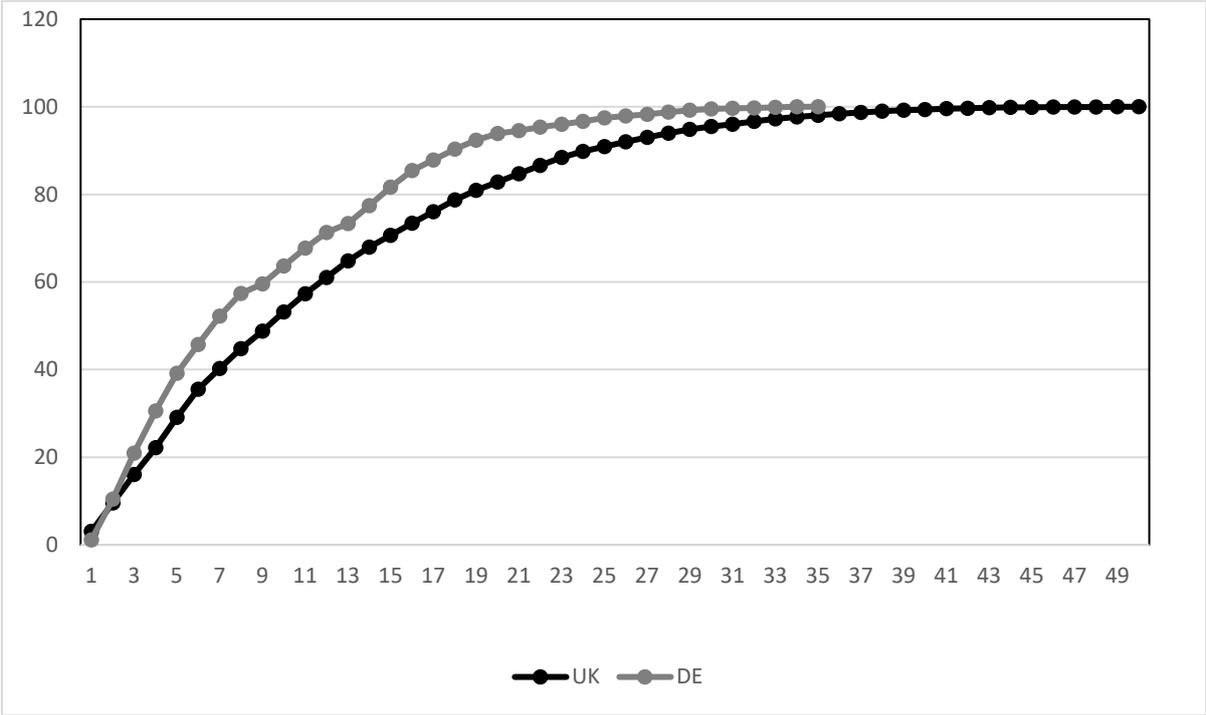
on the number of questions with a constituency focus per six-month interval (three month interval for Germany), controlling for a number of background factors (see above). Given the skewed nature of the distribution for both cases (see Figures 1 and 2) and the over-dispersion of our dependent variable, a negative binomial regression model was the most appropriate choice. The fixed-effects estimator is the most suitable model to estimate any variations within cases (MPs) over time. This is particularly important for our time-varying variable parliamentary experience.

Results

As mentioned above, the overall number of written questions in the House of Commons is much higher than in the German Bundestag. In the Commons, approximately 6 per cent of almost 651,000 written questions submitted between June 2001 and May 2015 included explicit references to the MPs' constituencies (Appendix, Table A.2a). The average MP submitted nearly three constituency-related questions per six-month interval (Table A.3a). There is a considerable variation between MPs, however. The majority of MPs did not submit a single written question referring to their constituency in most of the 28 six-month intervals covered in our window of observation. Some MPs, however, submitted up to 236 such questions per six-month interval. In the German Bundestag approximately 5 per cent of nearly 26,000 written questions submitted between October 2002 and September 2009 included explicit references to the legislator's constituency (Appendix, Table A.2b). Based on our current method of identifying constituency focus in parliamentary questions,⁷ the average Member of the Bundestag submitted 0.3 constituency-related questions per three-month interval (Table A.3b). Like in the House of Commons, there is considerable variation between Bundestag members most of whom did not submit a single written question explicitly referring to their constituency in most of the 30 three-month intervals covered in our window of observations. Some German legislators, however, submitted up to 9 such questions per three-month interval. As we mentioned in the section on data and methods, the inconsistency of three- and six-month intervals will be removed in the next iteration of this paper. Overall, however, we observe that British and German legislators use parliamentary questions for written answer to signal concern for their districts to their constituents, but they generally do so sparingly. The vast majority of written questions are on matters of national policy.

⁷ It is worth noting that our counts are broadly in line with the findings of Zittel, Nyhuis and Baumann (2019) as far as the volume of questions with local references are concerned.

Figure 2: Cumulative frequency of written questions in the British House of Commons and the German Bundestag (by parliamentary experience in years)



In Figure 2 we plot the cumulative frequencies of all written parliamentary questions (irrespective of their content) by years of parliamentary experience in both chambers. In Germany (2002-2009) the longest-serving legislator belonged to the chamber for 32 years, in Britain (2001-2015) for 49 years. In Germany, approximately 90% of all written questions were asked by legislators whose experience ranged between 0 and 17 years. In the UK, 90% of questions were asked by MPs serving between 0 and 24 years. In other words, less than 10% of all written questions in the German Bundestag were asked by legislators serving 18 years and more; less than 10% of all written questions in the House of Commons were asked by legislators serving 25 years or more. This has implications for the minority of written questions explicitly focusing on electoral districts as MPs with high experience might not use parliamentary questions as a legislative instrument at all. Such selection processes cannot be accurately reflected by our current research design, as we only included MPs who asked at least one question during the window of observation.

Table 1: Fixed effects negative binomial panel regressions for the number of written questions with a constituency focus, House of Commons June 2001 to May 2015

Dependent variable: N of constituency-related written questions within 6-month intervals Covariates	Fixed-effects (within) estimator	
	IRR	Std. Err.
<i>Parliamentary experience</i>		
Parliamentary experience (years)	0.9991	0.0135
Parliamentary experience (years) squared	1.0005	0.0003
Parliamentary experience * margin of victory in district	1.0005 **	0.0002
<i>Specialization</i>		
Size of parliamentary party	0.9994	0.0005
Share of 'rookies' by party	1.0049 *	0.0026
Parliamentary leadership role	0.9122 *	0.0470
Leadership role in committee	0.9689	0.0526
Senior Committee role	0.9168	0.0507
<i>Electoral vulnerability</i>		
Margin of victory in district	0.9877 ***	0.0037
Margin of victory in district t0 - margin of victory t-1	1.0158 ***	0.0046
Re-elected as incumbent * difference in margin of victory	0.9829 ***	0.0052
Re-elected as incumbent	0.6969 ***	0.0522
Constant	0.3384 *	0.2160
N of observations	8,559	
N of groups	697	
Log likelihood	-12525.29	
Wald chi2	296.69 ***	

Controls for legislators' age, change in electoral vulnerability since the last election, membership of an opposition party, extra-parliamentary leadership roles at the national and the local levels, legislative terms, Conservative Party membership not reported

Table 2: Fixed effects negative binomial panel regressions for the number of written questions with a constituency focus, Bundestag November 2002 to October 2009

Dependent variable: N of constituency-related written questions within 3-month intervals Covariates	Fixed-effects (within) estimator	
	IRR	Std. Err.
<i>Parliamentary experience</i>		
Parliamentary experience (years)	1.0845	0.0551
Parliamentary experience (years) squared	0.9970 *	0.0017
Mode of election * Parliamentary experience (years)	0.9894	0.0318
<i>Specialization</i>		
Size of parliamentary party	0.9993	0.0029
Share of 'rookies' by party	0.9976	0.0137
Parliamentary leadership role	0.8666	0.1801
Leadership role in committee	0.9959	0.1869
Senior Committee Role	0.9787	0.1797
<i>Election mode</i>		
Mode of election (district = 1; list = 0)	1.2357	0.4441
Constant	1.0226	1.8463
N of observations	2,872	
N of groups	231	
Log likelihood	-1738.84	
Wald chi2	25.21 *	

Controls for legislators' age, membership of an opposition party, extra-parliamentary leadership roles at the national and the local levels and legislative terms not reported

Tables 1 and 2 report the estimates from a negative binomial regression model in a panel design (based on fixed effects, i.e., an estimator for changes for legislators). Our first hypothesis predicts that the percentage of written parliamentary questions with an explicit constituency focus should decline as the parliamentary experience of a legislator increases. Local concerns should increasingly be replaced by national policy matters or technical questions of procedure in the chamber. In addition to our measurement of experience as the number of years in parliament we include the indicator as a squared term accounting for any possible non-linear effects. Our results for the British House of Commons suggest that parliamentary experience as such has virtually no effect on the number of written questions with an explicit constituency focus in six-month intervals. However, the interaction of parliamentary experience with electoral vulnerability is statistically significant at the five-percent level. In other words, whether or not parliamentary experience matters for the tendency of British MPs to ask local questions depends on their electoral vulnerability (see below). In the German case, the first hypothesis has to be rejected, too. Generally, our analysis of the German case is hampered by the smaller number of parliamentary questions. This problem will be addressed by expanding our sample to include at least three (rather than two) electoral periods. In addition, we are currently not confident about the number of false negatives in our strategy for the identification of constituency focus. We will turn to more sophisticated dictionaries such as those used by Zittel, Nyhuis, and Baumann (2019) or Fernandes, Won, and Martins (2020). Based on our current data, we find a small positive effect of parliamentary experience, which is statistically not significant at conventional levels. A more robust effect is the small negative effect for the square term. We have not yet implemented an indicator for the measurement of electoral vulnerability in Germany's two-tier electoral system, although we are planning to do so for the next iteration of this paper using Stoffel and Sieberer's method (Stoffel 2014a; Stoffel and Sieberer 2018). Instead of an interaction with electoral vulnerability, we interact parliamentary experience with the election mode. The reason is that 'directly' elected German legislators have frequently been shown to have a stronger focus on their constituencies both in their election campaigns and their parliamentary activities (Stoffel 2014b; Zittel, Nyhuis, and Baumann 2019). However, we cannot find any significant interaction in this context.

Our second hypothesis posits that legislators with a high level of specialization in the chamber have a stronger tendency to concern themselves with the detail of national policy and legislative procedure rather than matters of local policy. We know from comparative work that this perspective would also pick up organizational differences between the Bundestag and the House of Commons as the Bundestag is characterized by a strong and highly institutionalized system of internal specialization around the chamber's committee structure (Saalfeld 2000). The House of Commons, by contrast, does not provide strong instrumental incentives for MPs to specialize to the same extent (Fernandes, Saalfeld, and Schwemmer 2021; Norton 2000). We operationalized the level

of specialization through three dummy variables, the first registering whether a legislator has been the member of a particular permanent committee repeatedly, the second indicating whether the legislator had a leadership role within the committee (either as committee chair or party spokesperson on the committee) and the third showing whether the legislator had a leadership position in their parliamentary party group or the legislature. MPs with specialist parliamentary leadership roles should table fewer questions with an explicit constituency focus than backbenchers. The argument is similar to the one advanced in P_2 , except that there will be a stronger emphasis on MPs' functional roles within the legislature and within their parliamentary party groups. The expectation would be that legislators in such leadership positions have fewer incentives to pursue constituency causes because they are strongly involved in the development of party policy or in the parliamentary process of getting relevant legislation approved. In the German case, this expectation has to be rejected. In the British case, committee leadership does not have a statistically significant effect, while MPs holding parliamentary leadership positions have a lower probability of asking written questions with a constituency focus at least at a 10% level of significance.

Our third hypothesis takes up the argument that higher levels of electoral vulnerability incentivize legislators to focus more strongly on their electoral districts in order to safeguard their reelection. Legislators increase the share of questions with constituency focus, if they are electorally vulnerable. Zittel, Nyhuis, and Baumann (2019) find that both high aggregate electoral volatility at the constituency level and a small electoral margin of 'directly' elected legislators tend to increase the number of constituency-focused written questions. At this stage of the paper, we have not been able to collect relevant data for Germany. Hence we estimate the effect of electoral vulnerability on constituency-focused questions in the House of Commons only.

The estimates for the variables capturing electoral vulnerability show the expected causal patterns. This finding is at odds with Kellermann's (2016) estimates who demonstrates that as the margin of victory in the previous election decreases, members ask more questions in general, but they do not ask more questions with an explicit constituency focus. He concludes from his study 'that electorally vulnerable members use questions to signal effort, rather than attention to constituency issues' (Kellermann 2016: 90). Based on a slightly different research design we find that the larger the margin of victory in the previous election, the lower the number of constituency-related questions. This is particularly true for incumbents. The interaction between the status as a re-elected incumbent and the winning margin demonstrates that – all else being equal – MPs tend to reduce the number of constituency-related questions as their winning margin increases and *vice versa*.

Instead of conclusions: Next steps

The paper seeks to investigate the extent to which a long-term parliamentary career contributes to a shift in legislators' behavior from a focus on local matters to national policy and to clarify whether electoral incentives (conceptualized as electoral vulnerability) moderate this process. Using a panel design, we do not find the expected negative effect of an MP's parliamentary experience on the number of questions with an explicit focus on his or her constituency. In the case of the British House of Commons, we also find a significant effect of electoral vulnerability: The more vulnerable an MP, the larger the number of questions with an explicit constituency focus. This is partially in line with previous research on legislative behavior in the United Kingdom and elsewhere (André, Depauw, and Martin 2014; Kellermann 2016). Our findings for the House of Commons suggest that parliamentary experience and electoral vulnerability interact in their effect on the number of constituency-focused questions. Legislative specialization, by contrast, does not seem to reduce responsiveness to constituency concerns.

However, these findings are still incomplete and preliminary. Our next steps will be to add at least one further legislative term to the German data and apply more sophisticated, richer dictionaries for the identification of local references in legislators' questions. This is likely to reduce the risk of false negatives in our count data and improve the robustness of our estimates. Given the strong effect of electoral vulnerability in the British case and the findings by Zittel, Nyhuis and Baumann (2019) on Germany, a further priority will be to produce valid measures of electoral vulnerability to match our data structure.

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Appendix

Table A.1a: Number of observations (six-month intervals per MP) in the British House of Commons June 2001 to May 2015

	Obs	Mean	Median	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Six-month time intervals	14,182	14.37	14	8.08	1	28

Table A.1b: Number of observations (six-month intervals per MP) in the German Bundestag October 2002 to September 2009

	Obs	Mean	Median	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
three-month time intervals	4,826	8.82	8.00	6.85	1	29

Table A.2a: Parliamentary questions for written answer with and without explicit constituency focus in the British House of Commons, June 2001 to May 2015

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative percentage
Explicit constituency focus			
No	612,574	94.14	94.14
Yes	38,110	5.86	100
Total	650,684	100	

Source: data extracted from www.theyworkforyou.com

Table A.2b: Parliamentary questions for written answer with and without explicit constituency focus in the German Bundestag, October 2002 to September 2009

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative percentage
Explicit constituency focus			
No	24,587	94.99	94.99
Yes	1,298	5.01	100
Total	25,885	100	

Table A.3a: Descriptive summary statistics for the variables used in the analysis (House of Commons, June 2001 to May 2015)

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Number of constituency-related questions per MP and six-month interval (=Y)	14,182	2.69	8.15	0	236
Parliamentary experience (years)	14,182	10.96	8.90	0	49
Size of parliamentary party	14,182	197.55	75.83	0	289
Share of 'rookies' by party	14,182	28.71	16.80	0	100.00
Age	14,178	52.58	9.74	25	86
Committee role	14,182	0.71	0.45	0	1
Parliamentary leadership role	14,182	0.47	0.50	0	1
Extra-parliamentary party leadership role (national level)	14,182	0.07	0.25	0	1
Margin of victory in district	14,088	18.75	12.62	0.08	69.01
Margin of victory in district t0 - margin of victory t-1	13,144	-1.88	9.26	-39.04	32.63
Re-elected as incumbent	14,182	0.70	0.46	0	1
Number of six-month intervals	14,182	5.16	2.74	1	10
Opposition MP	14,171	0.50	0.50	0	1
Conservative MP	14,182	0.37	0.48	0	1
MP representing regional party	14,182	0.04	0.20	0	1
Extra-parliamentary leadership role (local level)	14,182	0.47	0.50	0	1
Parliament 2001-2005	14,182	0.29	0.45	0	1
Parliament 2010-2015	14,182	0.35	0.48	0	1

Table A.3b: Descriptive summary statistics for the variables used in the analysis (Bundestag, October 2002 to September 2009)

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Number of constituency-related questions per MP and three-month interval (=Y)	4,826	0.27	0.79	0	9
Parliamentary experience (years)	4,826	8.25	6.60	0	34
Size of parliamentary party	4,826	51.44	36.38	1.15	107
Share of 'rookies' by party	4,826	33.57	16.31	0	71.52
Election mode (district = 1; list = 0)	4,826	0.33	0.47	0	1
Age	4,826	49.87	9.88	23	73
Committee role	4,826	1.00	0.06	0	1
Parliamentary leadership role	4,826	0.25	0.43	0	1
Extra-parliamentary party leadership role (national level)	4,826	0.03	0.16	0	1
Number of three-month intervals	4,826	7.99	4.26	1	17
Opposition MP	4,826	0.80	0.40	0	1
Extra-parliamentary leadership role (local level)	4,826	0.24	0.42	0	1
Parliament 2002-2005	4,826	0.47	0.50	0	1